

Three options for the countercultural Catholic

Robert Christian | Aug. 26, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

Editor's note: Michael Sean Winters is on vacation this week. Filling in for him is Robert Christian, editor of [Millennial](#) [1], a journal featuring the writing of millennial Catholics. He is a doctoral candidate in politics at The Catholic University of America and a graduate fellow at the Institute for Policy Research and Catholic Studies. Winters will be back next week.

There is an inevitable tension between the values of the world at large and the demands of the way of Christ. Christ's message is radical and necessarily distorted when one tries to synthesize it with an acceptance of bourgeois values and practices. Catholics are called to be countercultural, to live in a way that reflects an authentic faith in God and Christ that translates into loving, virtuous action. But what does that mean in terms of our engagement with those pursuing a different path?

One option for countercultural Catholics is to choose isolation. This entails pulling away from mainstream culture and society and retreating to exclusively Catholic circles. It is inspired by the belief that the larger culture is so corrupt that purity can only be achieved by developing a subculture walled off from the corrosive influence of the outside world. These Catholics would predominantly engage and live their daily lives with other Catholics. They would look to create a distinct, separate culture protected through isolation.

A second option is to engage in culture war. Some contend that in the face of a culture that is seemingly hostile to an authentically Catholic way of life, confrontation is the best approach. Efforts are focused on drawing stark contrasts between the teachings of the church and the beliefs of those who disagree or dissent from the church. The future it envisions is of a smaller, purer, more unified church. The clear, up-front and uncompromising articulation of church teachings is used to draw the line between friend and foe in this battle.

A third option is being articulated and modeled by Pope Francis. It is defined by joy, mercy and engagement.

Pope Francis has explicitly called on Catholics to be countercultural, [saying](#) [2], "I ask you, instead, to be revolutionaries, I ask you to swim against the tide; yes, I am asking you to rebel against this culture that sees everything as temporary and that ultimately believes you are incapable of responsibility, that believes you are incapable of true love."

But what does this revolution look like?

First, it means engagement, and not just with secular European philosophers in highly rationalistic dialogue. The call is to go to the margins, to the periphery and to meet people where they are. As Francis X. Rocca of Catholic News Service [has noted](#) [2], "If the pope sees the church as a counterculture, then he sees it as one necessarily in dialogue with the cultures to which it is opposed, all of them part of what he calls a great 'culture of encounter.' To reach out in this way follows naturally from his call that the church evangelize all those on its 'existential peripheries.' "

And what form does this engagement take? It is inspired by mercy. Pope Francis [explained](#) [3] using the

parable of the Prodigal Son: "I think about how when the Prodigal Son returned home, his father didn't say: 'But you, listen, sit down. What did you do with the money?' No, he held a party. Then, maybe, when the son wanted to talk, he talked. The church must do the same. ... This is mercy. And I believe that is a *kairos*: This time is a *kairos* of mercy." (John Allen [explains](#) [3], "*Kairos* is a deeply evocative Gospel term that means an appointed moment in the plan of God.")

Finally, one of the best ways to evangelize is to live well and joyfully, to be virtuous without being embarrassed or proud. Who wants to follow a faith where the adherents are always angry and hostile or cold and distant? Imagine the appeal if the first reaction of others was, "Look at how these Christians love all people." This is not simply a tactic for the new evangelization. It is at the heart of Christianity itself. Love is the force that should animate our actions, and joy is its frequent product. It is no coincidence that Pope Francis has used the word "joy" more than any other in homilies and addresses to the public. And Pope Francis has not just preached this way of life, but embodied it in his actions from the moment his papacy began.

Catholics might find something appealing in each of these approaches. Sometimes it is nice to be around those who share our values and understand where we are coming from. And there are moments where it is absolutely necessary to confront injustice and those working to undermine human dignity and the common good.

But it is the final option that ultimately provides the best foundation for the new evangelization and most closely reflects Christ's vision. If we choose to retreat into exclusively Catholic circles, we will fail in our obligation to "go and make disciples of all peoples." Confrontation, meanwhile, too often resembles or descends into hatred, anger and bitterness. "Love the sinner, but hate the sin" is great in theory. In practice, it often looks more like harsh, self-righteous judgment than concerned love. Or it may take the form of cold, rationalistic arguments that make sense to theologians but only intensify the distance from and alienation of others. Pope Francis has [cautioned](#) [4], "At times we lose people because they don't understand what we are saying, because we have forgotten the language of simplicity and import an intellectualism foreign to our people." The risk of over-intellectualization can be avoided without sacrificing the integrity of Catholic thought.

The answer is not found in watering down church teaching or adjusting it to the latest cultural trends. It's about drawing people in by showing that the way of Christ offers meaning as opposed to indifference or nihilism, joy instead of a life running away from boredom, and hope rather than the despair of injustice and death without redemption. Living in a way that reflects a radical commitment to love with generosity, humility, forgiveness and joy draws people in, as they look for the source of that which they often intuitively know is good.

Meeting people halfway opens up the possibility of walking the rest of the journey together. Francis has faith that if he meets non-Catholics and lapsed or alienated Catholics on shared ground, discussing social justice or protecting the environment, he can help more people become receptive to God's love and the full range of church teaching. He believes the language of love and the patience to persuade work better than shouting down "pro-aborts" or condemning the godless. Let us hope others agree and follow his lead so that we might truly enter into a new epoch, an authentic *kairos* of mercy.

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[3] <http://ncronline.org/blogs/all-things-catholic/one-word-describe-pope-francis-papacy-date>

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