

The Resilience and Renaissance of Roman Catholicism in Canada

by Reginald W. Bibby

When Pope John Paul II last visited Canada in September of 1987, making a brief stop in Fort Simpson on his way home from his U.S. tour, he found himself in a country where secularization seemed rampant and religion à la carte was dominating the Catholic scene.

While close to one in two Canadians viewed themselves as Roman Catholic, a majority were exhibiting a pick and choose style that was readily evident in declining attendance, the selective adoption of beliefs, practices, and values, and the widespread ignoring of church teachings in the area of sexuality — including sex outside marriage, birth control, abortion, and homosexuality.

Such a marginalizing of faith seemed to suggest that the Catholic Church in Canada, like so many of the country's religious groups at the time, was on the verge of being shunted to the sidelines, an aging Church with fewer people and diminishing influence. Things were particularly bad in Quebec and only marginally better elsewhere. Reflecting the mood of the times, Anne Roche Muggeridge went so far as to subtitle a 1986 critique, *The Catholic Church in Ruins*.

However, as the Pope sets foot on Canadian soil again this week, he finds himself in a country where the Roman Catholic Church continues to be a prominent player on the national religious scene — indeed, the most prominent player — part of a powerful, long-established multinational religious corporation with considerable organizational strength and significant recuperative powers. Contrary to the ongoing prophecies of its demise in the face of everything from secularization to scandal, Roman Catholicism remains solidly entrenched in the lives of millions of Canadians. To be sure, many and perhaps most Catholics continue to be into religion à la carte. They commonly disagree with many church teachings, some vociferously. And their confidence in leaders fluctuates in the face of incompetence and immorality. But Catholics they remain.

Observers who try to make sense of the state of Catholicism in Canada invariably emphasize the sharp decline in weekly attendance that has taken place over the last half century as evidence of the Church's increasingly fragility. A Gallup poll in 1957 found that 83% of Roman Catholics claimed to be attending services at least once a week — 88% in Quebec and 75% elsewhere. By 1975 the national Catholic figure had dropped dramatically to 45%, and by 1990 had slipped to 33%. Weekly mass attendance now stands at about 25% — some 20% in Quebec and just over 30% in the rest of Canada.

The decline in weekly attendance has led many to assume that the children and grandchildren of Catholics have moved on to alternatives ranging from Protestant groups to New Age, or simply have increasingly opted for the “no religion” category. However, there is little support for such hunches. In late 2000, 92% of Catholics across Canada told us bluntly that they are not open to the possibility of switching to another tradition, with the figure in Quebec 98% for weekly attenders — and 97% for those attending less often.

Still further, alleged losses to the “no religion” category are constantly overestimated, in large part because observers have been typically shortsighted. Of course some people drop out. But most Canadians raised in Catholic homes who tell the census takers and pollsters that they have “no religion” are younger adults who soon will be in the market for weddings and baptisms. Contrary to rumour, rather than decreasing, the demand for church-related rites of passage has increased markedly since the 1980s. The magnitude of such expectations is staggering: at a time when weekly attendance among teenage Catholics in Quebec, for example, is a mere 7% compared to 31% for their counterparts elsewhere in Canada, 92% of Quebec teens say they anticipate turning to the Church for weddings, 94% for baptisms, and 93% for funerals. Our research indicates that, down the road, many people who receive such rites will be informing interviewers that they now are “Catholic.”

The facts of the matter add up to a situation where the overwhelming majority of people who come from Catholic settings never leave home. If they do, they eventually come back. So it is that close to one in two Canadians — some 14 million in all — regard themselves as Catholics, including some 6 million people in Quebec. The one in two figure has remained virtually unchanged over the years from what the first national census uncovered in 1871.

Approximately one-third of those 14 million Catholics attend weekly to monthly and are providing the bulk of the Church’s human and financial resources. However, they frequently find themselves sharing pews with the remaining two-thirds of the 14 million who are showing up from time to time. Just 6% of Catholics in Quebec never attend services; in the rest of the country the “never” figure is only 17%. Keep in mind that many of these “nevers” are also about to get married and have families.

The obvious question that arises from all this is why are levels of identification so high and levels of participation so low, particularly in Quebec? Some experts point in rote-like fashion to cultural explanations, such as secularization, modernization, and post-modernism. Others often emphasize indifference and disenchantment.

I have good reason to believe that, for a large number of Roman Catholics, *the demand* for ministries that emphasize spiritual, personal, and relational issues is there. The problem is that in too many instances *the supplier* has not come though. Simply put, Catholics young and old, like the rest of us, readily indicate that they have spiritual interests and needs, are experiencing various problems as they life out everyday life, and value good relationships more than anything else. A parish that could touch their lives spiritually, personally, and relationally is one to which they would be drawn.

Consistent with such an argument, in our most recent national surveys of adults and teenagers, we asked Catholics and other Canadians who attend services less than once a month, “*Would you consider the possibility of being more involved if you found it to be worthwhile?*” What we found was that 56% of these relatively inactive adult Catholics and 46% of similarly inactive Catholic teens reported that they are open to greater involvement; the figures were fairly similar for Quebec and the rest of the country.

In the adult survey, we followed up the initial query with the critical question, “*What kind of things would make it worthwhile?*” The dominant response? Ministry — the meeting of personal, spiritual, and family needs. The second most prevalent response? People say they are looking for parishes that are more open to diversity, are more contemporary, and, frankly, more positive.

In short, some one in two Catholics of all ages across the country are receptive to greater involvement. There are signs that a conscious response to such receptivity is beginning to appear, to date primarily outside Quebec. During the 1990s, the proportion of adults under the age of 35 who were attending services weekly stopped plunging for the first time in decades, levelling off at around 20%. Further, weekly attendance among Catholic teenagers that had fallen from 37% to 27% between 1984 and 1992 rebounded to 31% in 2000.

The new interest of younger adults and teenagers is no accident. In the late 1980s — perhaps spurred on by Pope John Paul II’s declaration that “youth are the hope of the Church” — Catholics, along with evangelical Protestants and many other religious groups, began to accelerate their efforts to relate more effectively to children, teens, and young adults, complete with full-time and part-time youth ministry specialists. In the case of teenagers, for example, attempts have been made to develop ministry environments that are sensitive to the premier teen values of friendship and freedom, as well as their enjoyment of music and other media

The asterisk on such signs of a Catholic renaissance currently is attached to Quebec. One prominent Ottawa journalist recently suggested to me that Quebec is “a religious wasteland.” For years, many evangelical groups have seen Quebec as “a ripe mission field.” Both views are badly out of touch with reality.

Quebec continues to be thoroughly Catholic. If a renaissance occurs, it will be a Catholic renaissance. But it’s not as if the Church has to start from scratch. Some 80% of Quebec Catholics acknowledge that they have spiritual needs and a similar proportion say they believe in a God who cares about them personally. They don’t stop with abstract belief: 81% report that they pray privately, 51% at least once a week. Moreover, 63% of Quebec Catholics maintain they have experienced God’s presence, second only to evangelical Protestants (71%). And as we have seen, significant numbers indicate they are receptive to greater involvement — if they can find it to be worthwhile.

It would seem to be just a matter of time before the Catholic Church in Quebec follows the lead of the Church in the rest of Canada in capitalizing on its blatant competitive advantage, and responds to the interests and needs that are so readily apparent.

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