

From the President's desk...

My children still play many of the same games that I used to play as a child. One of them is make-believe. The point of this game is to pretend, to make-believe that you are someone else. As such, kids can quickly become firefighters, nurses, detectives, teachers, and so on. All that is needed is some "dress ups" and a little imagination.

Just recently, while Pope John Paul II was in Denver, we saw how popular the game of make-believe is with some adults. For example, it was fashionable for some adults to pretend they were Catholics. When asked by the media if they were Catholics, they said yes. Though they had long stopped going to church, they pretended to be Catholics when asked by inquiring journalists. Tragically, the same was true of a few nuns as well.

Pretend-type Catholics have become alienated from the church for many reasons. But above all, they are alienated because the church has stood firm on its positions on human sexuality and its criteria for the priesthood. It would be a mistake, however, to think that even if the church were to reverse itself and become accepting of all that its critics want that that would make any difference. No, these individuals are just too far gone to bring them back.

Pretend-type Catholics are not just alienated from the church, they are alienated from American society and, more generally, from Western civilization. These are the same people who, as Jeanne Kirkpatrick once said, like to "blame America first." On July 4th, for example, they are the type who blush in disgust with all the patriotic fanfare. Why? Didn't you know about the history of Native Americans? Or slavery? Or women? Or water pollution? Didn't you know that the West invented sin and America perfected it?

No one, of course, denies that these Catholics have a right to sulk or to bask in their alienation. But is it too much to ask them to stop playing make-believe? For beginners, could they at least stop lying and stop telling pollsters that they're Catholics?

The media, of course, love pretend-type Catholics. Dissent always makes for good copy, and it matters not a whit if it is real or contrived. That's why they fawn over Catholics for Free Choice (an oxymoron if there ever was one), Catholics Speak Out and other fringe groups. These "Catholics" continuously charge that the church is rigid and unbending because it won't change its mind on certain issues. Take abortion as an illustration.

It would seem only fair that the Catholic Church ought to be accorded as much right to decide the question of abortion as the American Civil Liberties Union. The ACLU, it should be noted, is flatly pro-choice on abortion. Indeed, it brags that it goes to court to defend a woman's right to abortion more than any other organization in the country. All, repeat *all*, ACLU officials in the national office and in the affiliates are pro-choice. They have every right to be. But interestingly, no one charges foul play or complains about the ACLU being too rigid and unbending in its policy on abortion. Why, then, should the Catholic Church be treated any differently?

Does anyone doubt what the ACLU response would be if an official of the organization took a public position against abortion? He or she would be gone tomorrow. Now it is as unfair as it is incongruous to charge that the Catholic Church ought to tolerate pro-choice persons in its leadership positions when secular organizations don't tolerate division within their own ranks. There are no pretend-type ACLU'ers in the ACLU. Everyone either accepts a pro-choice position or they're gone (just ask Nat Henthoff). Why the Catholic Church should be held to a different standard is not clear.

No one is forced to join the Catholic Church. And those who join are free to leave. Honest disagreement of the application of church principles can be expected and may in fact prove fruitful for everyone. But there is a distinction between dissent and heresy. Furthermore, it is not acceptable to pretend that there are two churches, the American church and the institutionalized church of Rome. No one in the ACLU who disagrees with the national office, for instance, could get away with pretending that there are two ACLUs, one made up of the rank-and-file and one that is institutionalized in the national headquarters. Again, what's considered fair for the ACLU should certainly be considered fair for the Catholic Church.

At bottom, what pretend-type Catholics really want is for the Catholic Church to stop being Catholic. That, however, is not going to happen and that is why those who play make-believe will forever be disappointed.

-William A. Donohue