Fifth Annual Karl Rahner Lecture in honor of Father James Bacik Lourdes University, Sylvania, Ohio

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The Last Priests in America: Being Catholic without ‘Father’

Most religion writers and commentators today—and I include myself among them—see the Catholic Church facing serious challenges. Some writers and scholars of religion go beyond “serious challenges” and insist the church is in crisis. (When I speak of the ‘church’ this afternoon I’m referring to the Catholic Church unless I indicate otherwise.)

Whether you think the church is doing just fine… or declining…or barely hanging on, there are Catholics who believe their church is coping with a certain “shaking of its foundations.”

And they don’t know quite how to feel—anxious and afraid? Or patient and hopeful? Perhaps the storm will pass. Or perhaps the tremors shaking the foundations are just the beginning of something new and exciting.

This afternoon, I want to look at three realities—three signs of the times— that might help us understand the present “shaking of the church’s foundations”:

* the state of the priesthood
* our secular society
* and the “I’m spiritual but not religious” claim of many

Then, I’d like to explore what these signs might mean to be “Catholic without ‘Father’.”

My presentation, therefore, is in four parts—addressing three signs of the times…and their implications for the Catholic Christian living in our present age.

The fourth and final part of my talk… “Being Catholic without ‘Father” will try to capture what mature discipleship might look like in our secular age.

I hope my remarks will spark some serious conversation about our Christian faith and our Catholic Church.

You will see in the course of my talk that these signs of the times are not discreet. They bleed into each other, shaping the context—and practice—of our Catholic life.

I The first sign of the times…the state of the priesthood.

In 1965, the year of my ordination, there were there were almost 36,000 diocesan priests. Today there are 25,000 diocesan priests. But that includes retired and infirm priests. There are only 19,000 priests drawing a salary. Approximately 4,000 religious order priests are working in our parishes.

In 1970, the average age of a priest was thirty-five. Today’s priests are the “Medicare Corps” of clergy with an average age in the middle to upper sixties. It’s reported that there are more priests over the age of ninety than there are under the age of thirty.

And the future is stark. For every 100 diocesan priests who die, retire, or leave active ministry in a given year, we are ordaining about 30.

Today more than 6,500 international priests staff our parishes. These men account for ¼ of diocesan priests in the U.S. serving approximately 17,500 Catholic parishes. A decade ago there were over 19,000 parishes.

In May of this year, it was announced that the Archdiocese of Hartford was consolidating 212 churches down to 126. Since 1969, Hartford’s Catholics have declined by 69%. The number of priests has declined by 2/3rds.

There are over 3,500 parishes today without a resident priest. In 1965, only 550 U.S. parishes didn’t have a resident priest.

So the number of priests has declined steadily since my ordination in 1965. And our average age has climbed steadily. While the number of ordinations has increased a bit over the last few years, it’s not at all clear that this trend will continue. Many of our seminaries are only half full.

Over fifty years ago, our major seminaries—known as theologates—reported enrollments of over 8,000 seminarians. Today that number is under 3,000.

Before leaving this first sign of the times, I need to acknowledge the shocking, unimaginable scandal of clergy abuse of teenagers and children. It’s more than just a few bad apples in an otherwise healthy barrel.

We priests, along with our bishops, are still trying to figure out how best to reach out with care and compassion to these betrayed men and women.

And church leaders appear reluctant to read this tragic sign of the times. They’re still reluctant to see that something is wrong with the system of priestly formation and clerical living. But this is a conversation for another time.

True, we priests are far from being the “last priests in America”, but that might not be the case a generation from now.

IIThe second sign of the times…our secular society

When Father Bacik and I were ordained over half a century ago, we were described as “secular” priests to distinguish us from religious order priests…the Franciscans, Dominicans, Jesuits, Vincentians…

The adjective, “secular” has given way to “diocesan” to describe priests who have not taken the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience which are foundational to ordained members of religious orders or congregations.

As secular or diocesan priests we are linked to a diocese and mostly serve parishes within our diocese and we live in the midst of our parishioners…in the secular world.

Decades ago, the term “secular” when applied to clergy, was simply a descriptor—to distinguish diocesan priests from religious order priests. And it was a fairly neutral term.

As an adjective, the term “secular” denotes aspects of reality that are distinguished from the sacred. In a chapter Karl Rahner contributed to a book published in 1966, he wrote:

“The secular world, as secular, has an inner mysterious depth…which, by the grace of God…is open to God and his infinitely incomprehensive love…”

(“Christian in the Market Place,” in *The Parish Bookshop,* Sheed & Ward, 97)

Rahner, here, of course, is reminding us that we can find God in all things. But today, in the minds of many religious men and women the term “secular” is hardly neutral. It’s fraught with ominous overtones seen as a serious threat to religious belief and practice.

The secular has become secularism.

The dramatic falling off of religious practice in recent years among Catholics and mainline Protestant believers is often linked to the secular turn evident in American society.

Over a decade ago, the Canadian philosopher, Charles Taylor, a Catholic, published an 874 page book titled, *A Secular Age.* It’s one of the most important books I’ve read in decades and my descriptions of what I mean by this “turn to the secular” are drawn from Taylor’s book.

Omit [While I highly recommend *A Secular Age* to you, it’s not a book for the beach. If you decide to read it, I believe it would be helpful to first read the reviews of Taylor’s book by Dennis O’Brien in *America* magazine and David Ewart’s online review in “Resources for Worship, Leadership, and Congregational Health.”]

In the introduction to *A Secular Age*, Taylor identities three aspects or dimensions of secularism that will give some context to this part of my talk. And he assumes that, at least to some extent, most of us living in the North Atlantic region of our world—North American and Western Europe—see our age as secular.

The first manifestation of secularity has an historical dimension to it. Over the past three to four centuries, societies as a whole in the West became more and more separated from formal, established religion. There was a movement from the religious “worldview” of the Middle Ages to the scientific or rational “worldview” of the Renaissance and Enlightenment.

With the subsequent “separation of church and state” came a growing respect for freedom of conscience, and freedom of thought as fundamental human rights. Religion became more and more a personal, even private matter.

This secular turn didn’t always deny the existence of God. But in matters of the civic order—politics, government, the economy—God and religion were pushed into the background…sometimes politely and at other times with considerable rage and violence.

On the more benevolent side, in the political sphere, religious values and church leaders were still given due respect, but clergy were often treated as if they were polite children and they were expected to behave like children—they were to be seen and not heard. When it came to the policies and laws of governing and the sanctity of the market place, the clergy were expected to know their place. Priests, ministers, and rabbis became marginal figures…more or less to be trotted out for civic celebrations, inaugurations, and after natural tragedies like hurricanes and tornados.

Our modern, secular age, then, is not so much anti-religious, at least here in the U.S., as it is indifferent to religious belief and practice. It’s secular indifference to religion rather than outright hostility that has led to other changes in American religious sensibilities.

The Sabbath for example. Sunday is now a major shopping day for churchgoers as well as the non-practicing. The commercial exploitation of Christmas and Easter overshadows their religious significance.

Our cathedrals are dwarfed by office towers. Our sports arenas and stadiums are secular shrines to our celebrity athletes.

Sensing the crisis in identity evoked by secularism, our Catholic colleges and universities have established offices for mission and identity. Such offices would have been thought superfluous a half century ago.

In our secular age, radical individualism—with its emphasis on personal rights and unfettered liberty—trumps concern for the common good.

What has been lost in our secular world, I would like to argue, is a sense of thesacred. And with this loss of a sense of the sacred, we no longer live in an enchanted world where mystery and wonder and grace can touch our lives.

Another way to comprehend the reality of secularism is to look carefully at the reports of sociologists of religion who measure religious belief and practice. For most of us, the news isn’t good at all. For some, it’s downright alarming.

Let me highlight what we know by focusing on the Catholic faith in North America and Western Europe.

When Jim Bacik and I were young priests in the 1960s, seventy percent of Catholics celebrated Mass each week. Now, more than half a century later, less than thirty percent of Catholics are in church on Sunday mornings or Saturday evenings. And in the Catholic countries of Europe, countries like Ireland, France, Spain, and Italy, Mass attendance is reported in some places to be in the single digits.

And it’s still on the books, that Catholics have a grave obligation—read, “under pain of mortal sin”—to celebrate Mass weekly. Catholics no longer seem governed by what the hierarchy teaches to be mortally sinful—sex outside of marriage is another example of the bishops waning authority.

Many Catholics know the church’s moral teachings, especially those teachings relating to human sexuality, but they appear to be tweaking them or adjusting them to their personal conscience and life experience.

The radical decline in the celebration of Reconciliation…or confession…is linked to this Catholic phenomenon, which is, itself, a sign of the times.

Today, large numbers of Catholics no longer look to their bishops and pastors for moral guidance. The day when a parishioner might say, “Whatever you say, Father.” is long gone.

Adding to the present state of affairs, Catholic pastors report significant drops in the number of baptisms and marriages in their parishes—even funerals.

Still, in our secular age, the Catholic faith remains a player in religious life here in the U.S., accounting for almost one quarter of American adults.

Sociologists of religion are disputing the number of Catholics in the United States. Their reports range from 67 million to 73 million. Many researchers believe the number of Catholics is underreported because large numbers of Catholics are not registering in a parish. In many cases, it’s the registered Catholics that are counted.

It’s difficult, of course, to estimate the number of what we might call “freelance Catholics”, Catholics who remain uncommitted to a parish community. Some think it is as high as 50%.

Moving beyond the Catholic world, twenty-five percent of millennials in the U.S. claim to be unaffiliated when it comes to religion. They are the so-called “nones”. We find in this category those who say they are “spiritual but not religious.”

While the vast number of Americans report believing in God, the number of agnostics and atheists continues to grow…perhaps 12 to 15 %.

The factors effecting this change in religious practice are many and complex…but our secular age remains a factor, perhaps a very significant factor.

A thirddimension to our secular age takes us from the work of cultural historians and the social sciences into a more philosophical, and theological, area. Until our modern age, men and women looked to religious faith for a sense of meaning to their lives. For centuries, religion was the default meaning system.

Before the Enlightenment, religion and religious belief went, for the most part, unquestioned. Not believing was literally unthinkable. If individuals behaved badly…they may have thought of themselves as sinners, but hardly as atheists.

Today, religion is still a major focus for finding meaning in one’s life…but it’s not the only one. It’s one option among others.

Charles Taylor puts it this way, “[T]he change I want to define and trace is one which takes us from a society in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others.” (3)

I would wager that we all know people who claim no religious affiliation, perhaps denying all religious experience, yet leading exemplary lives from the standpoint of ethical behavior and concern for the common good. Perhaps it’s someone you love—a family member…a son or daughter…a spouse or longtime friend.

A few generations ago, parents feared for the salvation of their son or daughter who no longer practiced the faith. That fear or anxiety still exists, but it appears to be less prevalent. In a secular age, the fear of eternal damnation evaporates.

What matters now is to get ahead, to be successful…to experience as much happiness and pleasure as possible and to avoid as much pain and failure as possible. And these are the values of good and decent people.

Encountering good people who don’t share our fundamental meaning system can be unsettling, even jarring…leaving us wondering if they know something we don’t…and should.

Such individuals are indifferent to what I’m poetically calling the ‘last priests in America”. They appear to be doing quite well “without Father.” And this takes us to our third sign of the times…

IIIThe third sign of the times…being spiritual but not religious

Let me tell you of a friend of mine who died a few years ago. Dr. Joseph Foley, an internationally acclaimed neurologist, gave me his permission to write and speak about him.

Joe belonged to a Saturday morning coffee group I’ve dubbed “The Coffee House Theologians” and we’ve been meeting for almost thirty years now. One Saturday morning, Dr. Foley said, “I have confession to make—I’m a heretic.”

Now this Boston breed, Irish Catholic went to daily Mass at Cleveland’s St. Ann’s Church. He was as loyal a Catholic as you could find.

He went on…“I just can’t bring myself to believe in Mary’s Assumption…and he went on to quote the key lines from Pope Pius XII’s 1950 Apostolic Constitution. “We pronounce, declare, and define it to be divinely revealed dogma: that the Immaculate Mother of God, the ever Virgin Mary, having completed the course of her earthy life, was assumed body and soul into heavenly glory.”

“Where did she go?” Dr. Foley wanted to know. And “how did she get there? Does she require nourishment?” No, he couldn’t believe in the Assumption of Mary. And Pope Pius made it clear that the Assumption was a divinely revealed dogma.

So, to Joe Foley’s way of thinking…he was a heretic. And he had little patience with the “M” word…that it was a mystery…that he shouldn’t focus on the “how” of the Assumption, but rather on its theological significance.

I mention Dr. Foley’s crisis of belief because it points to a distinction that theologians and spiritual writers have been making for some time now.

While many Catholics see ‘faith’ and ‘belief’ as equivalent terms, it’s helpful to see how they might be distinguished.

Think of how often Jesus said to someone he had just healed of an infirmity… “Your faith has saved you.” Some of these men and women had never heard Jesus preach or teach. But they had heard of him…and trusted that he was a man of God. In the early church, there were no formal creeds, no doctrinal statements on just how Jesus was fully human and fully divine.

There was no list of sacraments. In fact, Jesus’ mother didn’t know there were seven sacraments. The church didn’t teach that marriage between baptized people was a sacrament until the beginning of the thirteenth century.

I’m proposing here that faith is deeper than believing in dogmatic statements attributed to divine revelation. Faith at its core is trusting in God, in Jesus as the Christ, in the power and presence of the Holy Spirit.

I believe it is important to understand faith as trust…trust in God, trust in Jesus Christ, trust in the Holy Spirit. Trust is the existential dimension to faith. It’s trusting in our covenant relationship to the divine mystery. Faith is always relational.

Beliefs, on the other hand, are statements about the mystery of God. They are listed in our creeds and official church declarations. As Catholics, the church expects us to intellectually assent to these propositions about God and God’s revelation.

We might think of belief as primarily an intellectual assent to religious truth. It’s a ‘head’ matter. Faith, I’m proposing, is primarily a matter of trust…a matter of the ‘heart.’

Dr. Foley may have been struggling with a ‘crisis of belief.’ But he wasn’t caught in the grip of a ‘crisis of faith.’

To return for a moment to the majority of Catholics who don’t go to Mass each week…it’s very possible that they might remain strong in their faith.

We are not saved by dogmas. We are saved, or better transformed, by a mysterious, powerful relationship with the hidden God dwelling in our midst.

Rabbi Abraham Heschel famously said, “God is greater than religion; faith isgreater than dogma.”It’s hard to exaggerate the wisdom of those words.

If I could make a pastoral aside here… to parents who might rightly be distressed because your sons or daughters are not “practicing” their religion in the sense of registering in a parish or going to Mass on Sunday…ask yourself: Is your child a loving person, a person who cares about others? A person who trusts in the goodness of creation, who cares about the poor and homeless and victims of prejudice and exploitation?

It could be that the faith of your son or daughter is alive and well.

To be sure, our church’s doctrinal teachings and moral codes are important, they’re foundational. But the heart of our faith—and of all healthy religion—is relational. It is about the hidden web of grace, of God’s unseen presence, holding us all in a holy union—a holy communion—in the divine mystery

We know, of course, that taking the measure of our relationships is difficult. It’s like asking: How much do we trust? How much do we love? How much do we hope?

These realities can’t be quantified. That’s why it is easier to count the number of parishioners who go to Mass each Sunday.

It’s hard to measure the heart. That’s why Jesus and Pope Francis insist that we shouldn’t judge the heart—the motivations—of others.

So, it’s possible that in our secular age when religious practice is down dramatically, that faith is alive and strong.

The question remains, however…why are more and more individuals describing themselves as “spiritual but not religious”?

For starters, religion can be dangerous to your health. Healthy religion easily succumbs to various diseases.

For example—moralism, which reduces religion to moral codes threatening punishment if not obeyed.

Or dogmatism, which reduces religion to assent to doctrinal propositions that must be accepted or the individual is declared a heretic.

Or triumphalism, the belief that “my religion is better than yours.” The Catholic writer Flannery O’Connor thinks that “smugness is the great Catholic sin.”

Or Fundamentalism, which reduces religion to an ideology that must never be questioned or doubted.

And if you know even a little of the church’s history, the answers to why growing numbers claim to be spiritual but not religious multiply.

Our history, our story, if you will, is a story of heroic service and holiness…and a story of greed and corruption. It’s a story of peacemaking and outreach totheworld’s poor and a story of episcopal arrogance and condemnations.

And in our own day, it’s the tragic, mindboggling, story of the sexual abuse of teens and children and our church’sfailure to reach out to the victims of abuse and their families.

Less sensational but also real are the financial scandals of bishops, pastors, and lay church workers.

Troubling behaviors sustained by unhealthy institutional structures and systems continue to the shake the religious foundations of the Catholic faithful, especially of Catholic millennials who rightly prize authenticity and integrity.

Many millennials report strong mistrust of our secular institutions…and of our religious institutions. Regaining that trust will be difficult. It will require honest, humble leaders of our religious, educational, and public institutions.

To Catholics who say they are “spiritual but not religious,” many of us want to say that we understand…but we want to add that the institutional church still has an important roll to play in our spiritual journeys.

We might ask them to listen to what the Jesuit theologian, Walter Burghardt had to say about our wounded church. He was a man who knew well the church’s history.

“In the course of half a century, I have seen more Catholic corruption than you have read of. I have tasted it. I have been reasonably corrupt myself.

And yet I joy in this church—this living, pulsing, sinning people of God.

Why? For all the Catholic hate, I experience here a community of love. For all the institutional idiocy, I find here a tradition of reason.

For all the individual repressions, I breathe here an air of freedom. For all the fear of sex, I discover here the redemption of my body.

In an age so inhuman, I touch here the tears of compassion.

In a world so grim and humorless, I share here rich joy and laughter.

In the midst of death, I hear an incomparable stress on life.

For all the apparent absence of God, I sense here the real presence of Christ.”

(*America,* August 4-11, 2003)

Father Burghardt is echoing the sentiments of the of the Renaissance scholar and priest, Erasmus, who said with keen self-awareness, “Still I put up with this church until I see a better one; and she is forced to put up with me, until I myself become better.”

Erasmus, Father Burghardt, and many others such as Thomas Merton, Dorothy Day, Pope John XXIII, Cardinal Bernardin, and Pope Francis call us to be both spiritual *and*religious.

But for a growing number of millennials and others religion wasand remainsthe problem. Some of these men and women know their history. They know the dark side of religion…the wars religion has bred, the persecution religion has inspired. The polarization and intolerance religion has spawned.

Some millennials fear Karl Marx was right when he insisted that “religion is the opium of the people”…the “lie” the working class accepted in order to find some kind of comfort in their bleak world of oppression and exploitation.

Most people, I believe, at least from time to time, find their lives boring and tedious. Psychologists report that large numbers of Americans feel trapped by lifeless marriages, dysfunctional families, and meaningless work.

In our secular age, if religion isn’t the source of comfort and meaning that it once was, where do people turn for some kind of deliverance? Perhaps sportsis the modern opium of the people, especially in the developed and developing nations of our world?

Sports, considered as a pseudo religion, has something going for it. It has rules, ritual, and drama. It demands discipline, practice, and commitment. And it can provide a spiritual high, a kind of euphoria akin to the religious experience of awe and wonder as fans unite in a “covenant” loyalty to their teams.

On Sundays in the fall and early winter, the National Football League, more so than church services, controls the imagination and passion of countless Americans.

Nevertheless, for many who claim to be “spiritual but not religious”, Erasmus and Father Burghardt and Pope Francis are simply not compelling.

While religion isn’t their opium, it’s hardly their hearts’ treasure—or even an important part of their lives. And if we consider religion as basically creed and code, then maybe we shouldn’t be surprised. Yet, religion, for many Catholics, especially older Catholics, is precisely that…religion is about creed and code.

For these members of the faithful, it comes down to this: Believe, Behave, and be saved.Their faith is a kind of “spiritual life insurance plan.” The premium is Mass on Sunday, obeying the commandments, and embracing the dogmas and rules of the church.

I wonder how many Catholics who have slipped into the ‘spiritual but not religious’ category see their religious tradition as reducible to “believe, behave, and be saved”?

Somewhere along the way, their church’s faith in the transforming power of God’s grace was overshadowed by rules and teachings they were expected to accept without question.

I see Pope Francis trying mightily to bring the church back to thesimplicity and humility of gospel faith, to the transforming power of living in right relationships with God, with each other, and with creation itself. He deserves our ear.

Now to the fourth and final part of my talk.

IV Being Catholic without ‘Father’

1) Let’s return to the first sign of the times I addressed…specifically the sharp drop in the number of priests serving our parishes.

I’m sure that most of you know that the majority of pastoral ministers serving Catholic parishes today are not ordained. And most of these non-ordained are lay ministers. The phenomenon should remind us that the gifts for pastoral service flow from baptism. Discerning the ministerial gifts—or charisms—of parishioners should be a major responsibility of ordained pastors.

Calling gifted parishioners to service means providing them with the education, formation, and support they will need to be effective ministers.

While the laity’s passive role in church life was put to rest at the Second Vatican Council, the church has a long road ahead in terms of acknowledging and celebrating the gifts of laity, especially the gifts of lay women. The shortage of priests will hopefully nudge church leaders farther down this road.

In 1961, Pope John XXIII, asked the bishops of the world’s developed countries to send 10 percent of their religious and ordained personnel to Latin America where the priest shortage was acute. Few bishops responded to the pope’s request.

Years later when the spiritual writer Father Richard Rohr was visiting Latin America, he was told:

“We’re glad the bishops didn’t send any priests then. If the priests had come, things would have gone on the way they always had. This doesn’t mean we don’t want to celebrate Eucharist or that we don’t want to have God’s word preached. But now we have a country like Brazil with between eighty and a hundred thousand base communities.” (R. Rohr, *Simplicity,* 1991, 112)

Base communities, small communities of Christians focused on God’ word, continue to emerge in our U.S. dioceses, from intentional communities near our universities, to parish based communities of families meeting regularly for prayer and mutual support. This, too, is a sign of the times.

The present shortage of priests may prompt our church authorities to review the policies, disciplines, and theologies that overlook the ministerial gifts of the Catholic laity.

When it comes to the arrogant, elitist, clerical priest, I think Catholics are saying—at least for the most part—we’re doing just fine without ‘Father’.

Listen to this scene. A priest is standing at the vestment case after celebrating Mass. A woman parishioner enters the sacristy to tell him how offended she was with his homily.

She found it patronizing, preachy, and paternalistic.

The priest became a bit defensive.

Their exchange grew heated.

Now frustrated and angry, the parishioner says forcefully,

“After all, we’re all disciples!”

The priest shot back, “I am not a disciple.”

Of course the priest knew he was a disciple. What he meant to say was that he was the teacher, and the parishioner was the learner.

It’s interesting that Carl Jung believed that every good teacher remembers that he or she is also a student.

…that every good physician remembers that he or she is also a patient.

…that every good pastor remembers that he is also a parishioner…and in need of ministry himself.

It appears today that some priests don’t get this. They think they don’t need ministry or mercy, for, in their minds, they are the dispensers of these gifts.

Most priests, of course, are not like the pastor in this anecdote. But like you, I’ve heard my share of pastoral horror stories.

Most of us would agree, I want to believe, that the majority of our aging priests are really good men doing their best to serve the pastoral needs of their parishioners.

They are trying to be good “trail guides” to a pilgrim people of God living in a secular age staggering under the mindboggling impact of technology, globalization, and environmental crisis.

Yes, there are more than a few “I’m not a disciple” kind of priests. But the majority aren’t like that… Please let me know if you think I’m in denial.

It’s time now to ask the big question: Is the priesthood essential to Christianity?

For half of the world’s 2.2 billion Christians, the answer is no.

It’s now 500 years since the Reformation and our Protestant brothers and sisters continue to follow Christ with their own theology of ministry.

About half of American Christians are Evangelicals. Their answer to the question would be an emphatic “no”.

But what if the question is put this way: Is the priesthood essential to Catholicism? Here I think the answer could be “yes” and “no”.

For a sacramental church…with our present theology of the sacraments…the answer is “of course the priesthood is essential.” The priesthood is essential because the Eucharist is the heart and soul of our Catholic faith.

Still, large numbers of Catholics, especially in developing countries, remain faithful without seeing a priest for months on end. The Oscar winning movie, *Silence,* is a moving story of Catholics holding on to their faith without the sacraments…without priests.

And in many of our 3,500 parishes without resident pastors, parishioners find the preaching of their catechist or lay ecclesial minister more enriching and inspiring than that of the priest who visits when he can.

Still, most of us here this afternoon have been touched and blessed by the ministry and witness of a priest…perhaps by the ministry and witness of many priests.

So, it’s troubling to me that faced with the “endangered species” state of the priesthood, many of our bishops, seminary rectors, and diocesan vocation directors simply tell us to pray for vocations to the priesthood and to double our efforts at recruiting young men to enter our seminaries.

Implied in this strategy are two assumptions. One, that God, through the intercession of our prayers, might call more young men to the priesthood.

The second assumption: that the male millennials God is calling to the priesthood are resisting God’s call. So, we are to pray that these men might answer the call.

If this continues to be the main vocation strategy of our dioceses, then sooner than we might think, we will be looking at “the last priests in America.”

2) Let’s look back now to our secular age through the lens of a Catholic Christian.

We’ve described this age as marked by a disconnect between religion and public life, by a loss of religious belief and practice, and by the rise of multiple, and for many, compelling, alternate worldviews to what the church called the “certitudes of faith.”

What’s a Catholic to make of religion and life submerged in our secular culture? A conversation addressing that question would keep us here till the wee hours of the morning.

So let me mention just a few of the implications or effects of secularism facing-off against Catholicism.

Religious belief, we have seen, is no longer the default answer to the perennial questions of life’s meaning.

Other world-views are holding their ground—Rationalism, Secular Humanism, Scientism, Buddhism, Atheism, Agnosticism, and the growing position of “Spiritual but not religious.”

These meaning-systems are held by intelligent, sincere, and good people. They might live next door to you, work in the same office building, or be members of your own family.

It becomes more and more obvious that we live in an age of diverse views when it comes to religion, politics, and philosophy. At least in principle, these variant world-views are respected or at least tolerated.

This means you won’t be put to the stake today if you are judged a heretic!

Until the modern era that spawned our secular culture, heresy was considered, in the Catholic world, not only a sin, but a crime… And not only a crime, but a capital offense. To illustrate this point…in May of 1431, St. Joan of Arc was burned at the stake as a heretic.

Our secular age, moreover, makes it difficult for religious leaders to simply teach by *fiat.* Their authority is now readily second-guessed.

And secularism has fostered critical thinking which in turn has led to real advances in the area of theology, ethics, and sacred scripture.

In short, our secular age has helped to keep Catholicism honest. And it has helped to keep Catholicism a bit more humble.

Catholics, with or without ‘Father’, if their faith means more than “believe, behave, and be saved,” are less likely to surrender to the dark side of secularism.

The dark side of secularism inevitably leads to a disenchanted world where mystery and transcendence—a time out of time experience—are dismissed as medieval, or worse, as superstitious.

Moreover, a secular age can only be two-dimensional. A dull grey or ‘flatness’ colors daily life…where men and women, as Oscar Wilde observed, “know the price of everything and the value of nothing.”

Consider here that one of the great strengths of our faith is our “Catholic imagination”—our “sacramental imagination.” We Catholics have a sense of the mysterious workings of grace…of the hidden but real presence of the divine.

Our secular age has something to learn from us. In particular, it has something to learn from the witness and writings and preaching of Pope Francis.

The priesthood, of course, is different in a secular age. And it can be daunting for priests swimming in secularism’s currents. Priests sometimes feel that the secularcitizen looks at them as anachronistic figures from a medieval morality play. Priests caught up in the elitist entitlements of clericalism only feed this secular perception.

For triumphalist Catholics locked into the idea of the superiority of their religion, our secular age is, without question, the enemy, an enemy with no redeeming qualities…a cultural force from which they have nothing to learn.

These Catholics feel both displaced—as if traveling in a strange land—and angry, fearing their world and church have been coopted by social forces beyond their control.

Charles Taylor believes there is no return from our secular age. I think he is right.

And if Taylor is right, then we Catholics—bishops, priests, religious, and laity—need to be ready to join the public conversation about what really matters.

Without denying our checkered history, and aware of our “sideline status” in the eyes of the secular world, Catholics have a tradition—a treasury—of spiritual wisdom that can heal our fractured world.

Among the spiritual leaders joining the conversation, the voice of Pope Francis rings clear and true.

3) Finally, what can we learn from our sisters and brothers who say simply that they are “spiritual but not religious”? How might we read this sign of the times?

For Catholics that I have described, kindly I hope, as “Believe, Behave, and Be Saved” members of the faithful, the answer is: “Not much.” Leaving the path of religion for the path of spirituality, they think, is too subjective, too individualistic, too grounded in feeling, too New Age… It’s just too risky.

And these “old school” Catholics, I believe, have a point. Being spiritual without being religious is dangerous. Still, we can learn from them. Here’s what I’ve learned.

They remind me that while dogma and code are foundational, the heart of Christianity is about transformation. It’s like a love affair that has the power to change everything.

Healthy religion is relational, trinitarian if you will, and a holy communion with God, creation, and others brings about a new quality to our consciousness. This new quality of consciousness is difficult to describe, but many spiritual writers say that it is like being in love—everything is the same…yet everything is somehow different.

This transformed state of the believer, spiritual masters say, can be thought of as living in the presence of God.And it’s here that we encounter the healing peace of Christ. It’s living in love rather than in fear or anxiety. It’s true spiritual freedom.

Here’s another sign of the times. In the midst of our secular age and the falling off of religious practice, there is a growing turn to contemplative living. Let me paraphrase Karl Rahner’s well known insight: “The Christian of the 20th century will be a contemplative, a mystic…or not at all. Rahner, I believe, understood that creedal Christianity has had its day.

I think…I hope…we are moving as a church and global society into a new age where the world’s contemplatives…Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu…are finding the union and unity promised to people living in harmony with God’s unseen presence. And contemplative living, this living in the presence of God, is not just for the so-called elites. It’s for every man and woman sincerely seeking to walk the path of God.

A previous Rahner lecturer here at Lourdes University, the Dominican theologian, Thomas O’Meara, wrote a gem of a book titled *Loose in the World.* O’Meara reminds us that the Holy Spirit is indeed loose in the world. In the slums of Calcutta…in the struggling neighborhoods of Toledo and Cleveland…in the corridors of power in Rome, Washington, and Moscow.

The Holy Spirit is loose in the world—in the violent streets of Chicago and Los Angeles and most of our big cities.

The Holy Spirit is loose in the world—in the priest-less parishes of our Catholic Church and in our diocesan chanceries.

The Holy Spirit is loose in the world—in our secular age and in the hearts of all seekers of the truth.

For Catholics who see the sharp decline in the number of priests, the triumph of our secular age, and the growing crowd who claim to be spiritual without being religious, as a breakdown…I want to say that I understand.

But it is also possible to read these signs of the times not as a breakdown, but as a breakthrough.

As you may suspect, I read these signs as the promise of a breakthrough.

What about you?