

# Deep Catholicism

During the long Lent of 2002, I started using the phrase “Catholic Lite” to denote a cast of mind that, in my judgment, had contributed mightily to the crisis of fidelity that was at the root of clerical sexual abuse and episcopal misgovernance. Within that mindset, one of the fundamental questions shaping ecclesial life had become, “How little can I believe and do while still remaining a Catholic?” Then as now, the question struck me as not only mistaken, but ultimately boring. But it didn’t come from nowhere, and understanding its origins was, and is, important.

In the late 1960s, the emergence of Catholic Lite was a reaction to some of the weaknesses of pre-Vatican II catechesis, and especially the kind of teaching that failed to distinguish between those parts of the Baltimore Catechism that stood at the core of Christian conviction and those that were on the periphery. This dumbing-down tendency in catechetics received intellectual reinforcement from efforts by scholars like Karl Rahner, an influential figure at the Council, to create what the German theologian called “brief creedal statements.” Rahner likely meant to provide short, compelling summaries of the Creed from which the serious work of explaining Christianity to unbelievers could begin; what too many learned from efforts like his was Catholic Lite.

Catholic Lite was also informed by interpretations of the Council which held that Vatican II marked a decisive break-point with the past, and that the boundaries of faith and morals were now sufficiently elastic as to accommodate virtually any construal of what it meant to believe, pray, and live as a Catholic. This notion of a “council of rupture” was rejected by the 1985 Extraordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, which counterposed a “council of continuity and reform.”

Catholic Lite also had a certain pastoral appeal. I’ve been approached by concerned Catholics who begin a conversation by saying, “I’m a bad Catholic, but ... ” To which I reply, “We’re all bad Catholics.” – before going on to make the point that holding the bar of expectation high, knowing that we’ll fail, is the path to genuine spiritual and moral growth. Yet it’s also understandable that, in a society dominated by the culture of the therapeutic, some pastors would imagine it more, well, pastoral to prescribe Catholic Lite rather than challenging parishioners to live Catholicism-in-

full: understandable, but short-sighted and, in the final analysis, a disservice to Christians baptized for spiritual and moral grandeur.

What's the alternative to Catholic Lite? I found one answer in a new book by Father Aidan Nichols, O.P., who teaches at Cambridge University in England. In "Criticizing the Critics: Catholic Apologias for Today" (Family Publications), Father Nichols responds to the challenges posed (according to the book's table of contents) by "modernists, neo-gnostics, academic biblical exegetes, feminists, liberal Protestants, progressive Catholics, the erotically absorbed, and critics of Christendom" in a series of trenchant essays.

He gives us a luminous description of the Catholicism-in-full that we need. That kind of Catholicism is not sectarian, nor does it attempt to re-create the Catholic 1950s, "which ... showed its Achilles' heel by the manner in which its adherents subsequently fell way." Rather, what we should seek is:

"...a deep Catholicism [that] is not simply sure of its dogmatic basis and at home in its corporate memory, though these are essential. It is also profoundly rooted in the Scriptures, the Fathers, the great doctors and spiritual teachers, and receptive to whatever is lovely in the human world of any and every time and place, which the Word draws to himself by assuming human nature into union with his own divine person."

That's the Catholicism, Father Nichols suggests, that can give people "strong reasons for living." Strong truths, beauty appreciated, and lives lived nobly: there's one compelling answer to Catholic Lite.

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