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The Catholic church's ritual unites us more than beliefs

Patrick Henry | Aug. 1, 2012

A woman receives Communion during a morning Mass at Notre Dame Cathedral in Cotonou, Benin, Nov. 17, 2011. (CNS/Reuters/Finbarr O'Reilly)

Viewpoint

In his recent book, *Toward A True Kinship Of Faiths: How The World's Religions Can Come Together*, the Dalai Lama recounts a 1994 visit to Israel during which he asked one of the chief rabbis "what it is that unites Jewish people the world over -- what the kernel of the doctrine is that unites all Jews." He was taken aback by the rabbi's response: "When it comes to doctrine, there is hardly any uniformity. What unites all faithful Jews are the rituals. Come Friday, all Jewish homes, from Siberia to Ethiopia, hold Sabbath in the same manner. We have been doing this for thousands of years, since the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem."

Not being "a great believer in the efficacy of ritual in its own right," the Dalai Lama was initially surprised by this answer. But he came to understand what ritual means in the context of exile and diaspora: "a particular form of continuity and connection that allows great pluralism of views and beliefs," he said, "while at the same time links people through a shared set of practices and a language ... to a powerful lineage of memory and tradition."

While many Catholics might perhaps respond to the Dalai Lama's question by reciting the Credo, I resist the idea that faith is synonymous with conformity and allows for no variance of opinion. Almost 500 years ago, in a letter to Jean de Carondelet, Catholic priest and theologian Desiderius Erasmus maintained that faith is "more of a way of life than of a profession of articles" and that "the sum and substance" of Christianity consists in "peace and concord." Erasmus was disturbed by those who would use dogma to disrupt harmony among Christians and found good support for his ideas of charitable disagreements and mutual love in his reading of Romans 14-15, where he saw a nonjudgmental, anti-dogma approach to Christianity, one that elevated tolerance in the name of peace, love and concord. (In Romans 14:13, for example, Paul writes: "Let us therefore no longer pass judgment on one another but resolve instead never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another.")

I find the strength of contemporary Catholicism in its diversity, its vibrancy, its personally lived quality, its recognition of the primacy of the individual's moral conscience. I hope that others will come to value it for these same reasons and respect the conclusions of all those honestly attempting to practice the teachings of the Gospels. By honoring individual authenticity, we prevent dogmatic conflicts from disrupting peace and concord

within the church.

Whatever the few required tenets are that all Catholics must believe, certainly they do not include opposition to birth control, legalized abortion and gay marriage.

It would be preposterous to maintain, for example, that even a majority of Catholics follow the church's teachings on birth control. Recent polls show that more than 90 percent of American Catholic women have practiced some form of birth control. This figure is so high because many priests tell women in the confessional to follow their conscience on this issue.

One may be personally opposed to any of these things but believe nonetheless that they should be legal. Sts. Augustine and Aquinas both believed that prostitution should be legal because greater evils would accrue if it were not. Many believe that abortion should be legal for this same reason. Still others believe that allowing gays and lesbians to marry fulfills rather than violates the spirit of the Gospels.

Whatever we believe regarding these contemporary contentious issues does not qualify us as Catholics or disqualify us from being Catholic. We should not therefore allow them to disrupt the peace of the church. Our rituals unite us beyond these differences and bring us together into the realm of the sacred.

At Mass, we all equally affirm our need for spiritual nourishment and enlightenment when we walk together in our ignorance, our faith buttressed by that of others, whatever their particular beliefs on such matters, to receive the Eucharist. This daily ritual unites us all, from Siberia to Ethiopia, and enables us to claim in our diversity that we are all members of the same body.

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