

Cafeteria Catholics

by Sebastian R Fama

Someone once told me that Catholicism is like a buffet. You take a little from here, and you take a little from there, but you do not have to take it all. Of course, this raises an obvious question, if I can reject some of it, why can't I reject all of it? But before we accept or reject anything, there is another question that we need to ask. Are the teachings of the Catholic Church true? Because if they are, I really do not have the option of rejecting any of them, at least not if I am going to act logically.

This whole buffet idea assumes that at least some of God's directives are arbitrary and of no real value. But is that even possible? Jesus said: "One does not live by bread alone, but by EVERY WORD that comes forth from the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4). So, if we are Christians, that is, followers of Christ, we simply do not have the option to disregard anything that He says.

Every Church doctrine comes from God. Thus, a rejection of even one doctrine, is a rejection of God. Some doctrines come to us directly from Jesus via an explicit statement. Some are taught by the authors of the New Testament. Still others come to us through the Church. Concerning this last method, the Gospel of Luke records Jesus saying the following to His apostles: "He who hears you hears me, and he who rejects you rejects me, and he who rejects me rejects Him who sent me" (10:16). As Paul noted in 1 Timothy 3:15, the Church is "the pillar and foundation of truth." If we are to accept Christ into our lives, we must do so on His terms and not on our own. Catholic teaching may not always appeal to our fallen nature. However, it always holds up to honest scrutiny. And it is always authoritative.

Once we allow someone to alter the faith in one area, it becomes easy to alter the faith in other areas. And thus begins our journey down the slippery slope. When we decide what is to be believed, we rob the faith of its divine nature and thus its power. Or as G.K. Chesterton put it: "If you only follow the teachings of the Church that you like, and reject what you don't like, then it is not Christ and the Catholic Faith that you claim to believe in, but yourself."

Jesus said: "And you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:32). He never says anything about opinions setting you free, and with good reason. The book of Romans tells us: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (3:23). Who has never recalled an earlier time and said: "what was I thinking?" In other words, no one is perfect. The fact that we are fallible, disqualifies us from being the arbiters of truth. As Proverbs 3:5 tells us: "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight."

Some fear that if they totally embrace the faith, they will be missing out on something. And in a sense that is true. But what we receive in return is far superior to what we give up. Essentially, we exchange destructive behaviors for life giving behaviors. It may not appear that way in the beginning, but that is always what we see in retrospect. Furthermore, the grace of God, if we are open to it, makes the exchange desirable. The key phrase here is; "if we are open to it."

In Hebrews 12:2, we are told that Jesus is the "pioneer and perfecter of our faith." Some translations render this verse as: "the **author** and finisher of faith." Jesus alone determines how we are to live and believe. No one else is capable, as He is the source of all truth and the way to salvation.

Jude speaks of contending "for the faith which was **once delivered** to the saints" (Jude 3). It was delivered once and it was complete, there is no need to add or subtract from it. Paul expands on this idea:

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you in the grace of Christ and turning to a different gospel – not that there is another gospel, but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the Gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we preached to you, let him be accursed (Galatians 1:6-8).

Make no mistake about it; rejecting any part of the Gospel, is creating a new gospel. It is the same as taking some of the ingredients out of a soup recipe, you end up with a different soup. A soup the original chef never intended. Perhaps not a tragedy where soup is concerned. But if we are to live by "EVERY WORD that comes forth from the mouth of God," it stands to reason that you are not going to want to leave anything out. As the apostle James said: "For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it" (James 2:10).

Pope Leo XIII was even more forceful in his encyclical "*On the Unity of the Church*." He wrote:

If it be certain that something be revealed by God, and this is not believed, then nothing whatever is believed by divine faith.... He who dissents even in one point from divinely revealed truths absolutely rejects all faith, since he thereby refuses to honor God as supreme truth (9).

I wonder how Cafeteria Catholics would feel if their children adopted their philosophy. Imagine what it would be like if children decided which rules they should obey. A great many of them would stop going to school and I am sure more than a few would have ice cream for dinner every night. Jesus left us an authoritative Church for a reason; because adults are just taller children.

We think we know what is best for us, but in reality, we are just being led by our desires. We focus on the here and now. But God thinks long term. And so, His commands are ordered with that in mind. Once we understand this, we realize that we need to completely trust God. And of course, trusting God is the very definition of faith.

Since we are flawed by nature, putting our trust in God usually involves a "dying to self." As the Scripture says: "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble" (James 4:6). Therefore: "Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:16).

Being open to God's grace is an absolute necessity. If we try to do it on our own the odds are against us. This is evidenced by the fact that most people will choose to go to Hell. And that is exactly what Jesus tells us in Matthew 7:13-14: "Enter by the narrow gate; for **the gate is wide and the way is easy, that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard, that leads to life, and those who find it are few.**"

Some Cafeteria Catholics try to justify their non-acceptance of Church teachings by pointing to the writings of dissenting theologians. Theologians can help us to better understand our faith. But they have no authority. Whenever they find themselves opposed to Rome, they have effectively abandoned their calling. Theologians are people. And people are sinners. And sometimes sinners openly rebel against God and His Church. Jesus refers to them as wolves in sheep's clothing (Matthew 7:15).

Pope John Paul II commented on the practice of Cafeteria Catholicism in a talk to the Bishops in Los Angeles back in 1987. He said:

It is sometimes reported that a large number of Catholics today do not adhere to the teaching of the Catholic Church on a number of questions, notably sexual and conjugal morality, divorce and remarriage. Some are reported as not accepting the clear position on abortion. It has to be noted that there is a tendency on the part of some Catholics to be selective in their adherence to the Church's moral teaching. It is sometimes claimed that dissent from the Magisterium is totally compatible with being a "good Catholic," and poses no obstacle to the reception of the Sacraments. This is a grave error that challenges the teaching of the Bishops in the United States and elsewhere.

We would do well to remember that even when the truth does not appeal to us, it is still the truth. And as such, we ought to live by it.