

THE FOURTEENTH (14TH) SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME
YEAR C
JULY 3, 2022

Supposedly there are about 129 million Christians in the United States. Of that, 51 million self-identify as Catholics. (The “self-identify” moniker added is intentional. There certainly are not 51 million *practicing* Catholics in our country. The day 51 million Catholics appear on a Sunday for Mass and are all united in believing what the Church teaches is the day our rivers turn to blood, locusts eat all our nation’s crops, and every country in the world declares war on the United States – except maybe for France, which doesn’t count one way or the other, because the French are really bad at waging world wars. ... Oh, come on! That’s funny!)

Well, okay. So, our census figures suggest Christians number 129 million. Now, although that amounts to 39 or 40 percent of our population, the numbers don’t tell the tale. The hard reality is that not all Christians are actually Christians, and that includes some number of us Catholics. “Would the Christians of the past recognize contemporary American Christianity as a modern incarnation of the ancient faith?” Two sociologists at the University of Notre Dame answer this question with a resounding, “No.”

In 2005, Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton published a study in a book titled *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*. “[T]he faith of many contemporary Christians has been subtly co-opted by a belief system that *calls* itself Christian and maintains the external *trappings* of Christianity, but one that is not *actually* Christian in any meaningful sense of the word. Sociology’s “term for this new religious phenomenon is Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (MTD). Among the core beliefs of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism are these: God wants people to be nice; the central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about yourself; God is not particularly involved in one’s life; and every nice person goes to

heaven. Any of that sound familiar? Any of that form part of your core beliefs? That is the question posed for your prayer and reflection this week.

“One of the dangers of this religious outlook is that it presents itself as something other than it is. [None of us have met anyone or ever said], ‘Yes, I am a Moralistic Therapeutic Deist.’ Rather, [the ordinary claim, said] with apparent sincerity that they are Christians, maybe even attending Church on Sunday. However, the first problem with MTD is that it is *not* Christianity as taught by Our Lord in the Gospels or by the Church, which means that it’s not Christianity at all.” Alarming, sociologists maintain that Moralistic Therapeutic Deism “is the dominant religious faith at work in America today,” that it has permeated every Christian denomination, every non-Christian religion, and every age-group, from the young to the old.

The Moralistic Therapeutic Deist’s first commandment is to be nice. Her driving ethos is to be inoffensive. “The goal isn’t holiness, it’s being nice. It is believing in nothing so strongly that [you] *trigger* no one.” MTD is theological milquetoast.” The end of human endeavor is feeling good about yourself. As one social critic wrote recently, “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism preaches the tolerance of God and the rightful happiness of all souls on earth.” This man continues, “But saying that everyone deserves to be happy and God will tolerate everything won’t help them get over a bitter break-up, a miserable job, or the ire of a digital mob.” MTD does not equip its adherents to suffer well.

“This is not a religion of repentance from sin – [something Jesus preached from start to finish during his public ministry] – it is not a religion of keeping the Sabbath – [think about all your neighbors and friends who won’t walk across the street to go to Mass or Adoration] – it is not a religion of living as a servant of a sovereign divine God, not a religion of saying one’s prayers,

of faithfully observing high holy days, of building character through suffering, of basking in God's love and grace, of spending oneself in gratitude."

The Moralistic Therapeutic Deist's god "is not Trinitarian, he did not speak through the Torah or the prophets of Israel, was never resurrected from the dead, and does not fill or transform people through his Spirit. This God is not demanding. He actually can't be, since his job is to solve our problems and make people feel good. Other words, this god is something like a Divine Butler or Cosmic Therapist." "Far from seeing the Lord as our Master, the Moralistic Therapeutic Deist makes him our mascot, the one who affirms our favored causes and affirms us in our selves, where we find ourselves defined by our severest desires."

What's a Christian to do? One high school religion teacher says to do three things: read the Gospels [and not just the nice parts, see that Christ calls us to a higher standard than "niceness"]; embrace the cross: a Christian faith that is easy is not the Christian faith at all; and fully participate in the sacramental life of the Church.

Moralistic Therapeutic Deism sets a ridiculously low spiritual bar in its first commandment to be nice. It's a religion of slogans and issue-opinions whose adherents have come to it "for emotional and psychological reasons, and out of a lack of understanding. MTD "doesn't require you to know very much or to think very hard." It is "anti-intellectual, ahistorical, and vulgar." It is all about oneself. MTD disciples are pride-filled; they lack the humility of Jesus. This religion's disciples judge that others not of its ilk are judgmental. It's "flatness does not serve [or nourish] the soul." And the Moralistic Therapeutic Deist's god is vapid. Do you know what *vapid* means? The word means "lacking liveliness or interest; lacking flavor; dull; flat. This is not a god you will love, is not a god you will serve, is not a god you will walk across the street to

praise in gratitude. If all you say of god is that he is *nice*, then you will ignore him, but you also don't know the one, true God at all.

There is no authentic and spiritual joy in Moralistic Therapeutic Deism as we heard of in the reading from the Prophet Isaiah (Is 66:10-14c). There is no honest appraisal of human nature as Jesus reminds his disciples in the Gospel text today: that is, not everyone will receive you (Lk 10:1-12, 17-20), that no one owes you happiness or even a smooth road.

It must be stated baldly: God is not *nice*. “Read the Bible from Genesis through Revelation and you won't find the nice, sweet God anywhere. God appears with power, he judges with justice, and he promises mercy. His mercy is credible, however, only because his might and justice are manifest. The God of biblical religion is disconcerting, disquieting, commanding, demanding. He can be shocking.”

St. Paul wrote to the Galatians, “I bear on my body the marks of Jesus” (Gal 6:17). We, too, bear on our souls the imprint of Christ – we were marked out as belonging to Christ at our baptisms, marked out for mission and witness to Christ at our confirmations. “Far be it from me,” said St. Paul, “to glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world” Gal 6:14). Crucifixion to the world is not a joining in the world's vision, but is rather a separating from the world of self-regard and self-promotion.

“The children of God will bear a family resemblance to their Father. ‘You shall know the truth,’ Flannery O'Connor said, ‘and the truth shall make you odd.’ [She didn't say, “The truth shall make you free”, she said. “It will make you *odd*.] So, we should not be surprised if [people] find our faith offensive or even intolerable. The [true] gospel has that effect on people, yet we are to still follow the [true] gospel, not a false one.

Do you bear the stigmata, the imprint, of Christ Jesus? Or have you bought in to Moralistic Therapeutic Deism and now bear “the mark of the beast” (*Book of Revelation*)?

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