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Thoughts on post-tribal Catholicism

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Tensions surrounding Catholic identity are very much in the air these days, and when they erupt they?re always a prescription for heartburn. People who regard themselves as authentically Catholic rarely enjoy being told they?re not, or that they?re only selectively so. Likewise, people who believe the faith they treasure is being misrepresented, or distorted, or eviscerated from within, typically get their Irish up.

A key question facing the church, therefore, is how to manage those tensions constructively. I offered some thoughts on that subject on Wednesday, at a conference in Chicago sponsored by DePaul?s Center for World Catholicism and Intercultural Theology and titled ?The Discourse of Catholicity.?

My bottom line was that Catholicism needs a grass-roots movement to rebuild zones of friendship in the church.

I?m not talking about formal programs of dialogue, and I certainly don?t mean debating societies. What the church needs instead are spaces in which relationships among Catholics of differing outlooks can develop naturally over time. The plain fact of the matter is that such spaces have been badly attenuated by the ideological fragmentation of both the church and the wider world.

To be clear, friendship won?t magically make hard choices go away. Catholicism has to stand for something, and somebody has to decide what that is. There will be times when certain versions of Catholic identity have to be ruled out of bounds, and there will also be times when certain defenders of orthodoxy have to be reminded that it?s not their job to determine who?s in and who?s out. (Recent events at the University of Dallas illustrate the latter point, where Bishop Kevin Farrell recorded a web video responding to concern about a new undergraduate degree in pastoral ministry. Critics objected that the program is soft on Catholic identity, to which Farrell replied: ?Let me remind the Catholic people of this diocese that ? I?m the one who has to stand before God and say whether this is truly Catholic. That is my responsibility, and I do not take it lightly.?)

My experience is that when such moments arise, they can lead to either creative tension or destructive division. Which way things break often hinges not just on the issues involved, but also the quality of the underlying relationships among the parties.

I prefaced the call for zones of friendship with three observations, outlined three challenges to implementing it, and closed with three examples which suggest there?s hope.

Observations

First, whether anyone likes it or not, pressure related to Catholic identity is here to stay. This is not only because a fragmented, post-modern world always makes identity contentious, but because one key trend in today?s church is precisely the rise of ?evangelical Catholicism.? It?s premised on recovering a strong sense of Catholic identity (including traditional markers of Catholic thought, speech and practice, such as Eucharistic adoration and Marian devotion) and using that identity as a lever to transform culture ? beginning with the culture of the church. This evangelical wave comes from the top down, in the sense that policy-makers are understandably

concerned to defend Catholic identity vis-à-vis secularism. Yet it also comes from the bottom up, in the form of strong evangelical energy among younger priests, religious, theology students and lay activists.

Second, there?s ferment today not only over how to define Catholic identity, but also who gets to decide. In Western culture there?s a widespread suspiciousness of any claim to institutional authority, and in Catholicism, that instinct has been turbo-charged by the sexual abuse crisis. As a result, virtually any exercise of hierarchical authority today elicits resistance. Thoughtful bishops know that all too well, just as they know the bishops themselves bear some responsibility for bringing about this state of affairs. Yet given how fundamental apostolic succession is to the physiognomy of the church, many bishops believe they have a sacred duty not to allow their authority to unravel. As a result, there?s an almost Newtonian equal-and-opposite dynamic: the more authority is challenged in some quarters, the more some bishops feel compelled to assert and to defend it.

Third, those tensions are unfolding in the United States in the context of a church that?s already badly divided. The conventional term for that division is ?polarization,? as if everyone?s clustered into left and right. In reality, the sociological landscape is more akin to ?tribalization.? We have pro-life Catholics, peace-and-justice Catholics, liturgical traditionalist Catholics, neo-con Catholics, church reform Catholics, feminist Catholics, and on and on, with each tribe touting its own heroes, attending its own meetings, and reading its own journals and blogs. Such diversity is healthy in principle, but destructive in practice if these tribes come to see one another as the enemy, and in many cases that?s precisely the situation. Compounding the problem is that these tribes have spent so much time moving down separate paths that they often have completely different senses of what the issues facing the church actually are, so on those rare occasions when they do rub shoulders, they often lack a common set of points of reference to sustain a conversation.

Challenges

The following are highly generalized statements, and in each case one could easily spot any number of compelling counter-examples. Nonetheless, I think they?re broadly accurate at a descriptive level about where things stand.

First, building friendships that transcend ideological divisions in the United States today is an effort that has to swim against a powerful cultural tide. Journalist Bill Bishop has coined the term ?the Big Sort? to refer to a decades-long trend among Americans to retreat into like-minded enclaves, both physical and virtual. More and more, Americans are choosing to live, work, socialize and even worship only with people who think like themselves. It?s a basic rule of sociology that homogenous communities radicalize while heterogeneous groups moderate, so this ?Big Sort? goes a long way towards explaining the increasingly toxic character of our civic life. The problem is not merely that Americans disagree, but that we?re becoming strangers to one another.

Second, the normal pillars of Catholic life often no longer naturally bring Catholics of differing perspectives together. Many parishes, for instance, have become virtual gated communities. Walk into any diocese in America and find a Catholic in the know, and he or she can tell you in five minutes where the ?Vatican II? parishes are, the neo-con parishes, the traditionalist parishes, and so on. The same point could be made about Catholic colleges and universities, Catholic media, and other institutions, all of which tend to have clear ideological alignments. Catholics aspire to be evangelizers of culture, but in many ways we have been thoroughly evangelized by culture. Smuggling the divisions and animosities of secular political life into the church is a classic case in point.

Third, Catholic creativity on this and many other matters is often stifled by an overly ?purple? popular ecclesiology, which holds that the bishops are both the cause of, and the solution to, all our problems. Not only is that assumption disempowering, it?s not true. Church history teaches that great new impulses such as the mendicant orders, the teaching communities of the 19th century, or the new lay movements weren?t born because someone in power said, ?Let it be so.? The same point applies to addressing today?s tensions around

Catholic identity. The bishops aren?t the only reason we have those tensions, and they?re unlikely to ease as long as we sit around waiting for the bishops to fix them.

Signs of Hope

The following are three examples of what a ?zone of friendship? in the church can look like. This is hardly an exhaustive list, and these may not even be the best instances. Nonetheless, they at least illustrate that it?s possible.

First, the Focolare movement, founded in wartime Italy by a lay woman named Chiara Lubich, is rooted in a profound spirituality of unity. Based on that foundation, Focolare has built lasting friendships over the years with other Christians, followers of other religions, and all people of good will. Their success is shaped not only by the group?s spirituality, but also its internal culture -- patient, open, always disposed to understand before passing judgment. Those qualities have been acquired largely through building friendships outside the church, but they also represent a powerful resource *ad intra*.

Second, the Salt and Light network in Canada is a rare media outlet that?s both unmistakably Catholic and yet open to varying expressions of that identity. It was born out of the experience of World Youth Day in Toronto in 2002, and is led by Basilian Fr. Thomas Rosica, who not only has vision but also business moxie. The network has the support of the Canadian bishops, but it?s not an institutional initiative. In terms of programming, there?s a little something for everyone. For instance, Salt and Light produces high-quality features on Catholic saints and other luminaries, including heroes for both progressives and traditionalists, yet taking an approach which cuts deeper than ideological readings. The staff, too, reflects a wide variety of backgrounds and experiences, so that the positive tone on-air reflects real friendships in-house.

Third, the ?Catholic Voices? project in the United Kingdom was launched in the run-up to Benedict XVI?s visit last year, giving a cadre of young Catholics a crash course in both communications techniques and issues facing the church, and then offering them as interview subjects to media outlets from around the world. The co-founders were the spokesperson for Opus Dei in the U.K. and a former editor of *The Tablet*, so they come from different Catholic backgrounds. Yet they?re great friends, and that spirit permeated the project. In the end, Catholic Voices projected a rational, self-confident, attractive face for Catholicism while the pope was in town, disarming a lot of anti-papal and anti-Catholic prejudice. The idea was so successful that today a ?Catholic Voices Academy? is in the works, and like-minded Catholics in other parts of the world are looking to franchise the brand.

The point is not merely that Focolare, Salt and Light and Catholic Voices are all places where Catholics of different experiences have formed friendships. It?s also that this cross-pollination produced a sort of ?hybrid vigor,? allowing these outfits to accomplish aims that would likely exceed the resources of any one tribe acting on its own. Moreover, nobody in authority launched these projects, but nobody got in their way either.

Fundamentally, what these examples illustrate is that post-tribal Catholicism is more than a pipe dream. If you build it, they will come.

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