

“Caught, not taught”

From time to time, Jay Leno has included on “The Tonight Show” a feature which I always find hilarious. Leno goes out on the street and asks people he encounters some very basic questions. Sometimes he shows them photos of famous people, including elected government officials. Invariably, the people asked seem clueless: they don’t know the first line of the National Anthem, nor can they recognize a photo of the Vice President. It’s funny. But it is also deeply troubling.

In the past month, the Pew Research Foundation has published another in their series of polls which seek to measure the religious experience of Americans. This one had to do with basic religious knowledge. A quiz was given to 3,200 Americans in the late spring. The results were both humorous and disturbing. Those who identified themselves as atheist, agnostic, Mormon or Jewish actually did better; they knew more about religion than the “Christian believers”.

For example, as amazing as it might seem, the majority of those asked didn’t know that the Dali Lama is a Buddhist. Many thought that this highly publicized religious leader was in fact either Christian or Jewish! And others didn’t know that Mother Theresa was a Roman Catholic. The majority didn’t remember that Moses had led the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt or that Martin Luther had been a key leader of the Protestant Reformation.

Boston University religion professor and author Stephen Prothero reviewed the results and pronounced that most Americans seem “profoundly ignorant about religion”. All of this troubles me. I take it as another sign of the growing secularization of our culture. And I guess it shouldn’t really surprise us. According to other studies and polls, we are rapidly becoming a secular country with more and more of us having no religious experience, preference, or interest.

As one who has years of graduate level academic training and as a member of the clergy, I wonder what could be done to reverse this trend?

Although it will sound to some ears somewhat simplistic and clichéd, I remember the old adage, “The Christian faith is caught, not taught”. I don’t think that our appalling lack of knowledge about basic religious tenets is simply a matter of better teaching. It begins with having faith itself. And people are drawn to faith which is dynamic and real. Faith is truly something we “catch” from others who embody the genuine, authentic joy of Christian living. Only then, after having caught the faith, can it be taught. Yes, it’s important for Christians to know about their faith tradition and to be able to explain their faith to others, but far more compelling is to live a life which in itself is a reflection of that belief.

So, there’s the challenge as far as I am concerned. All of us who claim the faith need to live that faith in such a way, by word and deed, that it is real and compelling. There is surely no one way to be a Christian. We don’t need to question the sincerity, content, nor

faith tradition of other Christians. All we need to do is to love the Lord and to witness to his reconciling love. The rest is up to the Holy Spirit.