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Faith and Religion Are Choices

Catholicism is reduced to a pinpoint of hot topic, Hollywood issues.

By Jennifer Sikora



Catholicism is, in principle, welcoming of other faiths, and situational to its locale. Moreover a *Jesuit* Catholic faith aims to drive the individual towards wholeness in a humanistic approach. As with any identity, one must allow for elasticity in defining oneself. In terms of group identity, or attempting to unify a university, one must include every member's individuality to form a cohesive whole. Specifically at Loyola University Chicago, our diverse student body of Catholics, Muslims, Jews, Hindus, and other faith backgrounds, blending at our main campus in Rogers Park (one of the most diverse neighborhoods in the United States), contributes both to each member's sense of community and individuality.

Loyola's University Mission and Ministry and the Center for Catholic Intellectual Heritage act as hosts to those who practice Catholicism, and the newly added Catholic studies minor includes classes that overtly discuss great Catholic artists and thinkers, from St. Augustine to James Joyce. These classes encourage students to question and debate Catholic dogma, asking students to rationalize their reasons for supporting or opposing controversial aspects of Catholicism, including female priests, gay marriage, and sexuality. However, taken outside of this small realm to the university as a whole, something falls away. Catholicism is reduced to a pinpoint of hot topics, Hollywood issues

such as abortion and gay marriage, sucking life out of the sacramental, artistic imagination of the faith.

The Center for Catholic Intellectual Heritage, founded in fall 2006, aims to expand people's notions of Catholicism, to find God in all things, but many are so irritated by controversial Catholic orthodoxy that they fail to understand its impact on believers worldwide. They fail to see the dialectical dilemmas of Alfred Hitchcock, Martin Scorsese, or Bruce Springsteen, — just to name a few artists gifted (and plagued) by the Catholic imagination; artists we admire for their Catholic ideas not because they are saints, but because they are sinners attempting to understand their place in the bigger picture. Thus to many students, their notions of Catholicism are simply their disagreements with its doctrine, and they find no liberation in their constructed ideas about the faith.

I asked several faculty their opinions...and most could not answer the questions frankly.

Loyola does well to drive students towards wholeness through the University Core Curriculum, yet there seems to be a certain hesitation on the part of administrative faculty to connect their everyday work to the institution's foundation. I asked several faculty members for their opinions on the integration of Catholic thought on a diverse campus, and most could not answer the questions frankly and instead referred me to speak to others on campus. While it seems obvious that one can talk about Catholicism with the director of the Center for Catholic Heritage, my

point was to gauge the involvement of general faculty members, those who do not deal specifically with religious matters, on *their* incorporation of work and faith at a Catholic university.

And yet I cannot deny the orthopraxic reality of student's drive for justice, equality, and service.

Quite honestly students can successfully go through Loyola without hearing much or even anything about Catholicism; but they will hear, discuss, and reflect upon how they, as individuals, can contribute to a community dedicated to morality and social justice. Personally, I wish Loyola students had an expansive understanding of Catholicism and its rich tradition, but it is not my place to judge how the seeds of Loyola's foundation will come to fruition.

Besides, what students talk about in their spare time is, as one student told me, "a big sprawling mass of subjects" including, but certainly not limited to, "video games, poetry, sports, small presses, fiction, *The Big Lebowski*, what's for dinner this Tuesday, how cool the lake looks in the Information Commons when it storms, grad schools, how much I want to go to Florida and/or Paris this summer." As with most things in life, faith and religion are choices, not things that are lost or found, but guidelines by which someone chooses to live. In the end, it is not Loyola's job to promote one kind of religious thinker over another, but rather to promote students to realize faith in the world as it exists: to hear the other side, to see the world through their eyes, and to walk in their shoes. ■

Jennifer Sikora, a 2009 graduate from Loyola University Chicago, majored in English and minored in French and journalism.