

# A Liberal Catholic and Staying Put

The new tone that Pope Francis has set in Rome seems to have quieted, at least for the moment, the movement aimed at persuading liberal Catholics to leave their church.

Last year, the Freedom From Religion Foundation took out a full-page ad in the New York Times and other newspapers aimed at per-

## HOUSES OF WORSHIP

By Paul Moses

suading Catholics like me to “quit the Catholic Church.” Bill Keller, former editor of the Times, wrote a column in the paper urging discontented, liberal-minded Catholics: “Summon your fortitude, and just go.”

He made the suggestion in commenting on the publication of “Why Catholicism Matters” by Bill Donohue, the president of the Catholic League, who wrote that he believes that “maybe a smaller church would be a better church.” So it’s not just liberal critics who would like to escort people like me to the exit. Some conservative Catholic leaders and pundits would too.

To me, these invitations reflect a shallow view of the Catholic Church that reduces its complex journey to the points where it intersects with the liberal social agenda. Pope Francis’ pastoral approach has shown a more merciful, less judgmental face of the church—one that always existed but needed to be more prominent in the public arena.

After my father died last year, I realized that my instinctive resis-

tance to these “just go” arguments—from the atheists, the secularists, the orthodox, the heterodox or anyone else—runs deep. It began when I observed how impressively the church was there for me in a moment of need.

Early on the morning after he died, I went to my father’s parish, St. Peter’s in lower Manhattan, to find out what to do to bury him. I found one of the priests in the sacristy after the early Mass. The Rev. Alex Joseph took my hands in his, spoke a beautiful prayer, told me of his own father’s death years earlier and added, “Our fathers are always with us.” I was much moved.

We decided to have my father’s funeral in the Staten Island parish where he had worshiped for 25 years rather than the church in lower Manhattan he had attended the last year and a half of his life. But at my mother’s urging, I asked the pastor at St. Peter’s, Rev. Kevin Madigan, if he would preside over the funeral Mass on Staten Island. I had hesitated to even ask if he would make the trip, but he swiftly responded that he’d be happy to, and to lead the graveside service after the Mass.

Bernard L. Moses, who died at 88, had loved Father Madigan’s homilies, and to hear the priest speak at the funeral Mass was to understand why. My father had advanced up the ranks of the New York City Housing Authority to director of management. Citing his concern for tenants, Father Madigan used the traditional Catholic

term “corporal work of mercy” to describe what my father did. It explained for me, in those difficult moments, why my father, who was well-schooled in Catholic social teachings, had passed up the opportunity for a more pleasant career in academia, or a more lucrative one managing private housing, to work in housing projects instead.

## Why I won’t heed calls from the left and right to leave the church.

After the Mass, people from the church gathered around to console. A priest friend accompanied me to the funeral home to work out the details of the wake. The parish where the funeral Mass was held assigned a laywoman volunteer who, in a very sensitive and knowledgeable way, helped me to plan the service. A contingent from my home parish in Brooklyn came to the wake and funeral. Sisters and others who work with my wife at a Catholic high school in Brooklyn arrived in large numbers.

I saw a theological term made real—that God’s people make up the Body of Christ, a mystical concept of the church that encompasses the living and the dead, the visible and invisible, my deceased father and me. As St. Paul wrote, if one part of the body suffers, all the parts suffer. This is the church I would not be lured to leave, even

on the frequent occasions when its leaders disappoint me.

Of course, compassion and solidarity are not limited to those who practice Catholicism or other religions; people of many religions and none comforted my family and me.

But the role of religion in American society is much more complex than the Freedom From Religion Foundation would have it. Statistically speaking, there is much to recommend it.

In their 2010 book “American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us,” social scientists Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell cite data showing that religiously observant Americans are more generous to charity than their secular counterparts, even to secular causes such as help for the needy. The religiously observant are up to twice as active in civic affairs and are more likely to have friends in lower social classes than are secular Americans. And, the study found, religious Americans are more trusting of virtually everyone than their secular countrymen.

“There is a more welcoming home for you!” the Freedom From Religion Foundation ad had announced, inviting me to “join those of us who put humanity above dogma.”

No thanks.

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