

This is a summary of what was said, not a word for word transcript.

Malcolm: There are lots of reasons to talk about the social and mental dynamics that characterize cults. For one thing, we're trying to promote community building, and cults are just communities gone wrong. A bad community can be a lot worse than having no community at all, can paradoxically lead to the very isolation and division community is supposed to fix. In fact, I think one reason people are susceptible to cults is that there is this deep unmet need for community, but most of us haven't experienced it, don't know what it should look like, and cults are good at presenting an appealing external image of perfection. (A healthy community, by contrast, may be more honest about flaws and limitations.)

For another thing, I think that cult dynamics are a lot more widespread than most people realize. The word "cult" conjures up a sensational, dramatic image, whereas in reality cult dynamics can come in more subtle forms; they can be found in political parties, religious associations, parishes, workplaces, schools; anywhere that fallible, flawed human beings come together in social groups.

One of these dynamics I've experienced is the problem of the echo chamber. I've been part of some traditionalist Catholic communities that certainly didn't look like classic cults; they didn't have a charismatic leader, they weren't hiding in the hills or handing over all their money to leadership, but many of the members didn't interact in a balanced, unbiased way with the wider world and the wider church; everything was seen through a specialized lens. They formed a sort of self-policing cult, where only a certain range of opinions were permissible, and where everyone was consuming the same specialized media that reinforced our ideology. The pernicious thing about this was that it was only apparent in retrospect, after I had left that sphere of influence.

Peter: (2:40) My whole family got involved with one of these new movements in the Church, and then I joined a religious order connected to it for nine years. At first it was good for us, steered us clear of even worse directions; we might have ended up on an isolated homestead. So a group with set ways of doing things helped us get rid of some unhealthy things, but the more we got involved, the more we found the same things there. There were lots of problems: one was a lack of honesty from the leadership to the members, but also an endemic lack of honesty

towards outsiders. Just before I left, I was talking to some fellow religious who were uncertain what to say at a diocesan meeting; they didn't want to admit that the only reason they were involved with the diocese was to recruit more members for the group. Since I was on my way out, it really struck me how dishonest that was, but for years that just seemed normal to me that one wouldn't be open and honest with outsiders. It is a fairly common problem.

Malcolm: (5:18) Yes, I experienced that too. To "outsiders" (fellow Catholics, and that's a problem right there!) we presented ourselves as just Catholics who liked a certain kind of liturgy, but on the inside we were busy bashing everyone else's way of doing things. We hoped for some sort of take-over or restoration where our way would be the only way in the Church. There was just this basic difference in how we interacted with insiders and outsiders; I wasn't taught that, it just happened.

Peter: (7:00) One of the reasons these groups can work this way is that there is an unconscious willingness of the members to not know things, a subconscious dishonesty. After I left, I found there were members of my community who were abusing minors or were alcoholics, but while I was in the movement I just saw it as normal that I wouldn't know, that I wouldn't seek information; there was this rule that one never told bad news about another, since that would be against charity. After I left, I found that those around me had known all these things, but they had never told me. So it created a scenario where everyone got used to not knowing the truth, which was highly problematic.

Malcolm: (8:34) Fortunately, I've only experienced very minor forms of this, nothing like what you've experienced. One of the forms I have experienced is a lack of curiosity and openness to what opponents are saying. I was afraid to read anything that any of my opponents were saying, because I might be corrupted. A friend of mine in a fairly rigid group within the Church mentioned to another group member that she'd read Han Urs Von Balthasar. She didn't say she agreed with him, just that she had read him, but that in itself was enough to shock the other person. (We don't need to get into all the theological questions here, but Von Balthasar is at very least a reputable theologian, who has been quoted by the last three Popes.) She'd transgressed a boundary. And that's the way it was. It was dangerous to seek the truth. Nobody told me this, I just ended up having this attitude.

Peter: (10:03) I think this is connected with the “us vs them” mentality which can be present anywhere, for instance in sports. But there is definitely an unhealthy level of that which we need to fight, since it comes from our brokenness. Even with fellow Catholics, when they talk about how bad the “culture” is, I like to point out that many of the bad things in the culture are in us too; the corruption in our society is coming *from* our society, and we’re part of it. So with a group, there is a tendency to forget that there are problems inside the group too, not just outside. The problem you mentioned about liturgical intolerance points to a certain level of fear which is a problem.

Malcolm: (11:32) In an earlier episode, we talked about fear as a problematic motivator for community. One way to ensure that a community WILL go off the rails is a fundamental motivation of fear of the wider world or the Church. One way to protect those building community is to always strive towards something good; ultimately the love of God, but even, say, with liturgy, one should focus on what one loves, instead of what one fears.

Peter: (12:38) Right, because there is nothing to ground it. A Christian community ultimately has to be based on love of Christ. It is a funny thing that many of our fears aren’t particularly spiritual. They could be shared with anyone, they come from our own insecurities, so if that is the basis it is ultimately a merely human thing.

Malcolm: (13:07) One particular fear that I’d like to bring up is that a lot of young families join problematic communities because the parents want to protect their children. They are not fearful for themselves, but they feel that if they don’t join a fairly isolated community, their children won’t have a chance. I don’t want to downplay this fear, particularly as I’m not a parent myself, but I’ve seen this play out a lot and I’m not sure that the results are generally good for either the community or the children.

Peter: (14:09) I agree, I’ve seen that dynamic too. On the one hand, there are a lot of problems in society that parents need to protect their children from; but at the same time, we can pull somebody out of something and not replace it with something, like the parable in the Gospel where seven demons come back to a

swept house. I grew up homeschooled as did many of my friends, and I saw a general (and justified) fear of the surrounding culture. But parents have their problems too, and if a family just pulls out, what they'll be left with are just the dysfunctional dynamics of the family itself. Those dynamics won't matter as much if the family was more connected to society, but if they are isolated in the country somewhere anything negative will be magnified.

Malcolm: (16:03) And of course there always will be SOMETHING negative! For Catholics in certain circles, there is a danger that in rejecting individualism they will replace it with "family individualism", an obsessive focus on the nuclear family. The family is not a perfect society sufficient unto itself, but some families think they can replace everything that the Church and society ought to give their children. It is hard to see that as selfish, but some people do become selfish as they focus so much on their family. The Gospel message is not "take care of your family really well." That's simply understood; it falls under the category of things that "the good pagans" do. The Gospel message is that everyone should matter as much to the Christian as family members. Not that biological or nuclear family doesn't matter, but the Christian should always have a wider focus. We can imagine that we're practicing Christianity when we're just practicing the kind of natural virtue ethics, the sort of thing we can get from Aristotle, say; nice, but not sufficient for the Christian.

Peter: (17:57) That kind of selfishness is interesting. Now that I'm a parent, I recognize that in some way our families are an extension of ourselves. Before I met my wife, I didn't even know she existed, but now that we're married, anything that happens to her reflects back to me. That can be a good thing, but it can also just be an expansion of my ego. If she gets into an accident, I can end up more concerned about the perceived affront "how dare you rear-end *my* wife's car!" instead of actually worrying about her health. Similarly with children; it is of course a good thing that parents care for their children but because it is just natural, we have to work at expanding that concern out to others. Similarly, today family is just the nuclear family, (Mom, Dad and kids) and as a parent I get to dictate what happens there. But I shouldn't treat my kids as a private social experiment; there are things they need I can't give, which can come from being connected to an extended family in a wider culture. I would realize that I'm also dependent, I can't just dictate whatever I want. But if I take my kids into the woods and try to live a

perfect life, then I would have lost that aspect of others reaching out to help me. Even several families in an isolated community will be cut off from the wider society, so a void arises.

Malcolm: (20:56) Every one of our actions are mixed, we're complicated with many layers of intentionality. If I scrutinize my intentions too deeply, I'd go crazy; we have to do the best we can and leave that up to God. Still, I think we can see that in some cases, while the parents really do want what's best for their children, they can be more worried that if a child "fails" in some way, it will reflect badly on them, particularly if they are living in a tight-knit community. So there is a temptation to hide any problems a family may have from the rest of the families in the group. So there's a depressing scenario where each family is struggling with crisis within, but looking outside all they see are everyone else's "perfect" families, and family envy sets in.

Peter (22:12) It's true! I have a friend who is a doctor, and he is taking his son for counseling. I admire that he was willing to admit that he needed help raising his son, that he made a choice to do what was best for his son instead of trying to protect his image. It is normal to need help, we're all just human. The dynamic you've brought up is why communities that seemed perfect can just implode in a time of crisis; all that was holding them together is the perception of perfection. We have to ground anything we build on the truth that we are flawed and imperfect, and even our attempts at following the Lord will be mixed in motivation and limited in what they can do.

Malcolm: (24:14) The individualist culture we have can promote this refusal to admit that we need help, whether spiritual or material. We're all trying to model ourselves on that pioneer family on the frontier, who are sufficient unto themselves. You made a comment a few weeks ago that I've been thinking about a lot; because we are formed in such an individualist culture, even when we try to do community, we bring our individualistic mentalities into it, and thus we don't get true community, we get something crazy. We're unaccustomed to the kind of thick community which was common, not just among Christians, but among humans in general in the past. If that's so, how can we avoid this dynamic? How can we train ourselves in the necessary mindsets which can allow a community to succeed?

Peter: (25:48) It is tough! Shortly after I moved to Denver, I was living with three housemates and we tried to set up a movie evening to build community. One person would only watch a certain kind of movie, one wouldn't go to a theater, and one would only watch something he hadn't seen before. So it was almost more effort than it was worth to find something we could watch! Our individual preferences trumped our need to do something to build community. If we really want community, we have to want it more than the satisfaction of our various preferences. That's hard in our society where there are so many choices to make. Our personal choices are overwhelming by themselves, but when we meet others, they can produce an insurmountable barrier. We've created a world where we don't know how to receive from others because it won't fit our very narrow personal preferences.

Malcolm: (28:32) In several episodes we've talked about choice as the opposite of culture. Culture is not something one chooses; it is something one inherits from a group. In one sense, we have to build a subculture, we can't just live as the mainstream does. So attempts to build a subculture will not really be building a "culture"; it is something else for the time being. It still has the aspect of choice. Somebody might think "I need community, so I will build or find it." That would be crazy to anyone from an organic culture. Community can't be something we choose. William T. Cavanaugh wrote "*Being Consumed*" in which he said that in our society we can choose not only our shoes, but our identities. We run around trying to find something "authentic" but we only become tourists. So long as we are worried about being authentic, we are obviously not; we're just perpetuating this cycle of tourism.

Peter: (30:50) I'd agree. I think there are ways to avoid that. I have friends who have chose to attend various Eastern Rite churches, and I don't criticize them, but for myself I'm trying to rediscover the Western Rite Catholicism I was born with. I just AM a Roman Rite Catholic, and that comes with a set of prayers and rituals that I didn't invent or choose. There is a beauty in embracing that normality; we started singing the traditional Marian hymns as a family, and then it was really neat when they sang them at our local parish. So our "culture" was reinforced by the surrounding community because I hadn't made a choice. Or take cooking; I could get into exotic cuisine; but then I wouldn't have something in common with the neighbors. Whereas the backyard barbecue is actually a kind of strange tradition

that most Americans understand, and that you can relate to others through, because it isn't something you've chosen in the same way.

Malcolm: (34:06) That's a great point. My family has suffered with food allergies, and we found that very few things are as isolating as not being able to eat the same things as everyone else, and there is nothing we can do about it. For a while, though, we made a choice to be vegetarians, which helped to isolate us from others. Recently I was in a Bible study reading Leviticus, and the group discussed that the point of the food prohibitions may have been simply to keep the Jews separate from the neighboring peoples. Now though, in Christ, being separate is not what we want, so such decisions would be a really bad idea.

Peter: (36:11) There is a certain paradox: community can be divisive, and if that's a division that has to happen, then that's not a bad thing. For instance, God separated the Jews from their surroundings. As a Catholic living in a post-Christian culture, there is going to be a certain level of separation and division. For instance, my wife is not going to get sloshed when all her co-workers are out partying, and that creates a certain division. So there is no way of creating a community without some level of division. Going back to what makes a group cult-like, it is a sense of superiority, the idea that anyone outside is ultimately evil, or at least not up to par. So instead of a focus on making these decisions to follow the Lord, it becomes a focus on others who are seen as inferior.

Malcolm: (39:08) I know, I've seen the same dynamic, where you think you can look around and identify the good and bad guys. That is what the Pharisees were up to; they thought there were external metrics that they could use to identify the good guys. And making it worse, the metrics were unimportant ritual details. We do need to make some pretty serious choices, for instance choosing not to participate in economic injustice, but many choices being made in Catholic communities are choices that needn't be made, for instance liturgical choices. When I was part of a group pursuing a specialized liturgical option, we talked a lot about how liturgy shouldn't be a choice. That was ironic, because we were the ones who were making a choice about liturgy. Because I had no experience with the wider Church, I thought everyone else was making a choice, but when I just dropped into a run of the mill Ordinary Form parish, I found that nobody was making a "choice", they were just showing up and receiving what was on offer.

(Of course, there are choices in different directions, clowns or “high” liturgy.) But given that things like clowns in the liturgy are now really rare, and that the liturgical change was 50 years ago, it has just become a given, and that was really refreshing. Now, unfortunately, even ordinary parishes are becoming battlegrounds between zealous reformers and those who prefer the status quo. And again, the reformers will talk about how liturgy should not be artificial, not be a choice, but their liturgies end up being more chosen and more artificial; their “traditional” liturgies are choice, and the standard Ordinary Form is unchosen culture.

Peter: (42:40) It is interesting; going back to what makes a group cult like: novelty is part of it. Of course, every group started at some point. But when a group first starts it is vulnerable to going off the rails; you can even see that in the Early Church, how often Paul had to rein them in. The liturgy is a good example; there was a break in the way things were done at Vatican II, and it takes time for something to become part of the fabric of society. (Though for me, growing up in the post Vatican II Church, it has become the thing I haven’t chosen. For me, “modern hymns” are “traditional”.) So likewise in society, the Industrial Revolution caused a big shift, and so we find ourselves searching for community because we all feel uprooted, like refugees in a new country; their great-grandchildren will have a tradition and a community, but they don’t. And we all feel that way. Even the advent of the smartphone has again caused a massive shift in the way we do things before we even recover from the last shift. So we’re searching for community, but you can’t simply *will* yourself to be rooted.

Malcolm: (46:26) That’s interesting because as you mentioned, in a few generations refugees are at home. The modern world produces such a rapid pace of change that this never happens, we are never able to settle down. That means that the elderly are no longer a repository of wisdom; they are left behind, isolated and suspicious. So we’re dealing, not with a culture, but with a kind of anti-culture, which makes inheriting anything difficult. We don’t even live in the same towns our ancestors did. Nobody belonging to me is buried in the Littleton Cemetery; I’m not part of the history of this place. So on the one hand we have to choose something different, we can’t just accept this destructive entity, but at the same time choices are dangerous. And I thought that one benchmark for whether you are excluding the right thing is whether your fellow Catholics become the outsiders. If you’ve made a choice which excludes your fellow Catholics is probably a choice



which shouldn't be made.

Peter: (48:56) I think that a good benchmark. And we have a good example in the saints. In Fr. Dubay's book that you've brought up before, he lists a lot of saints who were radical examples of poverty, but while the saints could be divisive, they always had the hallmark of obedience, something I've seen is missing in the groups I've been part of. They may have given it lip service, but there was this idea that the hierarchy didn't really understand our mission, and so if we worked at the margins of what was permissible that was OK. When you look at the saints, even if they could be controversial, they never distanced themselves from the Church even in living more radically. For instance, St. Francis: even as radical as he was in his choices, he also tried to spread the joy of the Gospel, it wasn't just him pointing out how bad everyone else was. Or Anthony of the Desert, who went to leave the world behind, and he ended up surrounded by a community. If God's grace is working through a group, God will build up the community through that; miracles and heroic virtue are not as important to being canonized as building up the Church; we canonize those who helped build up the Church. Similarly, any group should ultimately build up the local Church.

Malcolm (52:22) A few weeks ago I was thinking about this, and I was thinking that any group in the Church that is "elite" in some way can be one of two things: a reform movement embedded in the local Church, or a schism that breaks away, and schisms are one of the few things that Christians can't support. Unity on paper is not enough; one has to actually be in unity with one's local church and local bishop. At my first Easter Vigil after coming back into greater union with the mainstream Church, I was overcome with emotion when the sacred Chrism was brought in, feeling that union with the bishop and the cathedral and the local Church. I was part of a Church that I didn't have to re-create. Then when the scandals broke out in the Church that summer, I felt pain because I was connected to the Church. If I had still been in a more separatist movement, I would have felt a certain feeling of superiority, but not pain. So this feeling of wanting to be in control, not wanting to be part of something one didn't found . . . I was talking to a friend recently, and he said that the modern world produces feelings of a lack of control, compared to the way of life in earlier times. So people turn to these bizarre conspiracy theories, and the same could be true for cults; cults are controlling, and people are attracted to them because they feel a lack of control in life.

Peter: (56:06) That was definitely the case for me. It took me a while to figure out. That's one of the painful things for somebody who leaves a cult; you realize that you can't just blame the other guy, I had to come to terms with the fact that I liked being in a group where truth wasn't shared and we were better than everyone else, because then all my worries could go away. Instead of embracing that messiness of life, I'd found a place where it didn't exist . . . because it was all under the surface. I'd agree that there's an overwhelming feeling that things are out of control. On the other hand, we actually have more material control than they had in earlier times; but in those earlier times, people were better at turning things they couldn't control over to God. We need to relearn this. And we need to embrace our current time and place, instead of getting nostalgic about the past.

Malcolm: (59:04) That is really important, to have that trust in God. So cults and conspiracy theories, which go hand in hand, are replacements for true religion. Religion should be about realizing that we are not in control, God is; the cult is an attempt to grab at that control on our own terms.

Peter: (59:49) That makes sense. Also, I think there is this attempt to avoid the messiness of life. But as Christians we believe in an incarnational religion; God came to be one of us even though he didn't have to. I'm always moved by that first chapter of Mark, where Christ reaches out and touches the leper before the leper is healed. Christ comes into our messiness, and so who are we, to separate ourselves from the messiness of our fellow Christians. That is such a temptation in our world where we can choose. Any group in the Church needs to be willing to embrace the messiness.

Malcolm: (1:01:35) That's a good point to close on; no matter what we do, we must remember that Christ is with us IN the complications and failures of daily life. That's the unique thing about Christianity; only Christianity presents God as coming as a helpless baby, in all the struggles of common life. So as we try to live out authentic Christian lives, we're not trying to do so on our own strength; and we have to trust that God can bring good out of everything even our failures. We have to have that trust, which is a hard lesson to learn. Thanks so much for joining me!