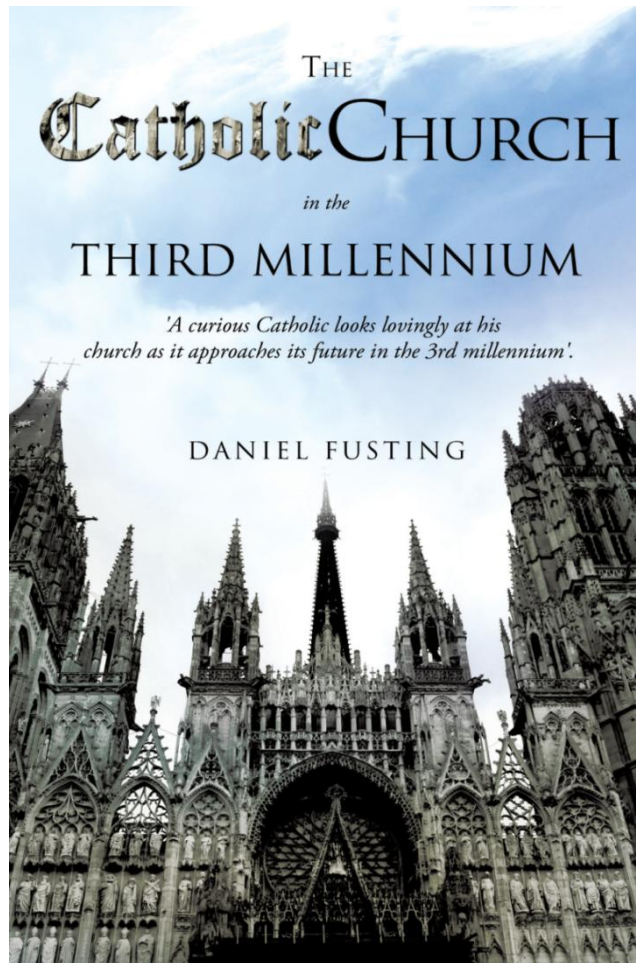


Discussion Guide



On the following pages are excerpts from the book. These excerpts can serve both as a guide for personal reflection and group discussion. As a suggestion, you may simply ask open-ended, thought-provoking questions prefaced by “who”, “what”, “where”, “why”, “when” or “how”. These types of questions cannot be answered simply by a “yes” or a “no” and encourages discussion. Space is provided for your personal notes.

Sample Questions for Reflection and Discussion

What do I consider the most important topics and why?

Which statements caught my attention and why?

Which statements do I agree with and why?

Which statements do I disagree with and why?

How do these statements apply to me personally and why?

With these kinds of questions in mind, reflect and respond to the following excerpts from the book? Space is provided for your personal notes.

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Where Are We Today As “Church”?

“I decided initially to identify the progression of changes in the Church over the centuries. The following outline is a summary of my research and serves a guide to better understand my approach”.

Characteristic	1st Millennium	2nd Millennium	3rd Millennium
Theme	Word	Sacraments	Spirituality
Focus	Priesthood	Papacy	Laity
Priesthood	Teachers of the Word	Ministers of Sacraments	Pastors of the Flock
Emphasis	Evangelism	Ritual	Community

Paradigm Shift

We may be entering one of the more exciting times in the history of the Church. Discussions concerning the present state of the Roman Catholic Church are frequent and ongoing. Yet, the real change that Vatican II intended may not yet be completed. Profound change, change that is transformational may still be underway. We propose that we are experiencing a “paradigm shift”, a fundamental change from our understanding and view of the present “church” to a totally new and different understanding and view.

Church’s Transition

It is sometimes difficult to see change unfolding in the present time. The realization of change may occur gradually or it can occur in one of those “a-ha!” moments similar to what the disciples experienced on the road to Emmaus. More often, change becomes obvious only in hindsight. This is the kind of change that we as Church may now be experiencing. It is a fundamental change from how we presently view Church to a new understanding and a totally different view of Church.

Statistics

The Number of Priests and Religious Is Declining

The United States Catholic Bishops' "Emerging Leadership Project" forecasted a decline in the number of priests – both diocesan and in religious orders. The Project documented that there are fewer than 42,000 priests in the United States. The study projected that 19,000 of these priests will be deceased within the next twenty years. Of the 23,000 priests remaining, an estimated 10,000 of them will be more than 75 years old. At the current ordination rate, only about 9,000 new priests will be ordained during this same twenty-year period.

Meanwhile, the number of Catholics is growing, further reducing the ratio of the number of priests as compared to the number of the laity. Demographic studies project that during the next twenty years, the

- Number of priests will be reduced by one-half
- Catholic population will double
- Meanwhile, the number of religious nuns and brothers is declining.
- Seminaries and convents are disappearing.

Even with an increasing life span due to an improved health care system, many of today's older priests may still be unable to continue and except possibly as "sacramental functionaries".

The Changes that are Occurring in the Church in this Third Millennium

The change in the Church that we as are now experiencing is a fundamental change in how we view Church presently to a totally new and different understanding and view of Church.

The pace of change in the Church has been perceivable, steady and is continuing at an accelerating pace. In hindsight, we can easily see how change has progressed.

The Demands on Priests Are Growing and Intensifying.

More than a third of the parishes in the United States now share a pastor with at least one other parish, sometimes with three, four, or more parishes. In some cases, these are contiguous city parishes. A number of these parishes encompass large, rural areas, especially in the resource-poor, home mission dioceses.

There have been numerous discussions and studies concerning the present condition of our Church in the United States. The two most frequent reasons given for the perceived problems we are experiencing are:

1. Demographics – due to population shifts, many parishes no longer have viable congregations while other parishes are overextended.

Can we solve the demographic problem quite simply by creating, merging, and clustering parishes? If so, “How?”

2. Lack of vocations – people are not answering the call to the priesthood and religious life.

Vatican II was not about changing the Mass from Latin to English, rearranging altars and pews or demographics. Nor was Vatican II about a shift in power from the pastoral staff of the ordained to a parish council of the laity. Vatican II sent a clear message – “By virtue of their Baptism, the laity are called to be active participants in the Church’s ministries.”

“Spirituality”- The Baptismal Call of the Laity

Spirituality

Our spiritual nature longs to be one with its creator. Our ultimate destiny as humans is “spiritual fulfillment.

Our purpose here on this earth is to learn how to become spiritual human beings and one in being with our all-loving God in whose spiritual image and likeness we are made.

Our quest for spirituality is to be made *through and through* and become totally integrated with our Creator in whose image and spiritual likeness we are made. By design, this is why we exist.

Our quest is to become more in touch with our spiritual self and realize our oneness with our all-loving creator God. The time we have on earth is a trial period, a proving ground, our boot camp, our novitiate.

This intense desire for oneness, to integrate spiritually with our Creator, becomes a force within us that drives and compels us to scale new and unimaginable heights. However, the most common mistake is that we often look for spirituality, success and happiness in all of the wrong places.

As a philosophical concept, spirituality can be so sophisticated that it remains elusive and difficult to grasp. On the other hand, the explanation can be so simplistic that it marginalizes the understanding. Richard Rohr reflected on spirituality this way: “Human beings spend most of their lifetime trying to become spiritual. In reality, we are spiritual beings learning how to be human.”

Our spiritual nature longs to be with our Creator. The nature of our immortal soul obsesses and drives us to seek higher and higher goals.

There are a considerable number of brands or types of spirituality.

Saint Augustine described this quest for spiritual fulfillment, “Thou made us for thyself and our hearts are restless. My soul longs for Thee and I shall not find rest until I rest in thee”. Robert Browning added, “. . . a man's reach should exceed his grasp, or what's a heaven for?”

To be made perfect means “to be made “through and through and to become one with God our creator”. In order to achieve a total spiritual integration and become one with our eternal and all-loving God, we seek the immolation of our human self.

Spiritual self-immolation is the spirituality of integration. This compulsion for spiritual integration is a response to the command given to us by Christ himself at the conclusion of His sermon on the mount. It is the last of the eight Beatitudes: “Be you therefore perfect, as also your heavenly Father is perfect”.

The quest for spiritual self-immolation becomes such a compelling desire within us that it enables us to overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles and to exceed all normal expectations. Spiritual self-immolation is spirituality in the highest degree and our life’s ultimate driving force.

Once realized, this quest for self-immolation, this intense desire to die to self and to integrate and be one spiritually with our Creator, becomes a force that consumes us, drives and compels us to scale new and unimaginable heights.

The first two millenniums of church history were unique in both substance and character. We indicated earlier that Word was the dominant theme in the first millennium and expressed in Evangelization. Sacraments were the dominant theme in the second millennium and expressed in Worship. We are now proposing that *Spirituality is the essence of our being, the dominant theme and the driving force in this third millennium and that we express our spirituality through Ministry.*

Being religious does not necessarily imply being spiritual. Religion consists of beliefs that educate and guide, and a set of practices that provide a path to spirituality. Religious practices are “what we do and how we do it”. Religion is a means to discover, understand, provide a track, nurture support and enhance our spirituality. There are people who are very religious but who may not be very spiritual. Moreover, being spiritual does not necessarily imply being religious. Spirituality is neither a devotion, a practice nor “just another program”.

Sacraments are the legacy that Jesus established during His sojourn on earth. Christ conferred on His Apostles and their validated successors the primary authority to continue administering the sacraments in His name. The sacraments are focal points for nearly all of the core religious activities in the Catholic Church.

Which sacraments can the laity administer? What conditions are required?

The Second Vatican Council instituted three major changes that affected everyone. How have these changes affected you?

1. The first change was in sacramental form and function. We eliminated Latin as the universal language, repositioned the altar and revised certain celebratory aspects of the sacraments.

2. The second change was in essence. We focused more attention on the spirituality, the holiness and the more personal nature of the sacraments.

3. The third Vatican II change may have had the greatest enduring impact. The most noticeable changes were those in form and function– “how we celebrate our faith convictions”. However, the changes that affected us the most were changes in essence – “how we understand, define, interpret and apply our faith convictions”. For example, the Baltimore Catechism defined a sacrament as “an outward sign instituted by Christ to give grace”. The new Catechism defines sacrament as an “outward sign of the inward grace” and the “Christian's participation in the paschal mystery of Jesus Christ”. Next we re-introduced and emphasized the ministry of the laity.

Next

The New Catechism also focuses more attention on the holiness and the spiritual essence of the sacraments. It provides a more thorough understanding, a better clarification and fosters a greater appreciation of the sacraments and of grace. Both the old and the new catechisms are of great value. For this reason, next we will blend the old with the new and make brief comparisons. The first comparison is grace. The second comparison is the sacraments.

Grace

The word *grace* derives its meaning from the Latin word *gratia*, which means ‘gift’. In a basic sacramental sense, grace is a gift that God bestows freely on everyone who seeks the truth and is committed to living his or her life in a manner that God expects.

The Baltimore Catechism defined two kinds of graces, natural grace and supernatural grace. Natural grace, also referred to as actual grace, is a “helping grace”. Supernatural grace is a “sanctifying” grace that enhances our holiness through a sharing in the supernatural spiritual life of God. We receive supernatural grace through the sacraments.

The Church now places an emphasis the *charism* - the effects of each sacrament. The word “charism” derives its meaning from the original Greek word *charis* which means literally, "that which affords joy, pleasure, delight, sweetness, charm, loveliness".

Spirituality

As a charism, grace is a spiritual gift of the Holy Spirit that aids and enables us to respond and grow in virtue and holiness as we strive to live our lives as spiritual humans.

Jesus wants to be active personally 24/7 in all areas of our life. God's desire is for us to be able to share in His holiness. Jesus instituted the sacraments as a means to remain active in our life and as a means for us to share more personally in His divine spiritual nature.

The Church now places an emphasis on the spiritual nature, the holiness and the intent of each sacrament – sanctification. We receive sanctifying grace through the sacraments. Sanctification is the interior spiritual process of developing a closer and more intimate relationship with the spiritual, supernatural nature of God. Sanctification is becoming more holy, more “whole”, more “God like” and more one with God.

Sanctifying grace increases our awareness of the presence of God within us. Sanctifying grace allows the Divine to be a real and active presence in our life as spiritual human beings. Sanctifying grace deepens, enriches strengthens, empowers, and sustains us in our spiritual journey.

The Church as Sacrament

The Church, in Christ, is like a sacrament—a sign and instrument of communion with God and of unity among all men. The Church's first purpose is to be the sacrament of the *inner union of men with God*.

Because this communion with one another is rooted in that union with God, the Church is also the sacrament of the *unity of the human race*. In her, this unity is already begun, since she gathers men "from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues"; at the same time, the Church is the "sign and instrument" of the full realization of the unity yet to come."

As sacrament, the Church is Christ's instrument. "She is taken up by him also as the instrument for the salvation of all", "the universal sacrament of salvation", by which Christ is "at once manifesting and actualizing the mystery of God's love for men". The Church "is the visible plan of God's love for humanity," because God desires "that the whole human race may become one People of God, form one Body of Christ, and be built up into one temple of the Holy Spirit."

God wants an utmost personal and intimate relationship with us. God wants to be a part of who we are and to be an active participant of our life. God wants to reside with us and within us. God want us to be one with Who He is and for us to be an active part of His life. Jesus instituted the sacraments as a means to remain with us and collaborate with us in our journey of sanctification.

The form and function of the sacraments enables us to maintain focus and provides a path to salvation. As a Church and as participants, we want to insure that we focus more on the essence, the spirituality and the sanctity of the sacraments.

In the Eucharist, God remains physically with us and spiritually within us. This was the prayer of Jesus at His last supper, “As you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us”

Jesus instituted the sacraments as a means to collaborate with us in our own personal journey of sanctification. In turn, we collaborate with Jesus in continuing His Mission here on Earth.

Baptism is a call to ministry. Jesus said, “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden; nor does anyone light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on the lamp stand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven”

God wants His light to shine forth through us. Through the Eucharist we each become an Alter Christus, another Christ. This was the revelation of Thomas Merton as he related in his book, *Confessions of a Guilty Bystander*. In Merton’s words,

“We are all walking around shining like the sun.”