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Quitting the Catholic church?

Phyllis Zagano | Mar. 14, 2012 Just Catholic

If you've never heard of the Freedom From Religion Foundation, it could be your town does not have a Christmas crèche, or your state does not have an annual day of prayer, or you do not read *The New York Times*.

The Freedom From Religion Foundation wants folks to quit the Catholic church.

The foundation is a Madison, Wis., group with Christianity in its gun sights. The other day, it ran an ad in the *Times* stating "It's Time to Consider Quitting the Catholic Church," apparently because of the argument between the USCCB and the White House, which wants to include free contraceptive services -- including sterilization and abortifacients -- in Catholic health insurance policies.

So the small but apparently well-organized band of free-thinkers in the Upper Midwest jumped in to announce it's time to quit the Catholic church. That was the original headline; they say the *Times*' ad folks required them to tone it down.

The Freedom From Religion Foundation does not like Christianity, especially Catholicism. At every bend in the icy road out of Madison, its members and directors find some egregious violation of the First Amendment to the Constitution. They focus on the "separation of church and state," not freedom of speech and of assembly.

In Tennessee, they complained a teacher occasionally used Bible verses for the "quote of the day." They sued a Michigan mayor over a Christmas crèche. They tried unsuccessfully to end Arizona's annual day of prayer.

They are organized, web-savvy and looking for members. You can purchase all types of things from their website -- sweatshirts, tote bags, lapel pins, baseball caps -- items you would get at church or school or summer camp.

Which is the point.

Humanity is inescapably social. We all need to belong. We belong to alumni associations, sports leagues, political parties, civic associations and churches. These last, the churches (and synagogues and mosques) are among society's first and most basic membership organizations. As with the others, church membership implies rules. But a trajectory of discussion in the last 50 years has publicly argued that rules -- at least as far as the Catholic church is concerned -- need not be followed in order to maintain membership.

Hence the development of "cafeteria Catholics" unique to the United States, where things are always black and white. Against a rigid church view one picks and chooses what to keep and what to chuck.

Prior to the public disavowal of this or another religious concept, personal disagreements with official church teachings were lodged and lived privately. Individual conscience was the arbiter of worthiness and membership. Now, thanks to the electronic preaching of the very conservative, the push-back has arrived. You're either in or you're out; you're either with us or against us. This or another line is the demarcation between being Catholic

and not, playing directly into the hands of the anti-church crowd.

The Freedom From Religion Foundation's bag of tricks includes birth control, gay rights, marriage equality and embryonic stem cell research. Stated Catholic opposition to these have, according to their *Times* ad, caused "acute misery, poverty, needless suffering, unwanted pregnancies, overpopulation, social evils and deaths," which they only too happily blame on the "church's pernicious doctrine that birth control is a sin and must be outlawed."

Not sure where they get their "facts," but they clearly want to drive deeper the edge of the wedge between the bishops and church members who may not have noticed the church "is launching a ruthless political inquisition in your name."

"You're better than your church, so why stay?" the ad asks. Herein lies the deeper sociological conundrum, returning to the main question. How do 21st-century people find identity and meaning? Relationship to church once meant a constellation of events, relationships, memories and milestones marking lives. With increases in mobility and communications, other groups claim membership and provide identity. These may also provide rituals, which often mimic church ceremonies. The need to belong, to be identified, to be ratified does not go away.

So the sweatshirts, tote bags, lapel pins and baseball caps that announce membership in the Freedom From Religion Foundation become emblems of membership in a religion -- their religion -- to the exclusion of all others.

No matter whether disaffected Catholics join the atheists or the Methodists or some other group or denomination, the result is the same. By removing their burrs from under the bishops' saddles, they slow the ride toward further discussion. These disaffected might heed the advice of John Wesley, who asked his fellow Methodists in 1784 not to split further with the Anglican church that still sheltered them: "Do not rashly tear asunder the sacred ties which unite you to any Christian society."

Good advice, I'd say.

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