Why Stay Catholic?

By Jamie Manson, M.Div.

Last year, I traveled to five cities that comprise the Call To Action-Upstate New York chapter, addressing the topic, “Why Stay?” It was a timely opportunity to discern why one would want to continue staying Catholic: just days earlier the Vatican had announced its crackdown on the Leadership Conference of Women Religious. Audiences were eager for some good answers.

To explain why I continue to call myself Catholic, I have to go back to a time when I didn’t know anyone but Catholics. I grew up on Long Island in an Italian-American family, and though we didn’t go the church regularly, my religious worldview was thoroughly Catholic. I grew up surrounded by my grandmother’s rosaries, my grandfather’s novena books, and many powerful images of the nativity, the Last Supper, Mary, and St. Michael the Archangel.

All of these Catholic sights must have worked deeply in my spirit throughout the course of my childhood because at age thirteen, I had an unexpectedly moving experience at the conclusion of the liturgy of Holy Thursday. After the altar was stripped, the priest and Eucharist ministers placed every last fragment of the Eucharist into a large ciborium. As the community chanted the “Pange Lingua,” the priest and ministers processed with a large vessel filled with the Eucharist. Watching it all, I was overcome with feelings of fascination and fear. I wasn’t sure what I was experiencing, but I felt irresistibly compelled to dedicate my life to what was unfolding before me.

My mother sent me to Catholic high school and I became fascinated with my religion classes. So deep was my interest, I chose to attend a Catholic university. Even with all of my theological studies, I did not meet a Protestant until I was in my early twenties. So you could imagine my shock when I pursued my Master of Divinity degree at a Protestant divinity school. Not only did I meet classmates from the typical mainline Protestant denomination like the Episcopal and Lutheran churches, but I met 40 different kinds of Protestants from religious communities like the Reformed Church in America, Assemblies of God, Church of the Nazarene, even Mennonites!

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It was extreme ecumenism. And less than a month into taking classes, worshipping, and eating meals with these folks, I realized that I was different from my Protestant friends. It wasn’t the obvious things, like that they didn’t have a pope or a daily Eucharist, but something else.

After talking with a few Catholic professors, I realized that a key difference was in our vision, more specifically the way in which we understood human nature and the power of grace. The distinction could be traced all the way back to the Reformation. The key theological concept that distinguished the Catholic view from the Calvinist view was in the conception of the relationship between grace and nature. For the Calvinist, humanity was seen as sinful and fallen.

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Why Stay?

It is a question that many of us in Call To Action frequently hear, and a question that we have likely posed to ourselves from time to time. Former Catholics ask us “why stay?” out of sincere wonderment as to why we remain in the Catholic Church and work to make our Catholic community more just and inclusive. Then, there are Catholics with a narrow, more exclusive vision of church who present this question to us in an adversarial tone that actually conveys the message “why don’t you just leave!”

Why stay? It is a good question.

In 2002, I entered Hartford Seminary, a progressive, nondenominational seminary in Connecticut, expecting that my theological studies would serve as a path out of the Catholic tradition and into another denomination. However, the Holy Spirit had other ideas. Through my years at seminary, I learned with inspiration and great comfort that my struggles with the institutional church are very similar to Catholics throughout history, many of whom we now refer to as saints. By the time I graduated from seminary, the question was settled for me - the Catholic tradition is my home and I am here to stay.

This edition of CTA News is devoted to that very important question – Why Stay? Working for change in our church is a sacred part of our Catholic tradition. We are the church and by working to make our church more just and inclusive, we create in ourselves a transformation that cannot happen otherwise.

This issue of CTA News will report on Call To Action’s transformational work including our participation in the Nun Justice coalition, LGBT equality efforts, and other items that reflect our resolve to stay. We stay and follow in the steps of the everyday saints that went before us with the promise to be present, to be bold, to be church.

Sincerely,

Jim FitzGerald, Executive Director

Letter from the director

Hey Editor,

My experience is that the vast majority of Catholics have been convinced that the 12 apostles were consecrated as bishops, and their authority is passed down like a baton in a race. The opinion and verdict of scholars on this issue as clearly stated by Raymond Brown, one of the premier scholars of the New Testament in the 20th century, in his book Priest and Bishop: “There is simply no compelling evidence for the classic thesis that the members of the Twelve always presided when they were present, and that there was a chain of ordination passing the power of presiding at the Eucharist from the Twelve to missionary apostles to pres-
byter-bishops…. but a more plausible substitute for the chain theory is the thesis that sacramental “powers” were part of the mission of the Church and that there were diverse ways in which the Church (or the communities) designated individuals to exercise those powers…”

I hope and pray this can be circulated by Call To Action as a way of promoting true renewal.

Best Regards,
Br. Tom Draney, CFC. Bonita Springs, FL

Dear Editor,

“...all the articles about the Vatican and the overall Church hierarchy regarding birth control, religious freedom and the scandal surrounding what is now being called Vatileaks makes my book, In Shepherd’s Clothing, all the more pertinent to what is happening all around us. [Editor’s note: the book is available on Amazon.com or Kindle EBooks]

God’s blessings,
Mark Matenaer, Cary, IL

Community letters

To submit a letter to the editor, email cta@cta-usa.org with “FOR NEWSLETTER EDITOR” in the subject line.
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and God saves human beings in spite of themselves. For the Catholic, grace perfects nature. God redeems us only from our sinfulness, not from who we are, because we are intrinsically God’s beloved children. For Catholics, there is a dynamic relationship with God, and human beings cooperate in their own transformation.

This essential distinction grounds so much of the Catholic theological tradition. The notion that grace perfects nature forms the basis for the uniquely Catholic idea that all finite things in creation are capable of revealing truths about what is infinite or eternal. Catholics have a sacramental view of the world. That is, for a Catholic, all of creation is good, and everything in our finite world can be a vessel of God’s presence and God’s transforming grace.

This notion of the sacramental view of the world provides the foundation for Catholicism’s rich mysticism and spirituality, its unparalleled social justice doctrine, its care of the poor, and its exquisite legacy of artists and writers. These are traditions that keep me calling myself Catholic. And, judging from the folks that I spoke with in CTA-Upstate New York, they, too, see these traditions as making up the core of their identity as Catholics.

But these faithful Catholics are also watching so many of their bishops put their energy and resources into denying gays and lesbians civil rights and denying women contraception, rather than taking political action on behalf of the poor and marginalized. They watch as the same bishops who refuse to be accountable to victims of sexual abuse oppressing women religious who have singlehandedly sustained the moral credibility of the church.

No wonder the most common question that I heard during my tour was: Is the Roman Catholic Church in this country entering a schism?

Some believe that the oppression of LCWR will be the offense that spurs on a schismatic movement. Others argue that, with so many independent Catholic communities emerging throughout our country, schism is already happening. Some agree with Matthew Fox’s contention that it is John Paul II and Benedict XVI who are in schism since they have trumped the teachings of Vatican II.

Regardless of which of these arguments they accept, Catholics are increasingly realizing that no church authority can separate them from the grace of God. By arguing for women’s ordination, the ordination of married men, and for the rights of gays and lesbians to marry, they are honoring their sacramental view of the world because they are telling church authorities that there are no limits to the ways in which God can be made present in the lives of God’s beloved children. They are realizing that sacramental power rests in all of those who see Jesus, the sacrament of God, in the table of the world around them. And the more they feel deprived by the church, the more they are becoming Eucharist for one another.

For some staying Catholic means remaining in church and continuing the fight. For others it means creating visionary church communities outside the walls of the institution. For many Catholics, it means doing both. There is no better way, or right way, no weaker way or stronger way to stay Catholic. The only criteria is whether this work attunes our Catholic sacramental view of the world, deepens our love for another, and brings about the life of God more fully in our community.

Jamie L. Manson received her Master of Divinity degree from Yale Divinity School where she studied Catholic theology and sexual ethics. Her weekly column, “Grace on the Margins,” appears in the National Catholic Reporter.

Young Adult Pilgrimage to World Youth Day

Call To Action’s CTA 20/30 young adult program and DignityUSA’s Young Adult Caucus is teaming up through our Equally Blessed Coalition to create a pilgrimage to World Youth Day (WYD). This July, a group of six young adults will travel to Rio de Janeiro to carry a message of welcome for LGBT Catholic youth in the church. The young adults wrote, “As faithful Catholics, we travel to World Youth Day with open hearts to talk with pilgrims and proclaim with our very presence that LGBTQ and allied Catholics are an integral and welcomed part of our colorful church.” Follow their adventure at www.Equally-Blessed.org/WYD where they will be posting photos, video blogs and other testimony from their journey.

What can you say about church justice in 140 characters? A lot! www.twitter.com/CTACatholics
Why I stay Catholic

We asked our members, “Why do you stay Catholic?” Here are some of their responses.

Fourteen years ago, I went to confession as part of my senior retreat before graduation from a Jesuit University. I confessed that I didn’t know if I could stay in a Church that had been so hurtful to women and to my gay and lesbian friends. I grew up in a very post-Vatican II church – rooted in justice with strong lay leadership - and had found progressive communities of faith thus far in my life, but I wasn’t sure of what I would find after college. I was surprised when the priest responded, “It is a sin to stay where you are not nurtured. As long as you have a community that nurtures you, stay. If not, you must find another one.”

Several years later, I was in spiritual direction with a most incredible sister of St. Joseph. I was leaving volunteer community and graduate school and I didn’t know what I would find next. I said, “I’ve been lucky to keep finding progressive communities of faith within the Catholic church.” She smiled and said, “You know, that’s not luck. You create that. That’s in you, and you bring it out of others.”

It was with those words ringing in my ears that on Ash Wednesday, I decided I could no longer find solace while challenging justice within the Institution of the Catholic Church. But I also heard my husband, who shares with me his journey to transform his motivation for labor organizing from one of anger to one of peace and love. I am angry at the Church – at Rome, but I still love the WE that ARE CHURCH. And it is because of that love that I re-dedicated myself to the three things about which I am passionate – social justice, creating community, and authentic relationship – and re-committed to BEING church and CREATING eucharistic community. In this way, I stay part of the “universal” Catholic, working to create the kindom together.

-Anice Chenault, Call To Action Anti-Racism Team Member

I find myself being asked a lot why I stay in the Catholic church when it is a place of so much struggle and hurt. When I answer, I think of two important reasons. The first is my family. I was raised in a progressive Catholic family that valued the experiences of community faith over a group of people sitting in the same building at the same time. We were told that every person’s faith was an important thing to listen to, not just the men behind the altar. My sister and I were taught that we could, and should, question the authority in the Church. At the same time, we were encouraged to become leaders within the church we challenged. This led me to believe that my experience was valid and important to be heard.

The second reason is because of an experience that I had abroad. I had the opportunity to travel around Europe for the summer with my sister. While traveling, we tried to get to church services on Sundays, whatever country we were in. During these weeks, we prayed in Ireland, France, Italy, and the Czech Republic. It was an eye opening experience to me to share in these prayers when I didn’t speak the language. No matter what words the people in the church were saying, I could follow the meaning. And when the time came to say the Our Father, I knew that I would continue to hold hands with the people in those churches, even across the ocean. The universality of the mass was something that has stayed with me since then.

As directives are passed down from Rome that try to change my prayer, I know that I am not alone in my struggle. It is a comfort to me to know that I am part of something so large that it encompasses the world, yet so familiar that I can be a part of it even when I don’t speak the language. I know that I am lucky to have found progressive prayer groups through my life that value my questions and encourage my leadership. So when I am asked why I stay, I say I stay because I am part of something bigger than me.

-Katie Schervish, CTA 20/30 Young Adult Team Member

Want to meet other inspiring Catholics? Register for conference at www.cta-usa.org/conference
With three adult children who have one by one left the Roman Catholic Church in which they were raised, I am frequently asked why I stay put. During 16 years of Catholic education, I regularly heard the story of Peter’s denial of Jesus during Holy Week. I learned at an early age to be skeptical of the qualities of the “rock” on which the Church was built. Having studied Church history in grad school, I am even more certain that only the Holy Spirit has kept the Church going despite so much destructive discord on the part of its leadership.

As a teen during the 60’s I experienced the earth shaking promise of Vatican II about which we were initially uneasy but learned to love especially the vernacular after years of Latin Mass! Remembering discussions with conservative Catholics in the Midwest where I lived who were in despair about what was happening to their Church, I am not surprised that they are making desperate attempts to take the Church back to those pre-Vatican II days where they felt more at home! Years ago, my family abandoned attempts to find a parish home where we could make a commitment to serve only to have the pastor transferred overnight and the new man bringing more unilateral changes than we could keep up with.

At the core of my being, most of all, it is not the structure or administration that I love and live for each day but the Body of Christ which is represented to me by the members of my small faith community whom I love and respect. They challenge me and call me to be my best self. We do our best each day to live in the model of our brother, Jesus, who loves us and shows us the way especially in these dark times.

-Norma Harrington, Call To Action Boston Chapter Leader

In the early days (1991-1995) of Call To Action National Conferences, the conference was known as the, We Are The Church: What If We Meant What We Said Conference. This, to me, is the touchstone for why I stay. I and we have to remember that no matter how much members of the hierarchy fulminate about obedience to the Magisterium and their teaching authority – that we, the People of God, as Vatican II named us, ARE the Church.

So, no matter how criminal we find the bishops’ behavior to be in the sexual abuse scandals, no matter how foolish the hierarchy appears to be in their “investigations” of American religious women and now the Girl Scouts, no matter how egregious are our “leaders’” persecutions of promoters of free inquiry and justice for the marginalized, they will NOT drive me out of OUR church.

I think, hope and pray that we are near one of those points that are described as hinges of history. Whether or not we are at a turning point from a monarchical, patriarchal model of leadership to a more open and collegial style – I feel compelled to act is if we are. If it is, as Joan Chittister told us at 2010’s Conference, that we are to be “prophets of a future not our own”, then I will be satisfied to have been a part of creating that future which will make our Church a better place for those who come after us.

-Mike Toner, Buffalo Call To Action Chapter Leader
Church Justice updates

Church Worker Justice

This March, Call To Action held its second annual Church Worker Justice Week to help raise awareness about the struggles church workers face and take action to support them. Thanks to everyone who forwarded one of the social media posts to help raise awareness (see below for a sample)!

We continue to support individual church workers who come to us for support after an injustice. If you know of a church worker who is seeking emotional or legal support, have them contact our office at 773.404.0004 and ask for our Church Justice Coordinator.

Lay Engagement

Meet the priest who stood up for change! Fr. Helmut Schuller knows the church is at a tipping point and Catholics are ready for a change.

He sparked the Pfarrer Initiative, or Priest Initiative, in Austria that is calling priests to resist current church practice and create a church with greater inclusion.

His work has inspired priest and lay groups around the globe to work together and take bolder steps to reform the church.

Fr. Helmut will visit the United States from July 15-August 7 at the invitation of a coalition of church justice organizations including Call To Action. He will be speaking in 15 cities and holding a national teleconference call for those unable to reach the tour sites. Ready to be inspired? Check out catholictippoint.org for tour details.

LGBT Equality

Call To Action, with the Equally Blessed coalition, held a social media campaign inviting Catholics to take action on Trinity Sunday, May 26th, if they saw or heard anti-gay remarks or bulletin inserts from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. Close to 300 people took part in the initial campaign and thousands more helped spread the word, wrote a letter to their priest, or took some another action.

Racial Justice

At the recommendation of the Anti-Racism Team, Call To Action recently signed on to the Once and for All Campaign. The project is organized by the US Human Rights Network (USHRN) and calls on the U.S. to be accountable to the commitments it made when ratifying the UN International Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD). By ratifying the treaty in 1996, the US promised to create a national strategic plan to assess its laws, policies and programs with the goal of eliminating the racism written into its structures. The Holy See is also party to the treaty and made the same commitments. We look forward to working with the other partners in USHRN to hold the US accountable to its promises.

As Catholics who believe in racial justice, we are also eager to see the Holy See fulfill its obligation to eliminate racial discrimination from its own politics and policies.

Women and Girls Equality

In early April, Pope Francis affirmed the Vatican mandate against LCWR, the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, that was issued on April 18 last year. So this April 18th, 2013, Call To Action, as part of the Nun Justice Coalition, participated in a nationwide action to remind the Vatican and Bishops that Catholics still support the sisters! Catholics across the country wrote letters to the editor and the Nun Justice Coalition sent a letter to Pope Francis encouraging him to discontinue the mandate that was set in place by his predecessor. Now, Call To Action is preparing to attend the LCWR Conference in August to show the sisters our support! Details coming soon on how you can help! If you’re not on our email list, sign up today to ensure you hear about our upcoming actions! Sign up at cta-usa.org/email

75% of catholic school teachers are lay women, any of them could be fired for her personal reproductive decisions.

Do you want to participate in Call To Action’s social media campaigns?

“Like” us on Facebook to make sure you’ll see our action alerts!

Facebook.com/CallToAction

Looking for an easy way to support church justice? Become a monthly donor at www.cta-usa.org/donate
Calendar of upcoming events

Memphis, TN
Summer Movie Series starting June 23 and every two weeks after that. First DVD features Sr. Joan Chittister’s keynote address from CTA Conference, Prophets of a Future Not Our Own. Contact: Judy and Jerry Bettice for details, jbettice@earthlink.net

Minneapolis, MN,
July 4-7
Dignity USA National Convention on the theme Let Justice Roll Like a River. Visit Call To Action’s booth and join our EquallyBlessed Coalition in the celebration. Contact: conv2013.dignityusa.org

Philadelphia, PA
July 12-14
Federation of Christian Ministries, National Assembly on the theme Spirituality: The Heart of Ministry. Contact: Federationofchristianministries.org, northeastvp@FCMmail.org

Estero, FL
July 18, 3pm
Mary Magdala Celebration. Liturgy led by Judy Beaumont, ARCPW. The Villages at Country Creek Clubhouse. Contact: Ellen McNally, CTA SW Florida, 239.390.0880

Prairie Village, KS
July 21, 2pm
Mary Magdala Celebration with theme of Women of Vatican II. Speaker will highlight Sr. Mary Luke Tobin, SL with whom she had close tie. Social follows. Contact: Janelle Lazzo, Heart of America Call To Action, lazzoj@aol.com

Albany, NY
July 22, 7pm
Mary Magdala Celebration at Hubbard Interfaith Sanctuary, College of St. Rose Contact: Steve Powers, CTA Albany Chapter, spowers7@nycap.rr.com

Alaska
July 22
Mary of Magdala Celebration. Contact: Ritchie Musick for details, ritchiemusick@gci.net

Omaha, NE
August 3-1, 4pm
Fr. Roy Bourgeois will share his journey and help us explore where we go from here. The event will also include a viewing of Pink Smoke Over the Vatican, a documentary on Roman Catholic women priests. First United Methodist Church, 7020 Cass St. Contact: CTA Nebraska, Joan Johnson, joanj68506@aol.com to rsvp.

Anchorage, AK and Fairbanks, AK
August 13 and 14
Fr. Roy Bourgeois will give presentations in Anchorage on Aug.13 and Fairbanks on Aug.14. Contact: Ritchie Music, Call To Action Alaska, ritchiemusick@gci.net

Bloomfield Hills, MI
September 21, 8am-4pm
CTA Michigan State Conference, featuring Nancy Sylvester, IHM. Birmingham Unitarian Church, 3865 Woodward Ave. Contact: Marianne Bernard, 248.467.6882, mailingsforctami@gmail.com

Dallas, TX
September 28, begins at 8:30am
Annual Open Window Conference, a CTA affiliate, will feature Francis Vanderwall on Modern Day Interpretation of the Parables. Contact: Pat and Sandra Haigh, pshaigh@juno.com

Caldwell, NJ and Jackson, NJ
October 12 and 26
Chapter organizing meetings in New Jersey. Contact: Mary Austin, CTA NJ Chapter leader, austin499@optonline.net, 732.833.4166

Seattle, WA
October 13, 1pm
Dr. Aimee Upjohn Light is an Asst. Professor of Theology at Duquesne University. Her specialties include Women’s Studies and Religious Pluralism. St. Mark’s Episcopal Cathedral, Bloedel Hall, 1245 Tenth Ave. East. Contact: Betty Hill, CTA WW Chapter Leader, 360.357.6207

Don’t miss a local event near you! Ask your local chapter to put you on their e-mail list. For a list of chapters, see www.cta-usa.org/chapters

Want to leave a legacy? Remember Call To Action in your will by simply inserting our legal name “Call To Action.”
Will you answer your call?
Living Our Baptismal Call, Call To Action Conference 2013
Register today!
www.cta-usa.org/conference