

REFLECTIONS

A Fractured Nation In Need of God

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In a nation whose citizens are divided by religious creed, race, and political affiliation...the lines of fraction run deep. As intense as the controversies arising from these differing positions are, they are more like fractures on the surface of society resulting from an underlying seismic rift. The deeper, more fundamental split centers on divergent beliefs in God and the importance of religion for leading our lives, both as individuals and as a society.

The American public and their representatives function more and more as if God does not exist, or if he does, his existence does not matter. There is a continuing effort to remove all influence of religion from public life, to limit religious freedom and restrict religious beliefs to private practice by building restraints and penalties into the nation's political, legal and cultural structures. The result is a growing, state-enforced practical atheism.

When God is not considered relevant to public life, there no longer are any absolutes. Disconnected from immutable standards, democracy becomes an unrestrained oligarchy with the many ruling in their own interest. Anything becomes possible.

Today, sexuality is separated from marriage; abortion is rampant, acceptable even to the point of birth and beyond; assisted suicide is gaining legality; pornography, adultery and cohabitation are commonplace. The disdain for human life and the absurdity with which human nature is treated are the outcomes of a society that is becoming spiritually depleted.

America is in a rapid religious decline. In the early 1970s, 89% of the U.S. population identified as Christian, 62% as Protestant and 27% as Catholic; only 6% said they had no religion. The latest Pew Research Study found that in 2019, Protestants had diminished to 43% of the population and Catholics to 20%, while nones rose to 26%. It is not just defections that are of concern, but at least among Catholics, there is a growing apathy toward religious obligations. A Gallup poll showed that over the six decades from 1955 to 2017, the percentage of Catholics who attended Mass weekly dropped from 75% to 39%. Further, today, 27% of the U.S. population never attends any religious service.

The combination of religious defections and apathy among those who remain has a large segment of society to morph into extreme secularism. The religiously-committed and the religiously-indifferent have very divergent perspectives on the purpose and value of human existence. A person who believes that life on earth is transitory and that one will spend an eternity in heaven or hell depending upon how that life is lived will make vastly different choices than one who believes that the here and now is all there is.

Religiously-committed people overwhelmingly uphold the sanctity of human life, maintain the traditional view of marriage as only between one man and one woman, and promote religiously-formed consciences to guide one's public actions. In contrast, the religiously-indifferent for the most part support abortion, euthanasia, and religion as a strictly private matter totally irrelevant to public policy. The two groups conflict not only theologically, but clash culturally and politically, as well. The gulf between belief and unbelief has no middle ground, no room for compromise. It borders on the unbridgeable.

Too many Catholics today are in the vanguard of the religiously-indifferent. They relegate their faith to an occasional Mass and the rest of the time live as if God has no effect on their lives. Catholic politicians oppose Church teachings, while proclaiming they are doctrinally faithful. Catholic voters support candidates who favor abortion and euthanasia. Further, guidance from the clergy has been weak. Priests have been reluctant to speak about moral implications of political issues, while statements of the hierarchy often have not distinguished between matters of doctrinal certitude and of social justice on which there can be legitimate differences of opinion. Abortion and climate change are not doctrinally equal.

True faith is more than a set of dogmas to be accepted; rather it is a way of life whose ends are not the temporal comforts of this world, but the fulfillment of why we were created, to gain an eternity with God. It is only when Catholics – and

Christians in general -- truly practice their faith that society will change. Catholics must be re-evangelized: to learn once again, if they ever knew, what it means to be Catholic; to understand the timeless truth of its doctrines; to develop the moral values and commitment to live their lives in accord with the faith.

While leadership from the pulpit is necessary, priests and religious alone cannot reshape society. They are not in the offices and stores, factories and laboratories, unions and professional associations, media organizations and judicial chambers, where secularism is rampant, where God is a non-entity. It is here that laymen can evangelize from within. Today, Catholic lay activism – laymen guided by the truths of the Gospel acting in the world – is needed. The laity, acting in their individual capacities, can have an effect, one person, one locality at a time.

Although action is necessary for societal change, by itself it is insufficient. It must be accompanied by prayer in order to center the action on what God intends us to do. We must strengthen our devotion to the Mass, the rosary, Marian hours of prayer, retreats, spiritual readings, Eucharistic adoration, and other means to connect with the will of God. Otherwise, the work, built solely upon a human foundation, will fail, undermined by the superficiality and distractions of modern life. As stated in Psalm 127: *"Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labor in vain."*