

Despite odds, people are staying in the church

In the March 16 issue of The Baltimore Sun, there was an article by Leonard Pitts Jr. about a new study - the American Religious Identification survey, conducted by researchers at Trinity College of Hartford, Conn. "The poll of more than 54,000 American adults found a sharp erosion in the number of people claiming religious affiliation" stated Pitts.

He cited a few highlights: "The number of people who call themselves Christian is 76 percent, down 10 percentage points since 1990."

"Thirty percent of married couples did not have a religious ceremony."

"More than one in four Americans does not expect a religious funeral."

Pitts cites a list of reasons why Americans are disaffiliating, everything from the scandals of televangelists and clergy abuse, to murders and terror committed in the name of God, to "intolerant" positions of various religions, and on and on.

In no way am I making light of the article or the survey. The sins of religions are well documented. We have indeed scandalized many. I am a flawed human being. Likely, you are, too.

Unfortunately, the thousands of wonderful things that churches do every day are not well documented. As I go from church to church, from school to school, from group to group, I am overwhelmed by all the good being done by so many people. If my only information about religion came from stories in the secular media, I might not affiliate either! However, if anyone spent any amount of time in any parish or school, and observed the generosity to the poor, the commitment to justice, the energy spent in educating our young, the genuine religious piety of so many people - I think there might be a stampede to be a part of such a religious movement.

The challenge to organized religion is twofold. First, the enormous good we do is often ignored, and our failures are highlighted. Second, when we do take a

“prophetic” stance, such as opposing abortion or embryonic stem-cell research, we are often branded intolerant. We tend to forget that Jesus took prophetic stances, and he was widely rejected in his day. Not only did many of the religious leaders of his day reject Jesus, but who can forget that poignant scene in John’s Gospel, when Jesus speaks of his “flesh as real food and his blood as real drink,” and, as a result, the “crowds followed him no more.” The Gospels demand a decision – for or against Jesus. Not everyone at any time has always been for Jesus!

The challenge for all of us is that the church is both a human and divine institution. It is divine, because as branches on the vine, the life and the love of Christ are constantly being poured into each of us. It is human because we are free to reject that life and choose the values of the world.

Why do we stay in the church? Because Jesus modeled fidelity to his roots. Jesus was an observant Jew. His first followers were observant Jews. Those who plotted his death were other observant Jews. Not everyone saw Jesus in the same way.

Today our church is a family of saints and sinners. As the old saying goes: “There is no sinner without a future, and no saint without a past.” The church can’t be perfect because we humans can’t be perfect. As Father Andrew Greeley said so well: “If you can find a perfect church, by all means join it. But, remember, as soon as you join it, it won’t be perfect any more!”

In closing, let’s turn around those statistics that I began this article with. Despite all of our real or imagined sins, despite all the pounding religion takes in the media – 76 percent of Americans do call themselves Christian! Seventy percent of married couples did have a religious ceremony! Seventy-five percent of Americans do expect a religious funeral! Oh, and last, but far from least, the same survey showed that today, in raw numbers, there are 22 million more Christians than in 1990! Critics are quick to point out the “reasons” why people stop being Christian. Who can explain that, against all the odds, so many more are joining and staying?