

Church Telling Me How to Live?

 bulldogcatholic.org/2017/09/23/value-authenticity-loathe-hypocrisy-want-simply-true-can-constantly-told-believe-behave-church

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Q: I value authenticity and loathe hypocrisy and I want to simply be true to myself. How can I do that if I constantly am told what to believe and how to behave by the Church?

A: This is a very good question. The fact that you are asking this already puts you ahead of most people in our current culture. For many people, the very worst thing that they could be accused of is “being fake”. But I would like to make a distinction between “being authentic” and “having integrity”.

Why is this distinction important for us to make? I mean, it could seem an awful lot like I am just splitting hairs or axe-grinding by spending so many words on what might seem like an insignificant definition. But I maintain that a great deal depends on understanding the difference between being authentic and having integrity. And yet, it wasn’t always this way.

The original use of the term “authenticity” was more complete. It referred to something that did not deviate from the original. Because of this, one could speak of a dollar bill as “authentic” (versus a counterfeit) when it matched up with a standard outside of itself. But the term has suffered a certain corruption in our day. Now, when someone claims that they just “need to be authentic”, this often implies a reference to nothing more than an interior and subjective assessment of self.

If a person tried to live like this, then their actions would be informed or guided by nothing greater than the terrible advice given to Laertes by his father, Polonius, “To thine own self be true.” If being an excellent human merely means that I am someone who is “true to my self”, then the “self” has become the reference point and the measure of what is or is not “true”. That is a recipe for disaster, not greatness.

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Please don't get me wrong. There is something amiss when our actions do not match up with our convictions or beliefs. This is rightly called hypocrisy (or “being fake”). But there is nothing inherently wrong when our actions do not always match up with our feelings or desires.

This is a critical distinction. Until relatively recently (somewhere around the rise of Romanticism), desires and emotions were given their proper place...at least by those we consider to be great men and women. The people who have attained an incredible level of excellence and wisdom in life all have this in common: they are not compelled to be “authentic” to their feelings or desires. Personal greatness (as well as human flourishing and the common good) can only be attained by individuals and cultures that advocate something more than mere authenticity.

We need integrity.

As a reminder, authenticity is not bad! It is simply not enough. While there is great benefit from being “true to self” at times, the self is not and cannot be the measure of all things. There must also be an external standard that guides a person and which judges a person.

The term “integrity” refers to a certain “wholeness”. Authenticity can refer to this as well, but integrity includes an additional element: an external and objective standard. One could consider it in this way: there is a difference between being candid and being rude. Both candor and rudeness can be oriented around honesty. But there are different ways to express honesty or to live honestly.

Both the candid person and the rude person could claim, “But I'm only being honest!” And they might both be right. But candor is not about simply saying whatever thought comes to mind or expressing whatever emotion one might be experiencing. The candid person is

completely honest with others based off a high regard for truth. Dr. Montague Brown notes, “Where truth is expected and at issue, we should always give our frank opinion.” Rudeness, on the other hand, “may or may not be an expression of what is true, but it always offends others unnecessarily.”

Dr. Brown further clarifies the distinction by noting, “[Candor] is an open exchange for the good of both parties; rudeness is bluntness designed to satisfy one party by offending the other.” I find this distinction to be profoundly helpful when thinking about authenticity and integrity as well. Rudeness is only concerned with the self and involves no consideration for something or someone outside the self. Authenticity, as it is currently understood, is also primarily concerned with self-expression and self-fulfillment with no reference to a higher standard than the self.

While no one wants to be “fake”, there is an ever greater call for each human person: for one’s life to conform to the true, the good, and the beautiful found outside one’s self.