

CHURCH CHAT

BY

TOM SMITH

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CREED, CODE, CULT

In 1958, Huston Smith wrote *The Religions of Man* (revised in 1991 and re-titled *The World's Religions: Our Great Wisdom Traditions*). Along with over 2 million other people, I bought a copy and still have the original version.

Smith maintains that a helpful way to understand various religions is to ask three questions: what does a religious group believe (their creed)? How are they supposed to act (their code)? And what do they do when they get together (their worship or cult)?

Those three questions have been invaluable to me in assessing the world religious terrain, and my own personal faith, for decades. They are also a convenient way to chat about the on-going changes ushered in by Pope Francis.

1. There are 2865 paragraphs in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Obviously, not all of those teachings are of the same value or importance. Some concern the existence and nature of God; others are commentaries on familiar prayers. Some reflect Catholic dogma articulated by Ecumenical Councils; others reflect the theological opinion of a particular school of thought. Clearly, a compendium like this calls for an ordering, a hierarchy, of importance. Which teachings are of the highest order? Which are more peripheral?

What Francis seems to be doing is rearranging this hierarchy, not denying the truth of them, but putting them in a different sequence. His criticism about “over-intellectualizing” our faith, about Christianity not being an “ideology” etc. signals a new emphasis. He follows that break with the

recent past by stressing the gospel centrality of simplicity, humility, and an insistent identification with the poor.

To put it in terms of Huston Smith's first question, Francis wants to change the usual, popularized answer to: What do Catholics believe? Our instinctive response has been to focus on how we differ from other Christians which leads us to answers about papal authority, hierarchy, infallibility, and organizational structure. Francis wants us to respond, and wants the world to identify us, as the humble followers of the biblical Jesus, even though other Christian denominations may claim the same response.

We believe, proclaim, and witness to the basic message long before we focus on the less important issues of authority and organizational structure.

2. How are Catholics supposed to act? Once again, there seems to be a major shift in emphasis. Our core code of conduct seems to be changing from a concentration on sexual matters (birth control, homosexuality, etc) to a much broader focus on the virtues that motivate us to think positively about and reach out to the poor, marginalized, and underserved members of our society.

Outreach to the poor often gets mired down in politics, conflicting ideologies, and cumbersome programs. There are many ways to help the poor: direct service; creating and constantly adjusting policies and programs that address structural problems; or education to help people think positively about how to help marginalized populations.

No one can do it all. But the gospel challenges us, and Francis reminds us, that to be Catholic, each of us must do something along these lines. It is a matter of conscience to find your niche and determine how much you will do for the "least of us".

3. What do Catholics do when they get together (cult)? This change at the top was crystal clear within weeks of Francis' selection. Holy Week in the Vatican included minimal pomp, shorter services, washing the feet of prisoners (including a Muslim woman), and a pastoral homily instead of a theological treatise. Subsequent papal liturgical celebrations followed this same simplified pattern.

But there is more to this question than vestments, incense, and liturgical pomp. When Catholics get together, who has what role not only in the sanctuary but also in the meeting rooms and parish halls of the world? Among other issues, the gender inequality is obvious, and must be changed, including ordination of women.

At this point, it is hard to say how far Francis will go, or how much power he really has to make substantive changes, in restructuring the hierarchy. After 30 years of neglect and outright punishment, the word “collegiality” has reentered the Catholic lexicon. If we had pursued that concept aggressively after Vatican II, we would know by now what it means in Catholic practice. But, alas, we must begin again. We can only hope that Francis starts a renewed collegial process.

Three handy questions: Creed? Code? Cult? What are your answers?