

The Secularization Project

Survey #5 Results collated 27 October 2021

Please find the results of the fifth survey of The Secularization Project below. The steering committee encourages you to discuss the results with other friars and to consider writing to *Inforum*.

Keep your eyes open for upcoming events in the Project.

Responses to: **How has secularization affected the ministries of the province, especially your own, past and present?**

Secularization has led to a neglect of the spiritual aspects in ministries. Under the cover of inclusivity and being human, it has uprooted the reliance on divine providence and instead focuses solely on worldly aspects, which are necessary, but we are here not just to feed people, clothe them, and provide for their material needs but also to lead them to Christ through our lives and our ministries.

Since the Province has been in Chicago, I can recall us having 6 different parishes. Today we have none. In fact we have no provincial ministry commitments in Chicago at all, excluding our membership in CTU. In this day of merging and closing parishes, we should be wondering if parishes are a good choice for our future. Or at least have parishes that have a chance of surviving. After being in Chicago this long, we really haven't built up a Capuchin Brand that helps raise money or receive vocations.

I really respect the brothers who minister at SLS. Secularization has really hit them hard. We have smaller Catholic families; fewer Catholic families; fewer families that want Catholic education. It's no wonder SLS has been having recruitment challenges for 10 years or more. COVID made it even worse. On top of it all, how many SLS grads consider a Capuchin Vocation later? Secularization has to be at least one of the important causes.

It seems that secularization has not hurt two kinds of provincial ministry commitments. The Solanus Center is a "destination ministry." People come there not for their day-to-day church life, but for special things. Of course, the Healing Service is one. Visiting the tomb is another. However, turning one's confession into a half-day pilgrimage is part of the bread and butter of the Center. That could be true even if Solanus were not buried there. The Archdiocese of Detroit now has connected its parishes into "families of parishes." That seems like the third or fourth wave of parish closings in Detroit. Yet more people are making the Solanus Center a religious destination. It's like a pilgrimage. Secularization doesn't seem to affect the number of people visiting.

Our Social Service Ministries also seem to do well. They are ministries that help people all over Milwaukee and Detroit engage: people in need with people of means. Perhaps your parish can't do that because it's too cash or staff strapped. Don't worry, go to the Capuchins.

Might these be two secularization-proof ministries that are models for our future?

Secularization has cause us to leave or hand over many ministries. We have totally abandoned some states or regions. How can a young man discern a vocation to the Capuchins if he's never run into one? There are fewer and fewer places where that can happen. Are we in a self-defeating downward spiral by reducing our geographic footprint?

We're doing so much refurbishing buildings. This is important, for these are sacred places. However, we need to move in those spots where the poor live.

There are many ways, but I will cite just a few:

- (1) Declining Catholic and more general religious literacy, which are especially evident at events like funerals and weddings--people don't know responses to the Mass, understand the meaning of various actions, etc.
- (2) Declining sacramental participation, which is evident in lower Mass counts at many places, the declining number of church weddings (replaced by an a ceremony performed by a friend or relative who went online to become a "Universal Life Minister"), families opting out of some or all funeral rites.
- (3) Increased need/opportunities for collaboration with secular groups on social justice projects (education, advocacy, direct service) in which there are shared interests and, on a more general level, shared values.
- (4) Increased need to reach out to people (esp. young adults) "where they're at" with softer approaches to evangelization such as the Alpha program.

I have not greatly considered the effect of secularization directly on ministry, but I would say that in the 41 years I have been ordained it has become increasingly evident how much Church and institutionalized religion has become irrelevant to so many people. If secularization, or at least one aspect of it, has some relationship to a cultural attitude which places the sacred on a level that is not as relevant, I would say that secularization makes ministry a greater challenge today for all of us. It may also be a way of purifying our ministry as it purifies the church.

Secularization has affected my ministry in the past by the number of articles needed to carry out the ministry. As one travels, and especially from your own family and friends, you receive numerous gifts, especially on birthdays and other feasts. One doesn't realize how much is accumulated until you move to another assignment and friary. We are constantly bombarded by television, radio and other media, to buy, buy and of course pay later the latest technological device. It is difficult at times to discern wants and needs, and thereby fall into the traps of consumerism and materialism. A periodic inventory of what we accumulate is needed and "when in doubt, throw it out."

I ministered at Monte Alverno Retreat from 1968-1973. During those years the number of retreatants was declining. I suspect it occurred because of the move away from some religious

practices, like retreats, because of the change in people's heart toward some religious practices because of the growing influence of secularization.

From my perspective, the rise of secularization has been a challenge for the Province and for my own ministry. The challenge has been one of engagement with the world around us in order to incarnate the Gospel in the present world situation which often places religious values and the presence of God off to the sidelines of daily living. I have struggled to live in such a way that the values of the Gospel become more visible in my daily living. In my preaching I have tried to engage the issues of the day with the Word of God in such a way that the Word is seen as vital to daily life and a refuge in times of stress like the current Covid pandemic. Many aspects of secularization are positive. Helping others see the hand of God in these positive aspects is a vital ministry for all of us.

I find myself approaching this issue as to the source of information and support for various things that happened at St. Lawrence. I was there when the abuse scandal was going to hit the papers. As far as I know, the issue never appeared in a Catholic public forum prior to the article in the Milwaukee Journal. Talk about an effect. We started a recycling program at St. Lawrence. Secular media was where it came my attention, along with some expression of concern by lay staff. Paul Courchaine, business manager for St. Lawrence at the time, started many projects for energy conversation. They garnered large government grants. I have no idea of initial source of information, but it was the secular government that had the resources and could provide help and guidance for caring for creation. I suspect I am lacking in an appreciation for the subtle points of this discussion of secularization. That is probably best left to others. But we also need to pay attention to needs of our society and those we minister to and with.

My vocation was founded on a turning away from the secular world. After 20+ years in business pursuing my own goals and first magnifying then meeting my own needs, and arriving at a place of vacuity, to enter apostolic life was to experience a holistic and salvific shift in my perception of what the world is for, how it functions in material terms, and how it ought to function so that all can have a chance to flourish. I wish all my brothers and sisters could come to know what it feels like to put God's desire for one's self at the core of their life.

The loss of clients sufficient to operate retreat houses - and the lack of generated income necessary to renovate the houses to meet contemporary expectations - leaves the province with a narrow means through which to carry out the traditional Capuchin charism of preaching retreats. I'm in my first post-profession ministry after priestly formation. In parish life I saw for two consecutive years the disappearance of families once their child/children were confirmed (it happens everywhere, I am told), and the low attendance at Mass of those families whose kids were in RE. The rep of the parents was that they dropped off the kids, went to Starbucks, and then came back to pick them up after class, not setting foot in the church.

I've participated in heart-breaking funeral liturgies during which it was clear that the attendees had little or no vocabulary around the faith, and little to no ability to participate other than as observers. At CCS it's not clear how far our volunteers' and sponsors' commitment extends beyond performing acts of charity. Whether or not our supporters have a lens through which to view charity and works of mercy as the foundation for examining justice issues - and who can or should carry that message within the community of our supporters - is a standing question.

Interactions with guests who come to CCS for help, on my part as ministry director, tend to be goal oriented. Engaging a guest around the question of "Where is God in this?" is an all-or-nothing interaction in the main. Some people can't stop talking about Jesus, others focus on their own needs and nothing else, with even condition manners sidled. My experience of the faith lives of our staff is that they are as varied as our culture's.

How will the plunge in church attendance and the continuing drop in people who identify with a traditional denomination impact CCS' ability to sustain itself? The ongoing secularization of our culture and nation creates a downward trajectory in this regard, as I see it. I never disregard the teaching that "If it is of God, it will flourish," but the timeline for said flourishing is not easy to chart in this moment.

It really shows its face at funerals where the deceased was an active Catholic and few if any of the children or grandchildren are church active anywhere. A standard funeral that I would have done years ago would mean little to them; so, I simplify the rites and preach with humanistic values that they may be able to relate to and avoid using much "churchy" language that would be meaningless to them. In dealing with secularized neighborhoods, I try to discern what values they hold so that some common ground can be established. Most converts have come through working on outreach projects and making them feel part of the church community. The spiritual hunger in some fellow workers has been ignited and they express a desire to also pray with us.

Secularization has made us aware of the structural evils in our world and so some of us have chosen to join existing organizations that work for social change out of justice.

It is difficult for me to judge because I have not experience ministry in our province long enough to know what has changed.

Over the years, I notice the distinction between sacred and secular losing ground, giving way to a new kind of seeing that notices divine activity in the nowness of life. Ongoing conversion to this presence reminds me of our brother, Solanus, who admonishes us to pay ever closer, deeper attention to the present moment. Therein, the amazing designs of the Good Spirit reveal themselves. I resonate with Solanus' request of others to pray for his conversion to this mystery of our being.

Perhaps the ministries have been affected in the sense that they now must not take any spiritual legitimacy for granted, rather they must organically and effectively learn to meet people where they are at across a much larger spectrum of socio-cultural layers and identities. Secularization has caused us to learn how to be comfortable with greater criticism in society and the challenges it brings.