

Practicing Catholic

Apart from the great museums that anchor the great cities of Europe and America, the Roman Catholic Church is what remains of Christendom, the generating and aesthetic and intellectual tradition of Western civilization. Offshoots of the protestant Reformation claim that same Christian heritage, but the Catholic Church in its institutional DNA, if not its ideology, has served as the vehicle for carrying key elements of the Roman Empire forward into history. Even today, in its organization, judicial system, official language, attachment to material control, and elevation of classic virtues, the Church embodies that first Romanitas.

This worldly rootedness has been a source of the church's exceptional longevity as well as its global reach. The diocesan structure, for example - with bishops and cardinals exercising over local churches an authority derived from the transcendent power center - is a repetition of Rome's proconsul method of governance. The way the Church's finances are organized, with independent dioceses feeding support to that center; the way the Church's diplomacy is structures, with papal legates dispatched to world capitals; the way the cult of the leader is maintained, with the bishop of Rome regarded as the deity's vicar - all of this echoes the methods of the imperium, a system that is otherwise long gone.

St. Peter's Basilica, after all, is an architectural duplication of the palace of the roman emperor; indeed, the word basilica derives from the basil wreath with which the Roman emperor was crowned. Catholic doctrine is grounded in philosophical propositions that came into their own in the ancient world, which is why any revision of that doctrine would amount to an extraordinary intellectual and spiritual transformation.

Down through the ages, the tension between the papacy and the councils of the Church can be seen to be analogous to the tension between Caesar and the Roman Senate. The church has, if only accidentally, carried forward the internal conflict between republic and empire, a tension that, in the church's case, while yet to be resolved, has become dramatic in the contemporary push-pull between laity and lower clergy on one side, and the hierarchy on the other.

Grave moral failings of the Church became evident in the last several decades, and those historic failings were compounded by further mistakes in recent years. A tradition centered on social justice, accommodation of immigrants, the global vision and the consolations of faith - all this weighs as much in the scale of history as spiritual imperialism, scandal and hypocrisy. Catholic history is a saga of glory and tragedy, corruption and reform, false starts and new beginnings. In our time, this age-old pattern has been compressed and sped up, with an edge that cuts deeper than ever before.

We bring Catholic sensibility to bear on this, but equally, we bring an American sensibility, which is something else entirely. American Catholicism, which has been profoundly influenced by the nation's predominately protestant ethos, is a subject of its own, with tension running in both directions - against the broader national culture, which is overtly secular but implicitly pietistic, and against European Catholicism, which in the past was established, hierarchical and anti-modern, but is at present in a state of near collapse. European Catholicism came to the United States as something new, and is today becoming new in Africa and in Asia. Third World religiosity may define the Catholic future, much as Europe defines its past. But American Catholicism stands decisively on its own ground, even if Rome never fully accommodated that.

By 1960 perhaps as much of the nation's population - more than 50 million people - were Catholic, and reportedly nearly three-quarters of them attended mass every week. Today, there are about seventy million Americans who identify themselves as Catholics, about a quarter of the nation's population,

registered in about twenty thousand parishes. They put about a billion dollars a year in the collection basket. This may not seem like a decline, but these numbers are bolstered by a huge percentage of newly arrived immigrants, mainly from Latin America. In the last thirty years the number of native born U.S. Catholics has plummeted, meaning that full ten percent of Americans are former Catholics. But whether they have abandoned the Church or remained with it, the religious identities of all of these people have undergone transformation.

Numerous global eruptions have upended religious and political assumptions in our lifetimes. Europe, after two acts of continental self-destruction, yielded to the United States as the power center of the West. The United States, in turn, defined itself, theologically as well as politically, against Communism abroad and at home. Basic flaws were laid bare in Western civilization (the Holocaust) and in America (continuing racism), with the recognition that hatred of others (Jews, blacks, Muslims) is still virulent. Women came to a new self-understanding from the workforce jolt of World War II to the claustrophobia of the suburbs in the 1950s to the liberation of the 1960s (birth control pill) and the 1970s (Roe v. Wade). Sexual sensibility itself was upended, with gay rights, the loosening of marriage, male insecurity, and the eroticizing of mass culture. Europe and Japan embraced pacifism, while America was so much at the mercy of the arms race that, even when the Soviet Union collapsed, the economic, psychological and political grip of war did not give up its hold on the United States. All of this weighed heavily on religion in general, and on American Catholicism in particular.

During our lifetimes, America has fully embraced the ethos of global empire, fulfilling what had in the continental notion of manifest Destiny. A shift in the nation's religious self-understanding occurred as well, with the Christian character being more openly proclaimed by politicians, while preachers blatantly advanced political agendas. American Protestants had been unbridled in their contempt for Catholics, but that changed. As "faith-based" initiatives marked both domestic and foreign policy, a new coalition was formed between politically motivated evangelical Christians, who supplied the fervor, and so-called neoconservative Catholics, who supplied a newfound intellectual gravitas. Together, they represented a major new strain of public influence in America, defined by nothing so much as political moralism.

The most striking instance on this new alliance centered on the U.S. Supreme Court, which had long been a hostile forum to Roman Catholics. Only one of the first fifty-four justices was a Catholic. For many years, Justice William Brennan, Jr., a moderate liberal appointed by President Eisenhower in 1956, was the only Catholic on the bench. Then, under a succession of conservative Republican presidents, a string of Catholic conservatives was appointed until in 2006 the Supreme Court had a Catholic majority, a majority composed of right-wing Catholics who were poised to reverse precedents on antidiscrimination statutes, conservation, women's rights, free speech, and government intrusions in the private lives of its citizens.

But the brand of Catholicism represented by the court majority was out of step with the generally progressive social teachings of the Church. For example, the Justices were not opposed to the death penalty. Indeed, the Court's five Catholics could be seen as not only against the dominant current of contemporary American life, but also against a new Catholic mainstream that had been set running in the mid-twentieth century.

But Supreme Court or not, right-wing Catholicism does not define the heart of this tradition, even today. There was a time when our own leaders first called us to profound religious reforms in our ways of being religious, and then warned us off those reforms. By now we find ourselves caught between an increasingly vocal group of "neo-atheists" and religious reactionaries, some of whom want to teach creationism in schools and some of whom vie for control of our own Catholic Church.

Rather than feel intimidated by secular or scientific criticisms of religion, a believer can insist that faith in God is a fulfillment of all that fully modern people affirm when they assent to science - or object to violence. Many of religion's critics (Marx, Nietzsche, Freud) insist that faith is mere superstition, a province of illiterate masses. When educated people cling to faith, it is supposed that they are merely protecting unexamined, if closely held, notes of identity. Smart folks too have their irrational needs - although not the smart folks who have jettisoned belief. Grossly fervent popular religion and cooler, more sophisticated belief systems are, to the critics, alike in their dependence on ignorance, their encouragement of resignation in the face of injustice, and their deep complicity in intolerance and even violence.

It is embarrassing to the critics of religion that so many advocates of justice in this world are motivated by expressly spiritual concerns; that peace defines the work of so many believers around the globe; that so many otherwise intellectually astute people cling to their doctrinaire mumbo-jumbo despite all the quite evident reasons not to. The critics steadily manage to avoid the clear fact of human experience - that 'evident reasons' forever fall short of fully accounting for human experience. Critical religion, while always aiming to submit to tests of reason, never defines exclusively in terms of evidence or reason. And in that, critical religion is pointing toward the essential depth of living that science by itself cannot address. The test of reason, i.e., includes the acknowledgment of reason's limits - and that test is one to which religion submits.

The world has changed, and with it the way humans think of the world. Inevitably, that means the way humans think about god has changed. The God who has repeatedly been pronounced dead is not one for whom all religious people mourn. The God whom atheists aggressively deny (the all-powerful, all-knowing, unmoved Mover: the God of damnation, supernatural intervention, salvation-through-appeasement, patriarchy, puritanism, war, etc.) is indeed the God enshrined in many propositions of the orthodox tradition. But this god is also one whom more and more believers, including Catholics, simply do not recognize as the God we worship. Such people regard the fact that God is unknowable as the most important thing to know about God. Traditional propositions of the creed, therefore, must be affirmed neither rigidly nor as if they were meaningless, but with thoughtful modesty about all religious language, allowing for doubt as well as respect for different creeds - and for no creed.

The contemporary religious imagination has been transformed by understanding born of science. Once a believer has learned to think historically and critically, it is impossible any longer to think mythically. It is the positive transformation of religious thought that has defined much of Christianity, including Catholicism.

In truth, however, that transformation has had profoundly negative aspects. There was a particularly epiphany attached to the clergy sexual abuse scandal that came to light in the first five years of the new millennium. In the chronology traced here, that tragic story must inform the climatic period, for it was then that the Catholic laity had no choice but to face the harsh reality of our Catholic situation. Although a small minority of sexually exploitive priests had actually betrayed the young people in their care, almost the entire rank of bishops, from the pope down, had moved with alacrity to protect the abusive priests instead of the children. In the name of avoiding scandal, the crimes of the exploiters, were covered up. These priests were typically given new assignments, which meant that they could repeat their assaults. Psychologically disturbed men were enabled by their bishops to become serial rapists of boys and girls. Their offenses were perverse and far more extensive than anyone imagined. But what the bishops did in response revealed a systemic corruption, an indictment of the whole clerical culture.

Rather than deal with that dysfunction, and with the inevitable questions about the place and power of the laity, mandatory celibacy, and the priesthood's male exclusivity, the bishops engaged in denial, putting their own power ahead of the Church's most vulnerable members. By "scandal," it became clear the

bishops meant anything that might undermine their authoritarian control. With that, the Catholic people saw what happened to the Church we loved. The magisterium of the Church, from its unmagisterial; margin, was seen to exercise a sham authority, with little influence over the inner or outer lives of the faithful, who had been forced in all of this to claim a new kind of Catholic identity.

A new identity! But actually the Catholic people have long affirmed their faith in ways that maintain a certain independence from the authority structure of the Church. Often, the church is discussed as if its clerical aspect were all there is. But that is not, and never was, the half of it. There are more than a billion Catholics around the world, and we are far from slavish - or even uniform - in the way we express our beliefs. Yet, in the basic creed to which - rich and poor, north and south, high-tech savvy and illiterate - we devote ourselves, can we all be wrong? The very size of the Catholic Church is perhaps its anchor in history, the reason both to take it seriously and to understand it as involving far more than a relatively small clerical establishment.. As councils and popes vied with one another for supremacy, and as theologians and philosophers debated fine points of the triune "persons" of the Godhead or the two "natures" of Jesus Christ, ordinary Christians kept the substance of Jesus Christ's meaning at the center of practice, the Gospel narratives paramount, the rite of initiation into his death and resurrection as the basic symbol, with regular gatherings to remember him at mass as the main note of communal identity. And always, Catholics understood what every ethic had to be measured against: the Lord's central command to love each other and the stranger, his radical option in favor of the powerless over princes.

Thus, hospitals, schools, universities, peace movements, social welfare organizations, labor unions, healthy family cultures, and humanistic art forms all emerged with creative regularity from the Catholic experience. Today the Roman Catholic Church is the largest and most productive nongovernmental organization in the world, accomplishing good works, without strings, around the globe. The laity, producing most of this, knew full well, even in eras of widespread illiteracy, what membership in Christ implied, no matter the pronouncements coming from on high.

If there is a surprise in this story, it is how, after a century of decline and disillusionment, religion reemerged as a major factor in the new millennium's future, and how questions of Catholic identity surfaced with profound relevance for each of us and for the world. Yet, we have the privilege of living through a period of such momentous significance.

So here is the faith of a practicing Catholic, which is the way we define ourselves. The label holds several meanings. "Practicing Catholic" describes someone who is both concerned with matters of fact and good in solving problems - two characteristics necessary for survival in today's Catholic Church. We laugh that we are 'practically Catholic' too, depending on who is doing the defining. But fundamentally our religious life is a practice, like the practice of medicine or law. This religious practice involves practical disciplines, like acquaintance with tradition, regular observance of rituals, and attendance, as we say, at Mass. Attending physician, attending Catholic! The sacramental life is not to be confused with subservience, although even dissenting Catholics are steadily in search of authority figures who show themselves worthy of respect.

But for us, the primary meaning of "practicing" is that, through these disciplines, rituals and searches, we have the prospect of getting better. This, therefore, is practice, like the practice of an art or sport. That we are practicing means, above all, that we are not perfect - not in faith, hope or charity. Not in poverty, chastity or obedience. Not in the cardinal virtues, the works of mercy, or the acts of contrition. Not in peace or justice. Not in the life of prayer, which is nothing but attention to the presence of God. In all this we are practicing, which is the only way we know to be Catholic.

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