

# TRULY 'CATHOLIC'

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LET US BEGIN by reflecting on what we mean by 'religion'. According to the classical etymology, religion is that which binds a community back (Latin 're' and 'ligare') to what it is that holds the community together, to its centre. A community can get out of touch; it can be distracted. Religion binds us back. It is the same with an individual. Genuine religion binds a person back to his or her centre. If it doesn't then it is not genuine, and our world is cluttered with institutions, ideas and experiences that claim to be religious, but are not.

What is the centre that religion binds us to? Every culture has a word for it. The English word is 'God'. God is the name we give to that which we find at the centre, holding a person together, holding a community together, holding the cosmos together. God is discovered at the centre (at the heart) of reality. Our experience is that the closer we get to the heart—to our own heart, or the heart of another, or the heart of matter—the more we discover mystery. That to which we give the name 'God' (other cultures have different names) is the heart and the beyond of everything. That to which we give the name 'God' is a reality that is beyond comprehension. We cannot lock it into a satisfactory concept. It remains essentially mysterious, sacred.

Any religion that 'works' binds us to reality outside, and to reality within. It binds us to the heart of the world and to our own heart. Religion 'happens' when heart speaks to heart. It seems true, however, that certain religions place something of an emphasis on the outer world (the numinous aspect of religious experience), while others place something of an emphasis on the inner world (the mystical aspect of religious experience).

Is Judaism an example of the former, with its interest in the prophet (Moses), the Word of God mediated through nature and history, the sacred book (the Torah), and obedience to the outer word? Of course, Judaism does not neglect the heart, but is it true that a strong emphasis is put on God coming to a person and a community through an outer revelation? Is Islam another example, with its interest in the prophet (Muhammad), the sacred book (the *Qur'an*), the word of God mediated through a religious leader, and obedience (submission) to God's revelation? Judaism and Islam do put a strong emphasis on the numinous aspect of religious experience.

Buddhism, by contrast, has holy people, but not like Moses or Muhammad. It has sacred writings, but not like the *Torah* or the *Qur'an*. Buddhism emphasises the mystical dimension of religious experience. Its focus is on enlightenment and inner transformation.

When people look at Christianity as lived in the Western world, they could be forgiven for likening it to what I have just said about Judaism and Islam, but they would be seriously mistaken. Jews do not claim Moses to be the revelation of God. He is the prophet through whom God revealed himself and his will. The revelation is found primarily in the *Torah*. Moslems do not claim Muhammad to be the revelation of God. He is the prophet through whom God revealed himself and his will. The revelation is found in the *Qur'an*. Christians, on the other hand, see Jesus the person as God's revelation. The New Testament is the book in which we find the inspired reflections of first century Christians. The New Testament is not the revelation, it points to the revelation. The revelation is the person, Jesus. That is why we can (and must) interpret the New

Testament using the same instruments we use for other first century Hellenistic writings. We do this for we want to know what they meant by their writings. We want to know how they saw Jesus and what they thought as a result of the way in which Jesus revealed God to them.

Christians see Jesus as the perfect human expression of God, as THE way in which God is revealed, as THE way God has chosen to communicate Godself to us in a human way.

If we understand 'Word' as the traditional expression for God's self-communication, Christians see Jesus as 'THE Word made flesh', for in his actions and his teaching he brought to a perfect fulness what other words (creation, history, holy people) have said about and for God. He clarified the various 'words' that people experienced as giving partial expression to the mystery that they discovered as the heart and the beyond of their world. He made God's Word flesh for us, showing us what God is when God reveals himself in a human way. Jesus is the human 'word'(self-expression and self-communication of God) that reveals the numinous, and reveals God as love.

But there is much more to Christianity than this. Christians believe that it is the Spirit of love that binds Jesus to God that also binds ('*ligare*') the Christian community together. In the words of Paul: 'God's love has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit that has been given to us' (Romans 5:5). That is why Paul can also say: 'I live, no longer I, it is Christ living in me' (Galatians 2:20). Christianity is essentially about the heart. The numinous and the mystical are both central. For revelation to occur heart needs to speak to heart. Jesus showed us that the outer world is sacred, as is the inner world of every person. Evil is what happens when we ignore the heart of the outer or the inner world.

To grasp the essence of Christianity it is essential, too, that we examine the profound insight that is expressed in genuine



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monotheism. Polytheism is a natural phenomenon, very understandable and basically healthy. People experience the presence of the sacred in a stream, a grove of trees, the sun, the moon, a storm, fire, a hill, anything. This experience invites us to wonder and to worship. However, people do not necessarily identify the sacred presence in the tree with the sacred presence in the stream, and so are polytheists. Monotheism (when it is genuine) is an extraordinary insight. A monotheist has come to see that one and the same mystery is at the heart of everything. A monotheist sees that everything belongs to everything else; that there is only one source holding everything in existence.

A person or a group that says that there is only one God, and then goes on to restrict God to their group, is certainly not a monotheist in any real sense of the term. A genuine monotheist will talk to a Samaritan woman at a well, will embrace a leper, will eat with sinners, and will be able to say to a criminal dying on the next cross: 'Today you will be with me in paradise.' We know a true monotheist by the way he or she treats every person, indeed, everything. A genuine monotheist sees one and the same sacred mystery at the heart of everything, and knows that this mystery is love.

Since religious experience is universal, since everyone is graced by the One who is the source of all existence, we should expect to find elements of truth, elements of inspired revelation, in the varied ways in which people have responded to the divine

and have given expression to their religious experience. We should expect to find elements of truth, and so to be enlightened, by the Vedas and the Upanishads, by the sayings of K'ung-fu-Tsu (Confucius), Lao Tzu and Gautama the Buddha. We should listen from the heart to the oracles of the Hebrew prophets and the writings of Paul of Tarsus and the Christian writers of the Gospels.

This is not to say that all these are equally revelatory of God. Equality is a mathematical term that measures quantity. A Christian who has come to believe that God is revealed in Jesus cannot expect people who lived before Jesus or those living now who do not know him to see God as God was revealed in Jesus. But they will see 'seeds of the word' wherever truth has been spoken, wherever religious experience has found expression in words, in art, in architecture, and in the inspired love of ordinary people in every culture of the world. Every culture, every people, has 'saints' who are a 'word of God' to their contemporaries, connecting them in a remarkable way with their own hearts and with reality, and so with God.

Christianity that is narrower than the cosmos, Christianity that is self-consciously

denominational, Christianity that is in any way bigoted, or blind to the revelation of the sacred wherever that revelation may surprise us, is a contradiction in terms. A Christian must needs be 'Catholic' in the best sense of that word. A Catholic Christian must be a person who lives by Jesus' Spirit and so learns to see with Jesus' eyes and love with Jesus' heart. A Christian must be one whose heart bleeds to see anyone not belonging. A Catholic Christian must be one who opposes violence because he or she knows that the heart is sacred, that everyone's body is an expression of the divine. A Christian must be one whose arms are open to welcome everyone. A Catholic Christian is one whose vision is universal, all-embracing. A Catholic Christian is one who has come to see that everyone has something to say, that revelation comes wherever a person speaks the truth from the heart. A Catholic Christian is not for conformity but for a harmony that rejoices in difference wherever there is sensitivity to the other and a humble awe before the unfolding of the mystery. He or she knows that only the embrace of everyone welcoming the fire of divine love can bring about the paradise that God wants for our world.

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*The word Catholic is derived from the Greek adjective, *katholicos*, meaning 'universal', and from the adverbial phrase, *kath'holou*, meaning 'on the whole'.*

*The term was first used by St Ignatius of Antioch (d.c. 107) in his Letter to the Smyrnaeans: 'Where the bishop is to be seen, there let all his people be; just as wherever Jesus Christ is present we have the Catholic Church' (n.8).*

—Richard P. McBrien, *Catholicism*, p.3

## ‘THE JOY OF THE GOSPEL’—SOME POINTS

Pope Francis published his first Apostolic Exhortation in which he presented the results of the Synod of Bishops held last year on the topic of the New Evangelisation. Pope Francis entitled his Exhortation: 'The Joy of the Gospel'. In it he has taken the opportunity to present some key elements of the agenda he has for his Papacy and for the Catholic Church. I have chosen to reflect on what appear to me some key points.

In the opening paragraph Pope Francis writes: 'The joy of the Gospel fills the hearts and the lives of all who encounter Jesus. Those who accept this offer of salvation are set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness.' He is asking us to examine our lives. Do we cherish the freedom we are offered as disciples of Jesus and members of the Church? If we do, we must want others to share this freedom and this joy, for surely we realise that it is meant for everyone, no matter how lost we might be, however sinful. Christ, the Pope assures us, never tires of forgiving (par. 3). He goes on to ask: 'if we have received the love which restores meaning to our lives how can we fail to share that love with others?' (par. 8).

He speaks of three groups who need to hear the Gospel of God's love. The first group is 'the faithful who regularly take part in community worship. Importantly, he includes in this group 'those members of the faithful who preserve a deep and sincere faith, expressing it in different ways, but seldom taking part in worship.' This is very encouraging to us, for we all have people who are close to us, who identify as being Catholic, but who do not come regularly to Mass. The second group are people who have been baptised but have no connection with the Church, and the third group are those who ignore or even reject God, for they, too, experience a yearning for love and a yearning for meaning. They need to hear the Good News and surely we want to share it with them.

He reminds us of the privilege we have to share the joy we have and to point others to what he calls 'a horizon of beauty and a delicious banquet'. Surely we want to attract others to the life we are privileged to know and live (par. 14).

In Chapter One of his Exhortation, Pope Francis issues a challenge to each of us and to us as a parish. 'Go out to others', he writes, seek those who have fallen away, stand at the crossroads and welcome the outcast' (par. 24). The Church is in constant need of reform. This is obvious because it is a Church of sinners. During his life on earth Jesus ate with sinners. It has always been this way. What the Pope wants to stress in this exhortation is the need for the Church to change so that it truly is a missionary Church.

We must concentrate on what he calls the essentials, 'on what is most beautiful, most grand, most appealing, and at the same time most essential.' (par. 35). This is true of what we are to believe, but also of what we are to do (par 36). So often we get caught up on matters which, however important they may be, are nevertheless secondary (par 34).

As regards the Eucharist he reminds us that 'it is not a prize for the perfect, but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak' (par. 47).

In Chapter 5 he speaks of 'Spirit filled evangelizers'. If we are going to take seriously the call that comes with baptism to share the faith with others, if we are truly committed to building a new world: 'we do so, not from a sense of obligation, not as a burdensome duty, but as the result of a personal decision which brings us joy and gives meaning to our lives.'

The fundamental point Pope Francis makes, is that we enjoy intimacy with Jesus, and that we make our contribution to bringing this joy to our needy, yearning, and often confused, but beautiful world.

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