

CHAPTER II

DIALOGUE AND THE PRACTICAL THEOLOGY OF DISAFFILIATION¹

What is the theological orientation we take as Catholic families engage with their disaffiliated children and grandchildren, and indeed the pastoral approach of church leaders to how we connect meaningfully with those who have exited our religious institutions? The answer to that question lies in a broader reappraisal of contemporary Catholic mission that does not pull back from the pluralism of our culture but courageously engages and dialogues with our post-secular age with imagination and hope. Theology can be a compass, a navigational aid for faith in a changing world, as it helps us explore the changing religious landscape within Catholic families. As Carolyn Chau states in her important work, *Solidarity with the World*: “ [There is a] need for greater understanding of the secularity of the modern Western world and the retrieval of mission as a key, ongoing aspect of Christian ecclesial identity. ² My engagement in this project study sees both the interviews and analysis of the affiliated and disaffiliated family members through the theological lenses of dialogue and the method of practical theology.

I propose to consider the *theology of dialogue* by which we engage in the lives of others outside of our church communities as our evangelical stance and *practical theology* as the understanding we bring as we enter the lives of those who have disaffiliated. The purpose of this dialogue is not to find a solution to the “problem” of disaffiliation but to suggest a theological framework to engage with those who leave the church and gather learning opportunities. God is present in both affiliated and disaffiliated family members, and that such encounters are an opportunity for revelation.

Dialogue leads us to realize the sacredness and meaning of disaffiliated stories we engage with and the ecclesial traditions that shaped the lives of parents and children. We hear stories of search and hope, frustration and crisis in the search for belonging, believing and values that undergird one’s life to have influence. Instead of merely a “failure” of one’s faith by exiting the church, dialogue unveils the experience of disaffiliation as “one of the most theologically significant phenomena in contemporary Catholic life.”³ The contribution of practical theology, even though still orientated toward

¹ There are several terms in the research of disaffiliation that are used. “Disaffiliation”, “unaffiliated”, “deconversion”, and “non-normative Catholicism” will be used interchangeably, even though there are nuance differences. Simply it refers to those who would once have considered themselves to be (Roman) Catholic, but who now no longer does. By ‘non-normative’ I mean two discursive dimensions at once: ways of belief and practice that diverge from those specified as important for Catholic life by official Catholic teaching, and ways of belief and practice that diverge from what baptized Catholics take to be specified as important for Catholic life by official Catholic teaching. (Beaudoin and Hornbeck II, 2018) (Bulivant, 2019)

² Carolyn A, Chau. *Solidarity with the World: Charles Taylor and Hans Urs von Balthasar on Faith, Modernity, and Catholic Mission*. (Oregon: Cascade Books, an Imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers) Kindle Edition, 3.

³ J. Patrick Horbeck II, “Deconversion from Roman Catholicism: Mapping a Fertile Field.” *American Catholic Studies*, Vol. 122, No. 2 (2011), 1.

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an institutional practice of faith and exclusively Christian model,⁴ is in my mind key to understanding the work of the Spirit of lived Catholic praxis of post-secular Catholics and their significance for the institutional church.

A Theology of Dialogue in and with Disaffiliated Families

Families wrestle with what it means to be Catholic in prominent ways. Everyday Catholic life contains an ambiguous regular theological play between normative practice and non-normative belief and practice. Nevertheless, the theological space to speak openly and frankly about common faith and practice and the doubts accompanying them is always there. Whether it meets official expectations or not, it is this space where Catholic ideals and Catholic realities blend in convergence and divergence and where the *whole* of Catholic identity may be more fully understood.⁵

Pope Benedict XVI emphasized in the 2012 Synod the need in the *New Evangelization*⁶ to be unapologetically bold in the proclamation of the gospel. However, some bishops pushed back on this and suggested that the church should instead adopt “a new attitude of humility, gentleness, and listening.”⁷ Pope Francis amplified this ecclesiology, which urges the church to be a place of hope where “young people often fail to find responses to their concerns, needs, problems and hurts in the usual structures.”⁸ In response to this, he continues: “We need to practice the art of listening, which is more than simply hearing. Listening, in communication, is an openness of heart which makes possible that closeness without which genuine spiritual encounter cannot occur.”⁹ Essential is an attitude to dialogue I too wish to propose in and with families with disaffiliated children.

As necessary as this dialogue is across faiths and cultures worldwide, it is this same dialogue that is indispensable across the gulf of affiliated and disaffiliated family members. The family is the ordinary place where emerging adults and older people trust enough to be vulnerable and share their stories of hurt, hope, sadness, and joy. It is here, in this nexus of trust, that families cross the gender gap of faith in eye-opening ways. This listening means that both parents and children become aware of the meaning and value revealed underneath their faith conversations.¹⁰

⁴ Tom Beaudoin. “Secular Catholicism and Practical Theology.” *IJPT*, vol. 15, (Walter de Gruyter, 2011), 24-25.

⁵ Tom Beaudoin and J. Patrick Hornbeck II. “Deconversion and Ordinary Theology: A Catholic Study.” Chapter Four. In *Exploring Ordinary Theology : Everyday Christian Believing and the Church*. Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2013. ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/fordham-ebooks/detail.action?docID=1114098>. Created from fordham-ebooks on 2018-07-03 13:54:17, 34.

⁶ United States Catholic Bishops Conference. *What is the New Evangelization?* Washington, DC. [New Evangelization | USCCB](#) “In a special way, the New Evangelization is focused on 're-proposing' the Gospel to those who have experienced a crisis of faith. Pope Benedict XVI called for the re-proposing of the Gospel "to those regions awaiting the first evangelization and to those regions where the roots of Christianity are deep but who have experienced a serious crisis of faith due to secularization.”

⁷ Tracey Lamont. *Ministry with Young Adults: Toward a New Ecclesiological Imagination*. Religions 2020, 11, 570; doi: 10.3390/rel11110570, 4.

⁸ Pope Francis. *Evangelii Gaudium* (The Joy of the Gospel). *Libreria Editrice Vaticana*. November 24. Available online: http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html, paragraph 105.

⁹ *Ibid*, paragraph 171.

¹⁰ Lamont, 6.

In this sense, I wish to re-imagine the idea of intergenerational faith transmission from passing or giving faith to discovering a faith that already exists in some “unfinished” form in all of us, something most relevant in adolescents and young adults children. This dialogue of faith cannot anticipate outcomes but points us into new, more profound experiences of God that are unforeseen and often unpredictable. This “missionary” focus is more on how we can meet our younger generations and others *where they indeed are*, rather than where we want them to be.¹¹ My own missionary experience across three continents has taught me that we are not bringing God to anyone; God is already present in the world, in all people, and in all creation in the hidden sacraments that may emerge in the encounter.

We help to unveil ways younger generations can make faith their own, and in so doing, seeing faith anew ourselves. We are all changed by this dialogue. As Pope Francis alludes to, the primary evangelical relationship in a disaffiliated family is not about whether the entire teaching of the church is accepted; instead, doors are opened to make room for everyone to explore more.¹²

It does not imply that the church's tradition, its rich resource that has sustained families for centuries, may no longer be as relevant or may be relegated to the periphery of secularization. Nor does authentic dialogue relativize the tradition of scripture and what the church has learned since the time of Christ. With many, however, (there are always exceptions), we cannot start with catechesis.¹³ Despite having been catechized in their childhood, disaffiliated adults have grown to perceive the institution of the church very differently than older generations. Of course, church tradition illumines all ages in the unique places we find ourselves and in the concrete realities of the here and now, but that is discovered slowly, in dialogue.

Dialogue in a Secularized World

This dialogue plays out in a myriad of ways worldwide. But religious-secular dialogue is a relatively new phenomenon,¹⁴ despite the efforts on the part of a post-Vatican II church that began to see the value of this dialogue in the Vatican institution of the *Secretariat for Nonbelievers* in 1965.¹⁵ Pope Paul VI developed this understanding further in his first papal encyclical, *Ecclesiam Suam* (1964), when he wrote that it is not the right course for the Church "to isolate itself from dealings with secular society." Instead, the path for the Church to follow in its dealings with the world "can better be represented in a dialogue ... conceiving the relationships between the sacred and the secular in terms of the transforming dynamism of modern society, in terms of the pluralism of its manifestations, likewise in terms of the maturity of man, be he religious

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid, 7.

¹³ Sherry Weddell. *Forming Intentional Disciples: The Path to Knowing and Following Jesus* (Our Sunday Visitor. Kindle Edition.), 125.

¹⁴ I am associating religious secular dialogue to the type of dialogue just described when speaking of dialogue between affiliated parents and their children, as well as church leadership and the disaffiliated.

¹⁵ Pontifical Commission of Culture. *The Courtyard of the Gentiles*. <https://www.cortiledeligentili.com/>

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or not, enabled through secular education to think, to speak and to act through the dignity of dialogue."¹⁶

The church took up the religious-secular dialogue again in 2005 with the Vatican initiative of *Courtyard of the Gentiles* that began developing international conferences gathering religious and non-religious adults. It deals with encounter and dialogue, a space of expression for those who are not religious and those who are asking questions about their faith, a window open to the world, to contemporary culture, and the voices that resonate contemporary.¹⁷ The three purposes are:

- A place for meeting and discussion on the key issues and challenges that affect modern society.
- A duet - and not a duel - between voices and prominent personalities of secular and Catholic cultures.
- In a spirit of openness and acceptance of the other, a network of people work to overcome the mistrust between two irreconcilable worlds.¹⁸

More recently, in this context of dialogue with secular culture, Pope Francis, in his first encyclical, *Joy of the Gospel*, says: “As believers, we also feel close to those who do not consider themselves part of any religious tradition, ...We consider them as precious allies in the commitment to defending human dignity, in building peaceful coexistence between peoples and in protecting creation.” Thus, the larger context is embedded in three significant dialogues necessary for the common good: dialogue with states, dialogue with society – including dialogue with cultures and the sciences – and exchange with other believers who are not part of the Catholic Church.¹⁹

In this light, the church’s relationship with the secular need not be solely adversarial. Yet, in the time of Pope Francis, that oppositional tone resonates still with many as in the “Benedict Option,”²⁰ a nostalgia for a less diverse culture. I understand that the Catholic notion of dialogue does not retreat from a secular world but requires we

¹⁶ Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam* (On the Church). *Libreria Editrice Vatican*. August 6, 1964. http://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_06081964_ecclesiam.html, paragraphs 78-80.

¹⁷ Pontifical Council of Culture. *What is the Courtyard of the Gentiles?* <http://www.cultura.va/content/cultura/en/dipartimenti/ateismo-e-non-credenza/che-cos-e-il-cortile-dei-gentili--.html>. The main website is: <https://www.cortiledeigentili.com>. The Secretariat for Nonbelievers was subsumed into the Pontifical Council of Culture by John Paul II.

¹⁸ More recently, an important conference took place in Rome entitled, *Understanding The Culture of Unbelief*, in May of 2020. My blog post on the event is here: <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/secularspectrum/2019/07/understanding-cultures-of-unbelief-for-religious/> Since 2012, our religious congregation, the Xaverian Missionaries, have emulated Courtyard of the Gentiles in an international program we call, *Common Ground*. Information for this may be seen here: <https://www.xaverianmissionaries.org/religious-secular-dialogue/>

¹⁹ Pope Francis. *Evangelii Gaudium*. (*The Joy of the Gospel*) *Libreria Editrice Vatican*. November 24, 2013. http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html, paragraph 257.

²⁰ Steven Thorngate. “Who is the Benedict Option For?” *The Christian Century*. May 8, 2017. <https://www.christiancentury.org/review/who-is-benedict-option-for> The “Benedict Option” spells out a more or less linear path of corruption, an orthodox faith accommodating itself to secular modernity.

enter it to take seriously the spiritual journey of those who disaffiliate, as we take seriously any dialogue partner, secular humanist, Muslim, Buddhist, Presbyterian. How we help Catholic families to do this is the pressing question I will hold to later in the study. For the moment, taking the faith journey of disaffiliation and its theological meaning acknowledges the constellation of cultural practices that represents a type of Catholic theology, which is also a “secularizing” process.²¹ Understanding this phenomenon is the work of practical theology.

Postsecular Dialogue and Practical Theology

Practical theology is a method to learn in the dialogue of the affiliated and unaffiliated. It is concerned with the hermeneutical investigation of lived religion “in loco.” Its contribution in this project is to make theological sense of how contemporary Catholic families and others relate to the sacred in their lives. Predominately Protestant, practical theology is still in its infancy in the American Catholic hermeneutic. But it holds a deep theological curiosity and a broad complex view of how the many ways faith lives. Terry Veling, in his reflections on Catholic practical theology, shares: “‘If God were a theory,’ writes Abraham Heschel, ‘the study of theology would be a way to understand him.’ But, what if God were not a theory but a method? What if we are meant to be studying, not the ‘theory’ of God, but the ‘way’ of God—God’s method, God’s ways, God’s thoughts, God’s hopes, God’s desires, God’s concerns—or, in traditional theological language—God’s will? At its simplest—and yet most difficult—practical theology is a way of life that needs to be practiced.”²²

The German scripture scholar, Gerhard Lohfink, describes how people in the gospels related to Jesus noticeably diverse ways. Not everyone was an apostle, not everyone was a disciple, and not everyone who had something to do with Jesus associated with him in the same way, yet all contributed in some way to Christ’s mission. He states that in all of the gospels, the gospel of Mark expresses different connections to Jesus and his ministry. Along with the twelve apostles, there was a broader circle of disciples who participated in the life of Jesus in tenuous ways, whether they made their houses available, those who helped in different situations, or just by offering water.²³

These diverse ways of associating to Jesus in whatever capacity their circumstances allowed mirror the many ways Christians today understand and relate to Christ and how they do that, either within an institutional religious tradition or outside of it. In this sense, I suggest that many American Catholics today can be characterized as *post-secular Catholics*. Here, I refer to those with a Catholic heritage, however nominal, who do not find Catholicism or the practice of Catholicism as the center stage to their everyday lives.

Postsecular Catholics have typically baptized Catholics who, by the time of adulthood, find themselves having to deal somehow with their Catholicism and do so as a part of their identity, but those in traditional pastoral ministry or academic theology are

²¹ Beaudoin, 2.

²² Terry A. Veling. “Catholic Practical Theology: Reflections on an Emerging Field.” *Compass: a Review of Topical Theology*. 45(2), February 6, 2011. 38.

²³ Gerhard Lohfink. *Jesus of Nazareth: What He Wanted, Who He Was*. (Indiana: Liturgical Press, 2012), 86-99.

often called fallen away or lapsed Catholics. Unfortunately, post-secular Catholics then learn to call themselves these names.²⁴ Nevertheless, there are post-secular Catholics in most Catholic families in the United States today and are the predominant group in the Archdiocese of Boston.

Again, Terry Veling offers some common ground of the practice of disaffiliated Catholics and Catholic theological tradition that can be seen in the lifegiving practice of faith both in and outside of the church, and which is apparent in the conversations with the disaffiliated in this study: a) a deep appreciation and respect for human cultures, with a constant need of dialogue among us; b) a deep appreciation of Catholic social teaching, stressing the dignity of the human person and the inextricable tie between love of God and love of neighbor; c) appreciation of God's presence in the ordinariness of life which our rich sacramental tradition expresses; d) an appreciation of a prophetic imagination which is mainly developed in liberation and political theology; e) an appreciation and respect for faith working together with reason, and for faith working with good works; f) an appreciation scriptures and what they mean for our times, and finally: g) a commitment to seeking and encouraging the good in all things, especially with the most disenfranchised.²⁵ When people depart from church practice, they often take core elements, like Veling's list, of their Catholic faith with them.

I want to highlight the creative character of Catholic praxis in those who are disaffiliated from the church and who have not wholly disconnected from their Catholic theological ethos. Bringing this understanding to Catholic families provides a sense of connection with a full new understanding of their children's lives. One way of doing this is to note the religiousness that remained in their lives during and after disaffiliating and how it is understood and practiced outside of the institutional church.

Disaffiliated Catholics often bring something of their faith with them to wherever they land in life. Their religiousness continues, although quite different than what is conventionally expected by church authority and their families. Many disaffiliated rejects the spiritual but not the religious label. First, there is the creative but critical continuity with a tradition they appreciate while simultaneously leaving elements they discerned are unnecessary and harmful. Second, many often retain a religious identity as distinct from the conventional practice of the Catholic faith. Catholic identity thus emerges with a complexity of patterns of spirituality and practice.²⁶

Stepping Beyond the Church

A biblical model that gets at the heart of the church's challenge in this dialogue is the episode of the mysterious figure who approaches Peter and the apostles walking on the stormy waters. (Matthew 14:25-31). When the apostles saw Jesus of Nazareth walking toward them, Peter's intuitive test to discern if it was their teacher was to ask the figure

²⁴ Ibid, 24.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ James Michael Nagle. *Learning to Leave: Expanding Shared Praxis to Understand the Religious Life and Learning of Young Catholics Beyond the Church*. Horizons in Religious Education Series. (Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2020), 10.

to command him, Peter, to do the same – to step out from the security of the boat (Matthew 14-29). The Gospel episode implies that if the figure had told Peter to stay attached to the conventional security of the boat, Peter would have recognized it was not his teacher. It also applies to a commitment to re-imagine Catholic disaffiliation by going beyond the safety of the “ark” of the church and its traditional notions of de-conversion.

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This project, along with much seminal research done in disaffiliation, is an attempt to show that Catholic families and their children are navigating the times we live and the evolving shape of a Catholic mission in a post-secular age together. In doing so, they become part of the transformation of the culture around us, as *Gaudium et Spes* of Vatican II challenges us to do:

“Today, the human race participates in a new stage of history. Profound and rapid changes are spreading by degrees around the entire world. Triggered by the intelligence and creative energies of (humankind), these changes recoil upon him, upon decisions and desires, both individual and collective, and upon the manner of thinking and acting with respect to things and to people. Hence, we can already speak of a true cultural and social transformation, one which has repercussions on (humanity’s) religious life as well.” (4)

What the Council fathers recognized in the mid-sixties has indeed happened by the early 21st century. Therefore, in this project, I argue that the reality of a post-secular age requires a reshaping and re-understanding of the Catholic mission.

It is not an exaggeration to say that the dialogue in Catholic families experiencing disaffiliation is crucial for reshaping the Catholic mission. It further suggests that to be the church of our times *with the disaffiliated* is about accompanying modern secular persons in their quest for authenticity and the challenges that attend this quest. It also requires that the church learn the secular language of modernity— “expression,” “authenticity,” “benevolence,” “rights,” and speak to the genuine desires implicit in it. Dialogue with pluralistic culture thus has the aim of *greater mutual understanding* of other’s spiritual orientations.²⁸ I would also dare to say that it may bring clarity to the church’s missional orientation.

In this brief chapter, I hope to lay out a theological orientation to the experiences of disaffiliation in Catholic families that provides a theological framework to understand the approach through faith in the choices of children and grandchildren, who were raised in the Catholic faith, but then make life choices outside the institutional church. The Catholic tradition of dialogue, adaptable across a broad range of communities, and practical theology that requires understanding disaffiliation as a meaningful and vital faith journey, provide a crucial impetus to a renewed mission to the periphery. The next chapter will survey some critical research that helps us ground this study in previous studies with much larger data sets.

²⁷ Ibid, 117.

²⁸ Chau, Kindle Edition, 194.

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