

Pastor's Pen: Consumer Catholic or Consumed Catholic?

Our western society, a capitalist one, has become a consumer society. After a while, such a dominant outlook can weasel its way into every aspect of our lives. At its heart, the consumer weighs what one receives and assigns a cost that one is willing to spend based on how the good and/or service makes the buyer's life better or easier. As time passes, all relationships start to be treated in the same way. Essentially, the value of your presence in my life is based on what you do for me or how you make me feel. It is accompanied with the attitude that I can move on to another vendor who might give me a better product for a lower price.

When we look at a list of why people do not participate in any organized religion (I don't like its teachings, I don't like its reputation, it doesn't do it for me, it doesn't interest me, etc.) we see two things arise: church shopping (I will find a place that caters to my wants) or the "spiritual but not religious" phenomenon that has steeply risen in the last 30+ years. The latter is more of an a la carte version of religion that allows the consumer to pick and choose what is the correct set of ingredients that will make the person feel whatever it is they want to feel.

The consumer Catholic resents the idea that there are standards that a Church might set as criteria for participation. That I am "Catholic" is like saying I have a Costco membership: membership that allows me to get what I want and leave. There comes a disconnect between consuming goods and services and life outside of that particular consumption. I mean, the grocery store has no say on what you do when you are not in the grocery store, correct?

Consumer Catholicism is easy to leave -- in fact, really easy to leave unless you get hooked on a particular product that is exclusively offered in the Catholic Church. Maybe I want to consume the educational apparatus for my children. Once that is complete, it is easy to walk away or the conditions of my stay are hanging by a thread.

This mentality has killed so many parishes. Every year it seems like a diocese or archdiocese is shuttering more churches much like a once-large department store chain closing locations. In some places the reduction is massive. In some places, there is a death by a thousand small cuts motif happening. As pleasing as consumer Catholicism might be, it is killing us. Why? Because consumer Catholicism is an ape of the Church -- an antichrist.

That might sound harsh. But let's look at what Jesus set up two thousand years ago and ask if a consumerist mindset is what He had in mind. Because, if it isn't, it might well be intentionally or unintentionally a mockery of Jesus at best and an anti-church that steals from the flock that belongs to Jesus at worst.

Before I go further: yes, I understand that many Church leaders have run with the consumer model. We took the "the customer is always right" attitude so as to say "please continue shopping here." Don't like a particular teaching? Hey, we'll just be oh so quiet about it. Don't want to tithe? Sure. Don't want to attend Mass and yet still want to receive the benefits? Okay. Just call yourself Catholic and occasionally show up as your schedule and priorities allow.

..and write a check. We fed the demon we were supposed to fight. That's why "stewardship" was just seen as the local store's way of saying we are jacking up the prices. That is why a price got attached to everything. How did that work out for us?

The Church Jesus set up had a completely different directionality. It wasn't a Church that consumed, but a Church that was consumed. The heart of the Gospel demands a change in one's life and priorities; God was to come first because He puts us first. Jesus was not sacrificed on the cross to create a multinational corporation but to extend the possibility of eternal life to anyone who would allow Him to change their lives. Eternal life is not a consumer product; it is an eternal relationship. It is not like upgrading the style package on a car, but is finding the reason we exist. The sacraments are not consumer products whose celebration is to cater to my particular tastes, but God's direct intervention into the lives of His beloved people. He isn't looking for you to be a consumer in His business but an adopted son or daughter who is heir to His eternal Kingdom.

To be a consumed Catholic, is to allow the grace of God to transform us on every level. Truth be told, if faith doesn't consume us, something else will. The things of this world will consume us. The big difference is there is only One who is willing to give the totality of who He is for your good. The others will demand you be consumed for their benefit. To them, you are a largely disposable item that once used is tossed to the side of the road. I will admit that has happened in parishes; however, because we were following a worldly model. The others will use threats to keep you with them (your child won't start if he or she isn't at this last second practice, you won't get promoted unless you work these hours too) under the pretense that you shop here or you'll not get a happy life. It is really easy to get caught in that hamster wheel.

The consumed Catholic realizes the relationship with God is first and is set on God's terms. The consumed Catholic enters into a mutual consuming relationship like a good marriage or functional family; the goal is self-giving and being consumed in imitation of Christ in the Eucharist. The consumed Catholic knows there are hard decisions that might cost them something but can look at the Cross and see someone who allowed Himself to pay the ultimate cost in the harshest and most humiliating way possible. They feel to their core the words of the song often sung during Holy week, "What wondrous love is this O my soul, what wondrous love is this that caused the King of bliss to bear the dreadful curse for my soul?" To reduce what God has done for us to a consumer product, for the consumed Catholic, is an unthinkable thought.

In the end, it is the consumed Catholic and not the consumer Catholic that will enter heaven. Why? The consumed Catholic loves God with all their soul, mind, and heart. All as Jesus commanded. They make the hard decisions and stand up to the threats. The consumer Catholic loves when there is something to personally gain in this life and will choose against faith when it is inconvenient. In my role as a pastor, if I actually love you all, is to get you as far away as possible from consumer Catholicism as I would get you as far away from any other lethal danger. Hence, if I challenge priorities and ask you to love God as He loves you, know it comes from my own love of you and God. Do you really want a pastor who would do less?