

The Privilege of Being a post-Vatican II Catholic



The wonder and privilege of being a 'Catholic' Christian

The word 'Catholic' ('universal', 'all-embracing') has never been more important.

Today we are asked to realise that our Church will only be in fact Catholic when 'there is one flock and one shepherd'.

In the meantime, our claim on the word is a claim that we will never be satisfied till everyone knows Jesus as the icon of God's choice in revealing in human terms what 'God' is really like, as well as what we, as human beings, could be.

We welcome the witness of every human being and every people that responds to God's Spirit stirring in their hearts and lives.

As 'Catholics' we state for all to hear that we are not one among many denominations. We are not defined by the fences that people have built. We are a stream, flowing from the heart of Jesus, to slake the thirst of every person on the globe, and we offer them all that we have been given, keeping the door open and the fire in the hearth alight to welcome them to join us in promoting the Catholic dream of being all-embracing.

It is this Catholic dream that is our greatest gift to the world, and it is a gift that makes total sense, especially to the young and uncommitted, provided that those claiming to be 'Catholic' have really embraced it.

A smaller version of 'Catholic' is self-contradictory and repugnant. People are walking away from it or bypassing it in droves.

These are the values espoused (in desire) by the Catholic Church. We must live them more authentically and have the courage to name and oppose those forces that would seek to confine Catholicism in narrower channels.

How do we attract people to see religious cult as beautiful and inspiring and life-giving?

The world desperately needs a 'Catholic' vision. Christians need it, too. We need a community that takes the Incarnation seriously, that refuses to seek God by turning from the world, but that knows that at heart the world and everyone in it is sacred, that everything is a symbol of God – a fact demonstrated by a Community that is sacramental and works to mediate the divine in every aspect of living.

This universal vision should not be new. We see it in the life of Jesus. Jesus loved Judaism. He loved Jerusalem and the Temple. He came to know God largely through them.

The difference was that he went to the heart of Judaism and had the courage to challenge whatever in the practice of Judaism was an obstacle to its achieving its goal.

His contemporaries accused him of violating the law and they had him crucified. Jesus saw himself as bringing the Law to its flowering, which is how those who were attracted to journey with Jesus also saw what he was doing.

That the majority of Jews failed to go with Jesus to the heart of their faith and chose to stay within the security of their traditions led to a break from which we are still suffering.

That some dared to embrace the 'Catholic' vision that engaged Jesus' zeal accounts for the growth and spread of Christianity, which, where it has been lived authentically, has been an enormous gift to the world.

We would do well to reflect on the life of Paul. He, too, was rejected as a heretic by many of his Jewish contemporaries, including Jews who had joined the Christian movement. With passion, and sometimes with exasperation, Paul rejected the accusation of heresy.

Through his encounter with the Christian Jewish community he came to see that it was they, following Jesus, who were carrying out the mission given to Abraham and to Moses. The religion of Israel was always meant for the world. Abraham was to be the father of many nations.

Jesus freed Judaism from the cult-specific and sect-specific rules and regulations of contemporary Judaism. He opened Judaism up to embrace all peoples and he welcomed all to open their minds and hearts to God's love.

Once Paul saw this, he was energised, as his heroic missionary activity and letters demonstrate. He came to see what genuine monotheism must mean, and it did not mean changing one's culture. It meant embracing genuine love with all its demands, including the refusal to sell their soul to the establishment – with the risk of martyrdom for many of them. It meant believing that God's love was not exclusively directed to Jews, but was offered to everyone.

Of course, like the Jews, they too had to make some radical decisions, including letting go elements of their religious security. But the Good News preached by Paul offered them a profound freedom, which included a respect for themselves and a conviction that God is indeed love. It gave a meaning that transcended race and religious upbringing.

Is this not similar to the situation in which we find ourselves? Aren't we, too, presented with a challenge that could be as fulfilling and as demanding as that faced by Jesus and Paul? Is their vision so alien to us?

The Christian message captured the imagination of the Roman Empire, and with Saint Patrick and others reached beyond the Roman Empire. It has continued to capture the imagination of people from all cultures ever since.

Have we lost our nerve? Are we copying the Jews of Jesus' day who preferred the security of obeying their leaders to the daring attraction of Jesus. He emptied the temple that was locking people away from the new revelation that could capture their hearts, make sense to their inquiring minds, and engage their energy to embrace a life they sensed was truly worth living?

Religion can be the opium of the people. It can be a refuge for the narrow-minded, bigoted and fearful. But it doesn't have to be that, and if we truly embraced our rich Catholic tradition we would be challenged to stop using fear to bring about conformity.

Life experience has long since passed that by, except for those who have not known any other way.

Following the example of Jesus, and sustained by his Spirit, we are to promote a 'culture of life' that is attractive, and that searchers can appreciate.

We have to be consistent, and to be on our guard against mixing fundamental wisdom with traditional taboos that do not make sense.

To mix things up in this way is to run the risk of not being listened to. We have no right to compromise the truth in this way.

People talk too readily of 'Church teaching' without making the necessary theological distinctions. This does our mission considerable harm.

When pastoral experience, theological investigation, and the spiritual sense of faithful Catholics are in harmony, the meanings and the values proposed can rightly be called 'Church teaching'.

Other 'teachings' that lack such a consensus can be called 'the teaching of Pope X', or 'the teaching of many European theologians', but not yet 'Church teaching'.

To mix all these levels up and call everything that has found its way into catechisms over the centuries 'Church teaching' is to line up with the scribes and Pharisees, and make it as hard for the truth to penetrate people's minds and hearts today as it was for Jews in first century Palestine.

We have to leave room for the Spirit of Jesus to say today: 'It was said to you of old, but I say to you ...'.

Furthermore, certain church teachings belong to the inner core of revealed truths. There are many layers of concentric circles surrounding these truths, till we get to the outer periphery where we are dealing with matters of much lesser importance where what is proposed can, indeed, be a matter of opinion.

We have been given a marvellous vision in Vatican II that has cleaned away layers of encrusted paint to reveal the beautiful primal wood.

Religion does not have to be a partisan, sectarian, thing. It can be what it was for many of Jesus' contemporaries, that which engages our imagination, our hopes, our longings, our deepest thoughts to hold them in a marvellous harmony.

This is the classical etymology of the word 'religion': from 'ligare'(to bind), and 're' back'. Genuine religion binds a community back to its centre, and binds the individuals who embrace it back to their hearts, hearts that long for the communion that can be enjoyed only when the human is embraced by the divine, as it was in the heart of Jesus.

Jesus once said: 'By their fruits you will know them'.

Paul said: 'Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom'.

Our mission is a mission of love. People are longing for true freedom. People are sick of hypocrisy. People no longer implicitly trust those who claim authority. We've seen too much to be so naïve.

People are longing to be respected, to be listened to, to be loved. People are longing for community that is not exclusive. People want to belong to the world, to the universe, because they know now that they are part of it.

A multiplicity of 'gods' makes no sense for people who live in a global village.

Monotheism that is sectarian is a stupidity.

The word 'Catholic' is beautiful, relevant, essential. We have inherited it. Let us make it real. Let us dare to be 'the heart of God in the world'.

God does not control the world.

God loves the world.

Let us stop seeking to control. Let us reject the techniques of the sects that lock onto people's weaknesses to achieve numbers and conformity. Let us relinquish the use of fear to gain adherence.

We have something beautiful to offer. Offer it with respect and love. Search for meaning. Want to know the truth. Don't overstate what you have discovered. Respect each person's experience and search. The God of Jesus is a God who has made us for eternal communion.

Enriched by the Catholic experience of the past, let us offer from our richness as we listen to what others have discovered and are discovering.

We need the real values of the '50s to help us live now. These must be distinguished from habits of thinking and believing and behaving that no longer make sense. At stake is 'salvation' – the healing of the wounds that continue to suppurate as the strong continue blindly to judge it as their right to dominate the weak when it appears to benefit their own self-interest.

Only a genuine 'Catholic' vision can hear what Jesus was saying when he told us to love those we judge to be our enemies. Only a truly 'Catholic' vision can sustain the often desperate cry for peace that breaks from the hearts of so many today – perhaps especially from those still too young to have accepted the compromises that obscure the ideals of older people who have opted to be satisfied with a religious institution that seems to offer some security in a bewildering world. It won't do.

Teilhard de Chardin (1934)

'Some day, after harnessing space, the winds, the tides and gravitation, we shall harness for God the energies of love. And then, for the second time in the history of the world, we shall have discovered fire.'

Why could that day be now? Only the Pentecost fire can purify our world and enflame our hearts.

When there is 'one flock and one shepherd' it will look very different from the Catholic Church we know, but we as Catholics have the privilege and the duty to keep the flame burning till our own hearts are pure and till everyone embraces the God revealed in the Heart of Jesus.