

Perhaps you have heard in the last few weeks of the Pew Poll that stated that adults in all major Christian denominations fell to 70.6 percent from 78.4 percent between the years 2007 and 2014 in the U.S. This drop was driven mainly by declines among mainline Protestants and Catholics, with both losing approximately three percentage points since 2007.

For many many years, we Catholics have viewed as our biggest dilemma and challenge as a church and religion, the competition between us and the Protestants of our communities for the prize of “biggest dog” on the block. However, this new research proves that we are not (or at least should not be) in competition with each other, but rather, that we have a common enemy and challenge.

This common enemy and challenge is ***indifference***. What I mean by indifference is the common and cultural norm of “moral relativism”: that whatever as you deem OK and good for you, is Ok and good in the grand scheme of things, as long as you do not hurt anybody else. In other words, as long as you ***think*** you ***mean well*** in your decisions and actions, you will be OK in the eyes of God, or whatever deity you believe in.

In today's culture, if you **think** you mean well and **try** to do good in our world (whatever that means), then you must be a **good** person. Well meaning is one thing; actions are another. Most people **believe** they mean well, but most often their intentions and agendas are in **their own** best interest, whether they realize it or not. (Hitler and Stalin were prime, but ultimately evil and destructive examples). This philosophy of "meaning well" is in radical contrast to the preaching and message of Jesus Christ (who had **everything** to gain for himself as God on earth) but chose to give it all up, so that His Father's beloved, yet guilty (you and me) might be saved.

This message of Jesus Christ is bold and uncanny. It claims that the only answer and cure for our mediocrity and mortality, lies beyond ourselves. While humanity and modern science searches for and progresses toward new discoveries and cures for human ailments, one fact remains: we cannot escape our own mortality, no matter **how far** we can extend our earthly lives.

God is a lover and forgiver, that's for sure. But we can't experience that love and forgiveness, if first: we don't acknowledge that there is something **greater** than ourselves Whom we owe our existence to; and second, if we don't acknowledge that we are fundamentally flawed persons, in need of forgiveness and transformation.

The first phenomena of our existential situation is the easiest to surrender ourselves to. It is the fact that we cannot claim **ourselves** as the source of our own existence. Our existence owes its being (not to ourselves) but to another life-giver, and so on and so on, until you get to the giver of being itself, God. As much as modernity may try to **disassociate** itself from God, it cannot give a reasonable account of why we exist rather than not. Recent scientific studies show that from the Big Bang to the early rapid expansion of the universe, to the creation of and the random association of primordial elements into more and more complex molecules and thus life as we know it, is statistically improbable. In other words, **statistically** speaking, we shouldn't be here, or have the kind of universe that supports life as we know it.

The second facet of our human condition and existential situation is one that is most difficult to argue, although it is perhaps the most obvious. People suffer. People question their place and/or difficult circumstances in life. Believe me, whether you are rich or poor, **no one** is exempt from suffering the effects of the human condition. We as children of Adam and Eve are flawed. These flaws make their way into our families, friendships, and relationships.

We expect those we love and those who love us (or should love us) to be perfect. But they are not. Original sin tells us that no one can be perfect. But still our expectations remain. This itself is an effect of Original Sin. Many of us believe we are **entitled** to perfect parents, perfect friends, perfect lovers. But this is a fallacy. All of us are wounded. And those wounds permeate our relationships. But this is where Jesus comes in. Jesus became part of this difficult and fallen humanity, to raise it up **beyond** what we could ever do ourselves.

Jesus met our sinful and depraved humanity head on. He didn't condemn it, but offered a way out. To the most serious of sinners, he offered forgiveness and a challenge to change. His message of hope is that we are **not** condemned to our sinfulness or past transgressions. We only need acknowledge them and trust in **his** mercy. **But** that is the hardest part for most of us; to acknowledge our sins; to acknowledge that we cannot get it right on our own; to acknowledge that we lack the ability to be who we want to be.

We have been fooled (by the Evil one) into thinking that we should be able to do it all on our own. We have been fooled into thinking that we have to **earn** and be **deserving** of God's love and mercy. But that is Devil-speak. The Devil loves nothing more than to convince us, time and time again, that we are **not deserving** of God's mercy and love. As I am fond of quoting, Clint Eastwood's character, William Munny, at the end of the great film Unforgiven says "Deserve's got nothing to do with it." Thank God, so to is it with us.

God's mercy doesn't concern itself with deserve. It is freely given, because He loves the humanity He created and the humanity he became a part of to save. Let us pray for those in our world who are searching for meaning and direction, for those who feel that they do not "measure up"; that their sincerity of heart may be like the mustard seed, which springs up and becomes a wellspring of holiness and new life. And may this new life bring them to Jesus, (and all of us) the true vine, who sustains and promises all of us eternal life, who try our best to maintain our roots in him.