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Quebec: What Happened?

Michael Sean Winters | Mar. 22, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

Yesterday, I gave my touristy impressions of Quebec, enthralled by the beauty and charm of the city I was visiting. Today we turn to the question that sits at the center of all conversations among Catholic intellectuals and pastors in the province: What happened?

The Quebecois have a distinct culture and the centerpiece of their efforts to preserve that culture has focused on language, maintaining the province?s Francophone ways in the midst of a sea of Anglophones. But, one of the traditional foundation stones of the culture virtually collapsed within the past two generations, the Church. Unlike the US, where it was the movement of large sectors of the populations from ethnic, religiously monochromatic neighborhoods to the pluralistic suburbs that accelerated the decline of Catholic culture, in Quebec the process was different: The people in the suburbs were Catholics too.

What to make of this? It is a large question and I hope to spend some time over the next few years asking that question and searching for answers. In part, I wish to undertake this search because the question is at the heart of the New Evangelization, which will succeed or fail based on its ability to inculturate the Gospel in the 21st century. The other reason to pose the question about Quebec is because when we pose the question in the U.S., sometimes the issues are so close to the bone, the explanations tend to the ideological. Sometimes it is difficult to look at one?s own situation head-on, and more light is shed by looking at an analogous situation, and the light refracts over to one?s own situation.

In the U.S. many of our conservative friends place the blame for the collapse of Catholic culture on the social and moral revolutions of the late 1960s and 1970s. Some go so far as to lay the blame at the Second Vatican Council or, at least, at its implementation. These conservative critics tend to adopt an apocalyptic vision when they look at the world today. They discern only civilizational struggles and crises. Of course, it takes a uniquely surly personality and a lack of historical perspective to look at the world over the last one hundred years and think the 60s and 70s was the problem. I would put my money on the 1930s and 40s. The blood-soaked lands between the Elbe and the Urals, where Hitler and Stalin took turns being the greater monster, are my evidence.

More to the point, anyone whose nostalgia for the Catholic culture of the 1950s leads them to condemn only what followed must contend with the fact that a robust culture does not disintegrate within a generation. What was so hollow at the core of that apparently vibrant culture that it could not withstand the winds of change brought on by the revolution in consumerism, the revolution in sexual relations, and other secularizing forces? What confluence of socio-cultural forces turned that Catholic culture into matchsticks and burned them in the twinkling of an eye?

The collapse of the Catholic culture in Quebec was not like the collapse of Communism in Europe, but there are similarities. Obviously, as Catholics, we do not believe that the Catholic culture of Quebec in the 1950s was a tissue of lies, a congeries of institutions ridden with corruption. People like to credit Pope John Paul II and Ronald Reagan with the defeat of communism but, in fact, their contribution was to kick the last leg out from

under an institution that was hollow at the core and it fell as a hollow tree falls in the wind. John Paul II and Ronald Reagan get credit for kicking that last leg out, to be sure, but if they had never emerged on the international scene, a different wind would have had the same effect. I wonder if it is so about the collapse of the Catholic culture in Quebec.

I do not want to pre-judge the matter, but reading this morning?s Washington Post [1], it is hard not to recognize the baneful influence of a consumer mentality on a culture. Melinda Henneberger looks at the state of eugenics in America today. This is an article that must be read by anyone who is serious about the future of Catholicism and/or the future of modern liberal democracies. Amongst other things, Henneberger quotes Michael Sandel, from his own short, must-read book, *The Case Against Perfection: Ethics in the Age of Genetic Engineering*, in which he wrote: ?To appreciate children as gifts, is to accept them as they come, not as objects of our design, or products of our will, or instruments of our ambition.? Yet, as Henneberger shows, the campus newspapers of most Ivy League schools are filled with ads seeking surrogates for pregnancy or sperm donors that treat the prospect of children in precisely this way. (I will have more on this issue early next week.)

Still, the Church must not only look outside for answers, it must look inside. It must ask how and why its clergy became so divorced from the lives of their people that they could not impede the collapse, in fact, they barely saw it coming. We must know the cause of the problem before we seek a diagnosis, and we must be candid about the results of early attempts to cure the patient: So far, nothing has worked. Attempts at restoration failed. Attempts to be more ?relevant? have failed. There is something deeper at work here than the traditional ideological divides within Catholicism have been able to address, or even to narrate convincingly.

Quebec is far and it is still cold. (My feet still feel cold and wet from trudging through the streets of the old city Wednesday night!) But, I met some wonderful people at the Theology School at Laval University, and hope to spend time talking with more of the clergy and people when I return this summer. The Quebecois are not only our brothers and sisters in the Lord, the problems they and we face are similar enough that we need to discuss the collapse of Catholic culture on both sides of the border the way any family discusses a common problem. As Henneberger?s article makes clear, the stakes are high because modern, liberal cultures tend to lack self-correcting measures, except in the face of catastrophes. I would submit that both the poverty rate and the abortion rate in the U.S. qualify as a catastrophe, but most people in America move about their business as if nothing is wrong. I do not share the apocalyptic view of this catastrophe that animates so many of my conservative friends, I see great good in modernity as well as great moral stupidity, but to paraphrase the astronauts on Apollo 13, ?Quebec, we have a problem.? We have that problem in the U.S. too, a culture that has forgotten God. Perhaps we can learn from each other how to encourage both our cultures to become less forgetful and more faithful and, just so, more humane.

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