

Charles P. Pierce is a *Globe Magazine* staff writer. The full article is available at http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/magazine/articles/2010/07/11/what_i_believe/

What I believe

... The institutional church is in disarray. The sexual-abuse scandal that had its ground zero here in Boston has now exploded internationally, most notably in Ireland, where the Roman Catholic Church was as close to an established state religion as it was anywhere in the world since the Reformation. The current pope, Benedict XVI, behaved as dubiously in these matters when he was the archbishop of Munich as Cardinal Bernard Law behaved here. Once, the scandal was treated as an American problem – the Vatican having had issues with the American experiment going back at least to Pope Pius IX, who included many of the American concepts vital to a secular democracy in his Syllabus of Errors in 1864, when American democracy was in enough trouble at home – so it was roundly dismissed by various Vatican functionaries as the creation of liberal freethinkers and scandal-happy US newspapers, including this one. Not any longer. Cases have detonated in Australia, Germany, Switzerland, Italy, and several other countries. Church attendance in the United States is down.

A survey by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, released in April 2009, found that one in 10 US adults has left the Catholic Church after having been raised Catholic – with Catholicism having had the largest net loss in members of all the major religious groups in the United States. About half of those who departed and now identify themselves as “unaffiliated” left the church because of its views on abortion, homosexuality, and birth control. (In 2009, the American Religious Identification Survey by Hartford’s Trinity College found that, between 1990 and 2008, the percentage of people in Massachusetts who identified themselves as Catholic dropped to 39 percent from 54 percent.) The sexual-abuse scandal, then, erupted within a church that already was struggling with serious demographic pressures. The scandal placed the doubts of much of the laity into sharp relief. Many Catholics are out of patience with intramural church solutions that seem to do little more than push the cases down the road and keep in place the sclerotic institutional structure and the paranoid mania for secrecy that allowed the corruption to flourish in the first place.

And that structure existed not only in the opulence of the Vatican itself, but also in the minds of millions of Catholics, like myself. It still exists in the former. It has no influence in the latter, not for me, nor for many others like me. The institutional Catholic Church, for me, has no concrete form, no physical structure, no hierarchy except that of ideas. Even my attendance at Mass is largely contemplative, the priest presiding in a supervisory capacity, his authority dependent wholly on the primacy of my individual conscience. For it’s not really about celibacy, or female priests. It’s about the source of the authority exercised by a hierarchical priesthood based in Rome.

None of this is really new. As Illinois-based historian and author Garry Wills has pointed out, relentlessly, Catholics fought to define the church's authority within themselves even back in the earliest days of the church, before it attached itself to imperial Rome and, subsequently, to thousands of years worth of European power politics. And the spiritual authority – and authoritarianism – of the hierarchy, up to and including the papacy, was diminishing in the minds of millions of Catholics long before the sexual-abuse crisis brought that issue to a conspicuous boil. “The hierarchy,” says Richard McBrien, a professor at the University of Notre Dame and an outspoken critic of the institutional church, “is largely irrelevant to any intelligent, educated Catholic.”

... My friend the Rev. Walter Cuenin is a good priest who voiced his disapproval of the handling of the sexual-abuse scandal in the Boston Archdiocese and later was forced to leave my home parish in Newton in 2005 because the archdiocese didn't approve of the way finances were being handled. It was a display of ward heeling that would have embarrassed Mayor Curley. Cuenin always used to tell a story during one of his homilies about a man recently arrived in heaven. His guide takes him down a street on which there are several houses of worship. This is where the Buddhists pray, he is told, and over here is the Lutheran Church. At the end of the street is one last church. The guide tells the newly arrived person to be very, very quiet.

“That's the Catholic Church,” says the guide. “They think they're the only ones here.” I have been asked, a lot, given everything that's gone on over the past few years, why I remain a Catholic. The simplest answer is found somewhere between the two curious extremes of public religiosity in the country today. On the left we have the new atheists – best exemplified by people like journalist Christopher Hitchens and writer Sam Harris, and worst exemplified by comedian Bill Maher, whose atheism seems to be little more than Ivy League snobbery – and all the way over on the right we have the fundamentalist Christianity of the suburban mega-church and the Left Behind novels.

As to the latter, I think I can say without equivocation that I simply don't want what they call a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. At the moment, I have a personal doctor, a personal trainer, and a personal fencing coach, none of whom I see as much as I should. One thing I always liked about being Catholic is that, while we could be insufferably vaunting about being the One True Church – which was the basis for Walter's joke, after all – we by and large didn't proselytize that way, and once you learned anything about church history, you could dispose of the One True part pretty easily. (The Episcopal Church doesn't count? The Book of Common Prayer doesn't count? Really?) I do not need a personal Lord and Savior. Not in that sense, anyway. I'm happy sharing him with the rest of what the fathers at the Second Vatican Council called the “people of God.”

As far as atheism goes, well, unfortunately, that ship sailed for me a while ago. We all have different ways of getting in touch with the transcendent. For me, these include sunrises over

Lake Michigan, the way the rain falls in the part of Ireland where my grandparents were born, John Coltrane's "Alabama," the last paragraph of James Joyce's story *The Dead*, the way Madison writes about government and religion, Robert Johnson's music, and the Catholic ceremony of the Mass. All of these lead me to contemplate, in one way or the other, the existence of something beyond myself. You can call it God or not call it God. I do, but that's all shorthand. I don't think that this ever has limited my intellectual development or my ability to think for myself. (Sorry, Bill.) As for the great mass of other churches, I don't get that same experience from their rituals. That's not their fault, nor is it mine. It doesn't make my church the One True one and theirs not. My experience is my own.

... Asking me why I am still a Catholic is rather like asking me why I'm still an American. After all, it can be argued that, over the past decade or so, with acts like waterboarding, the country has abandoned a lot of what made it unique in history and suffered a profound loss of faith in its founding ideals. (I've argued that myself.) I am still an American because, as Herman Melville put it, the Declaration of Independence makes a difference. I remain a Catholic because the Gospels make a difference. In both cases, ideals are set out, pathways delineated, and through them, our shortcomings can be measured as precisely as possible. In the former case, the torturers and their bureaucratic masters cannot contradict the verdict of that measuring, and in the latter, the crimes against conscience perpetrated by the institutional hierarchy of the Church cannot stop the slow, painful evolution from moving forward. I can stay a Catholic because of what I've learned about being an American. I am, in my own way, a Madisonian Catholic. To borrow a line from Thomas Jefferson, my church neither picks anyone's pocket nor breaks anyone's leg. Most important of all, it is mine – a personal church, if not a personal Savior.

... Which brings me to the most fundamental rule of my Catholicism – nobody gets to tell me that I'm not a Catholic.

Those of my fellow Catholics who remain loyal to the institutional structure of the Church don't get to do so. People who talk glibly of "cafeteria Catholicism" don't get to do so. People who seek to coin Catholic doctrine into political advantage – be they left or right – don't get to do so. No priest gets to do so, and no bishop, either, and that especially means the bishop of Rome himself. No pope can tell me I'm not a Catholic.

Things went awfully bad when, in the fourth century, the Emperor Constantine backed the right horse, adopted Christianity as the religion of the Roman empire, and set the institutional church on a course wherein it became a royal European court with the pope as its king. This shrewd political move by an emperor came to be seen as a very bad thing for both religion and the state. In developing a system to disentangle religion and government here in the United States, Madison cited the example of Constantine and Christianity as something to be avoided. In fits and starts, both institutionally and, more important, one

conscience at a time, the Church has progressed only on those occasions when it operates contrary to this bad ancient bargain.

Garry Wills regularly points out how Vatican II – the mid-'60s council that put the church on the path of liberalism and ecumenism – defined the church as the entire “people of God.” That being the case, one can find a way to remain a Catholic while not only distancing oneself from the hierarchy of the institutional church but also subverting it, in a kind of internal Reformation. After all, as Wills pointed out in a recent issue of *The New Republic*, “The pope is a freak of history – specifically, of medieval history. . . . Peter was not a pope, or a bishop, or a priest – offices that did not exist in his lifetime. There are no priests in the New Testament.” Wills further explains that “the democracy that would be denounced by Pius IX had been practiced in the early church, where priests and bishops were elected by the people.” For some time, at some instinctive level, in the depths of their informed consciences, Catholics knew this. And it was 45 years ago when they first put those feelings into action.

In 1869, desperate to cling to the spiritual power of his office as a secular revolution in Italy eroded his temporal power, Pope Pius IX called the First Vatican Council and rammed through the doctrine of papal infallibility, by which the pope is incapable of error while speaking on matters of faith and morals *ex cathedra*, from the Chair of Peter. Bureaucratic thinking being what it is, the Vatican became shrewd at draping almost every pronouncement with the trappings of infallibility, and the doctrine became a millstone on the consciences of millions of Catholics. It slipped loose in 1968, when Pope Paul VI issued *Humanae Vitae*, his encyclical condemning artificial birth control. The encyclical seemed so shabbily derived from Scripture, and so giddily divorced from the realities of daily life, that the informal infallibility with which it was sold seemed an unconvincing burlesque. Catholics discovered that they could ignore the pope in good conscience and remain Catholics, no matter how many people told them they couldn't.

“That was the last straw,” Richard McBrien says. “Paul VI, by comparison, was a pretty good pope. He was frightened into reaffirming that teaching. That was the turning point. It wasn't Vatican II that made Catholics freethinking people. It was that birth-control encyclical, when they realized that the pope didn't know what he was talking about.”

When the sex-abuse scandal exploded, the church hierarchy discovered itself with a laity that was already armed with a towering skepticism as to the ability of the hierarchy to confront honestly the depths of the crimes that had been committed. There was no credibility left in the tactics of deflecting blame; for a long time, the Vatican seemed to be arguing that this had been a uniquely American problem. To borrow a phrase from the Watergate scandal, that argument has been rendered inoperative by the events of this year. People determined that they would defeat the sullied authority of the hierarchy by ignoring it. The latest Reformation is taking place in people's minds. The papacy, as an institution,

can recognize that, or it can wither away over time, and its authority with it, until there's nothing left but one more museum piece, a pointless man on an empty throne, all lost save ceremony. ...

Daniel Moran, Boston, responded to this article:

Pierce says he'll remain a Catholic despite the facts. Priests do awful things, and he says, well, priests really don't matter. The Vatican does things that are anti-human, and he says the Vatican really doesn't matter. The same goes, says Pierce, for the pope and his ridiculous pronouncements and church doctrine. What matters for Pierce is being a Catholic despite it all. Therein, perhaps, lies the one thing that gives license to all the popes and priests and all their bad behavior. If one belongs to a country club with racist and/or sexist policies, can one say they are just there for the golf?

John Cooney and Fergus Black write for *The Belfast Telegraph*. This full article can be referenced at <http://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/local-national/republic-of-ireland/union-of-6500-irish-priests-to-hold-hierarchy-to-account-14891589.html>

'Union' of 6,500 Irish priests to hold hierarchy to account

A plan to form an independent association of Ireland's 6,500 priests will aim to make church leadership more publicly accountable, its three leading movers said last night.

"It is based on reforming the Irish church along the spirit and vision of the church as the people of God," Mayo priest Fr Brendan Hoban told the Irish Independent last night.

"This was the reform policy that was called for by the Second Vatican Council when the world's bishops met in Rome from 1962-65, but it has not been put into practice in Ireland," Fr Hoban added.

The group, akin to a union for clergy, also wants to provide a more liberal voice to the conservative response of the Vatican and Irish church leaders to the unprecedented child clerical abuse crisis.

... The three clerics agreed it would be impossible to represent all priests, given the diverse views among clerics, but they identified the need for wider discussion in the church to restore a positive relationship between bishops and priests'.

Last night Fr Flannery told the Irish Independent that tensions had developed between bishops and priests over the management of complaints of clerical child sexual abuse. He explained that one aim would be "to heal divisions between bishops and priests over how bishops were no longer father figures to their priests".

... Speaking to the Irish Independent, Fr McDonagh said it was astonishing that the clergy was the only professional body in Ireland that did not have "a corporate voice".

Catholic Communications Office spokesman Martin Long said he did not think there would be any opposition in the church to an association to represent priests. "It is a good thing if priests wish to organise themselves in order to voice their opinions and this would be important at this challenging time for clergy and lay Catholics alike," he said.

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