

Some time ago, a school student interviewed me on a statement he was asked to comment on for one of his assignments. The statement was:
“Informal Spirituality will soon take over institutionalised Religion.”

Let me share with you how I responded, as the statement for his assignment relates well to what Jesus said today.

Informal spirituality differs to formal religion insofar that it's not so much inspired by a given tradition, but more so of the exclusive interpretation of an individual. Informal spirituality is also characterised by personal prayer only, rather than a spiritual life which is further enriched and sustained by public worship.

Those whose spirituality is informal will say such things as:

“I don't need to go to Mass because it's enough for me to know that Jesus is my friend.”

This statement is contradictory. Precisely because Jesus *is* our friend, we don't want to take Him for granted or offend Him by ignoring His love, especially since Jesus said, **“Do this in memory of me”** when He gave us the Mass.

Since God is Father, Son,

and Holy Spirit (a community of Persons, but one God), those who do not pray in community also contradict the very nature of God. **“God is love”** (1 Jn 4:16), for His love is *interpersonal* in and of itself before flowing out to us.

So, to say, **“I can love God without worshipping in a faith community”** is a *misrepresentation* of how God Himself loves; nor is self-reliance being true to ourselves, for we are made in the image and likeness of God (that is, to love one another according to the love with which God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit love one another).

People who adopt an informal spirituality believe in anything that suits their whims or makes them feel good.

Consequently, they are less likely to engage in spiritual exercises that help them to be purified and grow in virtue. Jesus was well aware of how attractive this option is because when someone asked Him, **“Lord, will only a few people be saved?”** He answered, **“Strive to enter through the narrow door, for many, I tell you, will attempt to enter but will not succeed.”**

Sure, following Christ faithfully in the Church can feel like trying to get

through a narrow door at times. But, due to the rewards, it's worth it. Those who go no further than informal spirituality know the *price* of religion, but they don't know its *value*. In contrast, we're privileged as Catholics for the following five reasons:

Firstly, the Church is founded by Jesus Christ and every priest and bishop can be traced back to Christ Himself through apostolic succession.

Secondly, our Faith is more likely to inspire us to grow in virtue (rather than follow our immediate impulses or whims which don't always lead to long-term happiness).

Thirdly, the reception of the sacraments enables us to encounter Christ in tangible ways where Christ Himself is at work to help us.

Since encountering Christ in the sacraments is so ennobling, I always find myself being able to follow Him with a stronger faith, a more fervent love, and a renewed hope and confidence in Him when I receive them. These benefits are especially true of Confession and the Eucharist.

Conversely, I don't experience these benefits to the same extent without the sacraments. Sure,

Christ can be encountered anywhere, but I find that His presence is never as tangible and touching as where He has requested Himself to be found. I'm surprised to hear people say that they have a “personal relationship” with Jesus, yet choose to relate to Him in ways which are impersonal by avoiding the sacraments.

Such self-reliance is contradictory, especially when you consider that Christ Himself gave us the sacraments so that we can encounter Him in a personal way.

A fourth reason we're privileged to be Catholics is that practicing our Faith enables us to be a true *disciple* of Jesus.

Interestingly, the word, “disciple” only occurs in the Scriptures 27 times, but it occurs 299 times in the plural (i.e., “disciples”).

In other words, an authentically spiritual person is more likely to be found with other spiritual persons. The following statement, then, is clearly contrary to Sacred Scripture: **“I am a spiritual person, but I don't follow any religion; I just do my own thing.”**

Fifthly, knowing that I have fellow brothers and sisters who can, and do indeed support me in my faith, is very assuring indeed. In turn, even greater satisfaction is experienced in supporting others,

as there's more joy in giving than in receiving.

I don't think informal spirituality will take over religion in the near future, nor in the long-term, for history has demonstrated that while the Catholic religion may be counter-cultural, it's always relevant.

All human beings throughout history, including those of every colour and creed have always, engaged in ritual.

Additionally, history has taught us of the endurance of the Catholic Church. To give a few examples, the Roman Emperor Nero tried to destroy the Catholic Church and failed; the French Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte tried and failed; Hitler tried and failed; Stalin tried and failed. They're just a few examples. The point is, many have tried and failed!

Lastly, another reason why the Liturgical worship of Catholics will never vanish is because it's not merely *human*, but *divine*. Liturgy is God's work. The Holy Spirit prays in and through us, as St Paul says (see Rom 8:26). What's more, being united in worship is brought

about the activity of the Holy Spirit, for He's the fruit of the union between the Father and the Son. Nor is the Catholic Church a mere human institution.

The Church is indeed made up of frail and fickle human beings, but collectively, the Church is Christ's Body, as St Paul tells us.

Despite this clear teaching of St Paul, how often have you heard people say, **"I believe in Jesus, but I don't believe the Church?"**

Such a statement shows a poor understanding of who Jesus is and what belief in Him entails.

For what did Jesus say to Saul when he was on his way to persecute the Christians in Damascus?

Just as your head would cry out if I stepped on your foot, when Saul persecuted the Christians (the members of Christ's Body), Christ (the head of His Body) cried out to him from Heaven:

"Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" (Acts 9:4; 22:7; 26:4)

The Church is not a mere human institution because notice how Christ did not say,

"Why are you persecuting my followers?" or

"Why are you persecuting an establishment?" but, **"me?"**

Christ is identifying Himself so closely with His Church that to persecute His followers is equivalent to persecuting Him – Personally.

This correlation between Christ and His Church is consistent with what Jesus said to His disciples:

"Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me" (Mt 25:40).

This understanding of the Church as a divine institution has important implications.

Essentially, Jesus guides us through the teachings of the Church in faith and morals.

In addition to giving us reason to have greater confidence in her guidance, this understanding even enables us to love the Church.

St Augustine said that he fell in love with the Church before he fell in love with Christ.¹

There's no anomaly with this testimony of St Augustine because the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states that the "Church's faith precedes, engenders, supports, and nourishes our faith."² Put simply, without the Church, we wouldn't even know who Jesus is.

¹ cf. St Augustine *Confessions*, Bk. 6, art. 4-5.

² CCC, no. 181.

So, let us take courage in the assurance we receive from the Church,

because practicing our faith increases our chances of being able to succeed in our attempt to **"enter through the narrow door."**

Many will, as Jesus said, **"attempt to enter but will not succeed."**

In contrast, by practising our faith by our regular worship and receiving the sacraments frequently, by putting our faith into action by living lives of charity in accord with the Church's teachings, we have reason to be confident that we're walking on a sure path.

In addition to being a gift of Christ's body, the Church is God the Father's gift to us.

On this point, I invite you to consider what St Paul said today:

"For the Lord trains the ones that he loves ... has there ever been any son whose father did not train him?"

Could a father really say that he loves his children if he does not give them any guidance; if he lets their lives end up in wreck and ruin?

The guidance we receive from the Church is a gift our loving Father gives us in His Son.