

Whose church is it?

Oregon Catholics who question some church teachings find their loyalty questioned, but they're not leaving

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Bob Greger has wrestled with his share of questions. A Catholic for all of his 82 years, he has a master's degree in theology and has worked for the Archdiocese of Portland and for individual parishes for 15 years. Today he's retired, a member of St. Clare's Church and a leader of two "transformational" groups of parishioners, who meet weekly to think and pray about theological questions.

He was at the parish meeting in November, when Archbishop John G. Vlazny listened to about 125 parishioners ask questions about celibacy, homosexuality and the clergy sex crisis. The archbishop defended church teaching for almost an hour and a half before he suggested that there were "other churches" where dissenting Catholics might be more comfortable.

Greger isn't going anywhere.

"This is my church," he says simply. "Everything about faith is a mystery that we can't understand fully." Church teaching changes over time, Greger says, often as a result of the study, prayers and experiences of lay people. He says he'd just like the leadership of the church to admit as much.

Greger does not stand alone. Catholics like him who question a range of church teaching -- from women's ordination to artificial birth control, as well as the hot-button issues of homosexuality, priestly celibacy and stem-cell research -- are scattered throughout Oregon's two dioceses. The Archdiocese of Portland in the west and the Diocese of Baker in the east count 425,000 Catholics between them. Catholics are Oregon's largest Christian denomination.

But tolerance for different points of view is becoming a scarce commodity in the Catholic Church these days. Catholics like Greger increasingly feel pressure from bishops and others who suggest that doubters and dissenters should leave the church if they do not share all of its beliefs. Vlazny declined to be interviewed for this story. The Most Rev. Robert Francis Vasa, the bishop of Baker, agreed to an interview.

Catholic historians and theologians say that dissent has always played a role in the church.

A legacy of dissent

"It's been going on since the Acts of the Apostles," says George Weigel, a conservative Catholic historian, referring to the biblical book that follows the four Gospels and recounts disagreements that arose among the first followers of Jesus.

Dissent may not be new in the Catholic Church, but it finds itself in the spotlight now for several reasons. Pope John Paul II, 84, who has appointed an unprecedented number of bishops in the 26 years of his papacy, has nurtured a conservative leaning in the church. And the clergy sex crisis has eroded bishops' moral authority in this nation and may be motivating many of them to try to reclaim it.

Certainly the bishops have precedent on their side, too. A lot of it. "A serious Christian community knows where its boundaries are," says Weigel, a senior fellow of the Ethics and Public Policy Center in Washington, D.C., who's written a biography of Pope John Paul II. "Catholics who take seriously the demands of tradition do not think the church is something we make up on our own. It's something Christ leaves to the world and leaves with it the structure of authority. . . . Some things are not up for a vote."

But conservative bishops find themselves faced with stubborn dissenters, Catholics who are educated by church institutions and well-versed in church teaching and documents, thanks in part to the Internet.

Another factor is "our American location," says William Madges, chairman of the theology department at Xavier University in Cincinnati. "As Americans, whether Catholic or Protestant or from another tradition, we grow up in a culture that values very highly the free enterprise of ideas. We protect our freedom of speech and assembly with our Constitution. It influences the way religious believers then approach the teachings of their own church."

Rejecting conditions

In Eastern Oregon, however, "the free enterprise of ideas" is taking a beating. It has been eight months since Wilma Hens read the Bible aloud at Mass or led a song in her Catholic parish in Bend. Hens, 64, resigned publicly as a lector and cantor at St. Francis of Assisi parish last May because she couldn't, in good conscience, agree to a list of Catholic teachings put forth by her bishop, Vasa.

In an unusual pastoral letter dated April 2004, "Giving Testimony to the Truth," Vasa gave lay ministers a year to assent to church teaching on a range of issues. He wrote that the teachings "represent the authentic and authoritative teaching of the Catholic Church and acceptance of these tenets is expected of every Catholic." (See related story.)

In a telephone interview, Vasa defended his pastoral letter, acknowledging that some Catholics likely won't sign it -- and may leave the church. "A teen-ager who may not like the rule of a 10 o'clock curfew may have to find another place to live," he says.

Hens, a convert to Catholicism more than 20 years ago, has reservations about current church teaching that refuses to ordain women to the priesthood, forbids the use of artificial contraception, requires celibacy of homosexuals and sees masturbation as evil. She decided not to sign the document -- and not to leave the church.

"I have loved this community," she says of her parish in Bend. "I have had a lot of contact with other churches, religions and Christian traditions, and I know that I belong in the Catholic Church."

Reform from below

Like Greger, Hens believes that the Catholic Church is more than its official hierarchy. Lay people, those who are not ordained as priests or bishops, have an obligation to study church teaching and speak up when it does not match their prayerful experience. Like Greger, she'd like the leadership of the church to acknowledge the role of the laity.

"We are totally misguided when we're told that reform of the church cannot come from the bottom on up," she says. "God knows that the church has never been reformed by the bishops, that reform always comes from practice, at the grass-roots level."

In saying this she is echoing a point that Robert McClory makes in his book, "Faithful Dissenters: Stories of Men and Women Who Loved and Changed the Church" (Orbis Books, \$16, 180 pages).

In short vignettes, McClory writes about 17 people from several centuries who challenged church teaching. Some are well-known: Galileo said the Earth circled the sun, contradicting church teaching in the 17th century that the Earth was the center of the universe. Others are not so well known: John Courtney Murray, a priest who argued in the 20th century that the basic American belief in human rights trumped the church's tradition that Catholicism should become the national religion.

"The church does change," McClory says in an interview. "It has to change, or it becomes fossilized. The church has a huge human dimension, and human institutions get old and arthritic and rigid, and they won't change unless somebody steps forward."

What is the harm, he says, in a conversation?

"The church should be a very big table," he adds, "a lot bigger than a card table."

'To question is not to deny'

The Rev. Thomas Farley, pastor of Greger's parish, St. Clare Church in Portland, seems to see the church as a very big table, one that ought to value dialogue.

The Catholic Catechism, an 800-page book that outlines the church's faith and doctrine, declares that there is a hierarchy of truth without spelling out what that hierarchy is, Farley says. He has his own ideas of what that hierarchy may be, and so do his parishioners.

"Christ and human beings are mysteries that can't be captured in words," he says. "To pull people out of smaller perceptions and into bigger ones, (how one does that) that, too, is a mystery. Dialogue is so important, my talking and my listening in order to expand my experience and this heritage of faith."

Linda Dove and Judy Ringle are both members of St. Mary parish in Corvallis. The two women organized a reading group that has been meeting for several months. Right now, they're discussing "In Search of Belief," a study of the Apostles' Creed written by Sister Joan Chittister, a Benedictine sister who's written dozens of books.

Some Catholics from St. Mary's have challenged the group, which had met on church property with the parish priest's permission. Now they're back to meeting "off campus," Dove says.

"To question is not to deny," she says, paraphrasing Chittister. Love and Ringle are dismayed by the implication that they are not "faithful" Catholics.

"Don't call me a dissenter," says Ringle, 66. "I am a faithful Catholic who loves the church and assents to the movement of the Holy Spirit in this era."

Dove, who is 51, says she's been called "Catholic to the bone" and only recently been criticized because she has spoken in favor of inclusive language and the ordination of women.

Both women wonder why it is hard to find a place inside their church to study, talk and pray about issues that are not easy to accept or reject for any number of reasons. What they want, they insist, is a discussion.

"Discussion is of the essence," Chittister says in an interview. "Discussion is why you have theological study.

"Nothing has been settled, finally, in the Catholic Church. The church spent 300 years discussing the nature of Jesus. We have to assume that the Holy Spirit goes on working."

In her lifetime, Chittister points out, the church told Catholics that they "would go to hell" if they ate meat on Fridays and received Communion in their hands. Now Catholics may eat meat on Fridays, except during Lent, and Communion in the hands is a practice of the church, she says.

"To have consenting, committed adults, you have to allow people to grow into the faith. Discussion is part of that growing. These people do not breach the discipline, they broach the subject," Chittister says.

"If those things can't be discussed, we don't have Catholics, we have robots."