

Catholicism

The Faith Of A People

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[This pamphlet is a fascinating picture of the Catholic Church of this day and age. It shows it to be not just an institution, a complicated organization, but simply people - God's people, good bad and indifferent people. Written in a simple and lively style, it challenges all Catholics to examine closely their role in the Church, their responsibilities as God's People! The author is a young layman presently on the staff of the University of New England, Armidale, N.S.W.] -THE EDITOR.

INTRODUCTION

One of the distinguishing marks of Catholicism throughout history has been its decidedly popular character - not in the sense that its actions have always earned popular acclaim, but in the deeper sense that it has managed to attract and hold the allegiance and affection of the common people.

Such a feature is of especial interest, for the tendency of all Christian faiths apart from Catholicism has been, in result if not in design, to limit membership to an elite - to a solid core of those who are actively committed and ostensibly moral.

The celebrated 19th century critic, Matthew Arnold, a Protestant, was eloquent in his admiration of the popular spirit of Catholic life and tradition. He believed that Catholicism is the religion which has most taken root among the people, and that the Church contains "all the pell-mell of the men and women of Shakespeare's plays." (Essays in Criticism, 1st Series, 1865).

Arnold was struck in his European travels by the contrast between the respectability of the average congregation in an Anglican church and the predominance of the poor in Catholic churches. "Nothing indeed," as Sir Arnold Lunn once commented, "is so Catholic in its atmosphere as an Italian church in some poverty-stricken village... In such churches, where notices urge the faithful to refrain from spitting out of respect for the house of God, those who with difficulty refrain from spitting in church are as welcome as those who never spit even at home. Moreover the sinner is as much at ease as the saint, the philistine as the aesthete." (Any Yet So New, 1958.)

It has been part of the historic claims of Catholicism that it bears certain visible characteristics, the traditional four Marks of the Church - unity, sanctity, universality and apostolicity. In the Creed at Mass, we affirm our belief in "One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church." These marks are, in fact, to some degree in tension, a condition that is abundantly creative and fruitful under the exercise of divine authority.

One of the recurring events of Christian history, however, has been the repudiation of the authority of the Church, and the attempt to exalt one note above another - in particular, the note of holiness above that of universality. This was the cause of a whole series of schisms in the early Church - the Montanists in the 2nd century, who denied that the Church had the power to forgive sins; and the

Donatists in the 4th century, who held that sacraments administered by an unworthy priest were invalid, and that sinners could not be members of the Church.

Again, at the time of the Reformation in the 16th century, the belief in a chosen minority was very influential: the Calvinists in particular saw the Church as a society of the elect, and Calvin's emphasis on the doctrine of predestination tended to restrict the Church to those Christians who were unshakeably certain of their own salvation an assurance which most people in any age would be rather hesitant to claim.

In all these circumstances, the Church is not interpreted as a universal society but as a select one, its mission being seen not so much as saving the world as of separating a chosen remnant from the condemned mass of mankind. The outcome has been that movements of spiritual renewal have often been dissipated by being forced outside the bounds of the Church - as, for instance, happened with the Wesleyan revival in the Anglican Church during the 18th century, which ended in the new sect of Methodism.

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The Catholic Church, on the other hand, has tended to assimilate movements of authentic renewal and to incorporate them into its institutional life. The phenomenon of religious orders is striking proof of this capacity, for the Church has been able to absorb the spiritual movements which they represent, and to engage them as instruments of its wider purposes of internal rejuvenation and external conversion.

Throughout its history, the Catholic Church has sought to be a universal religion - a faith of mass appeal. It has exhibited the power to evoke the passionate loyalty of ordinary persons, and to retain the allegiance of the naturally irreligious. Wherever it has struck root, it has cultivated a living and sympathetic sense of the ordinary life. In each case it has given rise to a particular social atmosphere and ethos, a distinctive style of life: in each case it has given rise to a Catholic people.

In the past decade, much attention has been focussed upon the meaning of Catholicism for contemporary times. By and large, this examination has taken place at the theological and moral levels, and comparatively little study has been given to the cultural dimensions of Catholicism - what it is like to be a Catholic, what is the nature and rhythm of the Catholic life as it is actually lived.

It is clearly of supreme importance for an adequate understanding of the Church that the cultural aspect be considered. Catholicism must be savoured as well as studied: it must be seen as an atmosphere and not merely an attitude; as the life of a people and not only a structure of ideas or a system of ethics.

A Sense of Belonging

It is as the life of a people that most ordinary Catholics know and experience their faith. It is this which provides them with a sense of identity, a sense of belonging. To be a Catholic is to belong to a people - the People of God. It is to be part of a long historical procession as well as a large contemporary community. It is to be bound together by a complex of memories, sentiments and images, which form the texture and background of the Catholic experience. It is to be conscious of a concrete institution, the Church, and a set of particular habits and rituals which defines the context and climate of belief. It is to be neither particularly ideal nor noble nor even pious but to know, nonetheless, that one is attached to a living body of people on its way to God.

The Catholic People

Very little has been written directly on the Catholic people. Indeed, not unexpectedly, one must turn to the sphere of literature in order to find a realistic depiction of the world of ordinary Catholics, for it is through literature that the concrete flavour and authentic accent of the Catholic experience can be best conveyed and comprehended. The Scottish novelist, Bruce Marshall, for example, has produced a shelf of novels which affords a glimpse into the world of popular Catholicism. In his book, *All Glorious Within* (1944), he describes the funeral of an old Irish priest, Monsignor O'Duffy, and the scene which is evoked illustrates the emotions and loyalties of a Catholic people:

"For the most part it was the poor who had come out to see Monsignor O'Duffy go by for the last time, but some of the eleven o'clock coffee drinking women were there as well, caught in the crowd between changing their library books and buying liver salts, popping their silly little eyes at a popularity they were too imbecile to understand. But the poor understood all right and the ragged children sat on their parents' shoulders and those who were big enough clambered up the lamp-posts. If the monsignor had been alive they would have cheered but as he was dead they wept instead and those who weren't weeping had a great distress on their faces because they knew that a great clumsy slice of man who had known all about God's mercy would walk among them no more...

"When at length they reached the cemetery the acolytes all had to light their candles again as the flames had long since gone out. The Bishop blessed the grave with incense and with holy water and prayed that the soul of Patrick Ignatius O'Duffy might be joined to the angelic choir; and with the cold trees all about them the clergy and the laity all blubbered like bairns because a holy, humble, yelling, blundering, delicate priest had been gathered by God."

The responsiveness of a Catholic people, as shown in their sorrow at a priest's death, is not, as Marshall makes clear, because he was a figure of heroic dimensions. On the contrary, it is due to the fact that Monsignor O'Duffy mirrored in his own life the ordinariness of his people - the drab, persistent, tiring and flawed efforts of the typical Catholic's daily struggle. This spectacle of ordinariness may seem unappealing, yet it has always exerted a profound and continuing effect on the psychology of a Catholic's adhesion to his Church, for it is bound up closely with the sense of hospitality which he experiences there.

It has also had an impact upon the Catholic convert, as Father George Tyrell testified on the occasion of his reception nearly a century ago, when he attended Mass in the crypt of a church in London:

"In darkness and amid the smell of a dirty Irish crowd... here was continuity, that took one back to the catacombs; here was no need of, and therefore no suspicion of, pose or theatrical parade; its aesthetic blemishes were its very beauties for me in that mood." (Autobiography, 1912.)

The relationship of a Catholic people with their priests is of key significance, for it reflects in large part their relationship with the Church itself. The phenomenon of anti-clericalism has had a ruinous effect at times on the state of religious faith, particularly in Europe, but it is not a problem which has afflicted Catholicism in Australia - or, indeed, in other countries where a close affinity has existed between priests and their people.

Priest and People

The priest personifies the religious tradition, and as such he is an extraordinarily important person at the popular level. By virtue of what he represents and testifies to - the existence of a divine order and the operation of divine power - he is also a sacred person. In past eras he was accorded great and formal respect; in modern times there is a greater degree of banter and informality. No doubt different periods call for different styles of relationship and a different form of social rhetoric, but the human need for the sacred, and for sacred persons, remains strong, and the priestly role in this is still of critical importance. His serving as a sign and instrument of the sacred has not been of negligible religious merit: he was, and remains, a central part of the popular fabric of faith and devotion - a religious symbol, a community leader, a man to turn to in the midst of trouble, and a source of unity and reassurance in times of conflict.

Unquestionably, one of the great strengths of Australian Catholicism has been that the priest in the parish has been generally seen in this light by his people. The earlier generations of Irish clergy, despite the faults and limitations for which they are often now condemned, were sympathetically close to their people and endowed with a deep and lively awareness of the human need for belonging. At their best, such clergy served as much-loved leaders, social as well as spiritual, of their people. They were an impressive witness to the surpassing achievement of Irish Catholicism - and of the Catholicism of those national churches, like the Australian, established through the Irish Dispersion of the 19th century - namely, its capacity for retaining the allegiance of the working class. Pope Pius XI declared that the great scandal for the Church in the last century was the alienation of the working class -- a statement made with pointed reference to older Catholic countries in Europe, like France, but not primarily applicable to the newer countries, like Australia and the U.S.A., whose Irish religious origins ensured the survival of a close and vital social link between the common people and their priests.

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At Sunday Mass in any local church, and in particular at Communion time, one can observe an astonishing array of people, of every conceivable age, appearance, personality, profession and background, assemble in united faith to honour and receive their Saviour. Such, in microcosm, is the mosaic which is the Catholic Church.

It is true, as Michael Novak has remarked, that this variety "is so close to us we have often taken it for granted." To be a Catholic, as he goes on to point out,

"is to be simultaneously in institutional contact with Italians and Irishmen, Slavs and Germans; and to have a richer experience of class variation than most Protestant parishes, from poor through middle-class to wealthy; and a larger range of expressive styles, from devotional and Pentecostal to rational and scholastic; from passions for symbol and image to passions for logic and transcendental method. Being Catholic is already a pluralistic experience." (Commonweal, 4 May, 1973.)

Historical Evidence

The diversity of expression which is characteristic of Catholic culture is strikingly evident in the Gothic cathedrals of the Middle Ages. The cathedral itself was, indeed, the religious heart of the city - a place of great liturgical as well as educational importance, for it served not only as a centre of worship for the people but also as a prime means of religious instruction, in that the symbols and adornments of the building formed a visual introduction to the Faith, in periods when illiteracy was widespread. At the same time, the cathedral had a strongly social importance as well. Its construction was the work of the whole community over many years, engaging the efforts of every

order of society, from peasants to kings. The art and decoration of the cathedral depicted not only innumerable religious scenes, but also every walk of life in medieval society. At Notre Dame in Paris, for instance, a sculptural relief shows a peasant gathering winter fuel, while in the windows of Chartres Cathedral are portrayed no less than forty-three of the trades of the city.

For a Catholic people, the first social duty, and consequently the main cultural activity, is the act of worship. Popular traditions thus assume a liturgical form and orientation. For example, the popular religious drama in the Middle Ages was either a liturgical drama in the strict sense, like the Passion plays and Nativity plays, or else was directly related to the cult of the saints and the celebration of their feasts.

In the same way, the Church itself served not only as a religious temple in which the drama of human redemption was annually enacted through the liturgy, but also as a cultural centre of the common people, for whom it was at once school and theatre and art gallery.

Catholic Culture Today

Even in contemporary times, when in many countries the process of secularization has eroded the religious base of society, the effects of a Catholic culture can be profound and powerful. In his vivid study of popular Catholicism in present-day Spain, *Person and God in a Spanish Valley* (1972), William A. Christian Jr. shows the intense significance which the ordinary Catholic attaches to religious symbols and practices.

Family devotions like the Rosary, visitations to local shrines, the invocation of special saints as personal patrons, the wearing of such articles as scapulars - all of these signs of religious dedication testify to a profound interaction of belief and life, of religion and culture, the outcome of which is a continual awareness on the part of ordinary people of God's active participation in the day-to-day world.

Our Altar Boys

One of the most interesting popular institutions in the Church, and possibly one of the most underrated, has been that of altar-boys. It can be argued that this institution has played an important part in forming and transmitting a Catholic sensibility over many generations, and in giving young Catholics a sense of the sacred and a sense of participation in the rites of the Church. The altar-boy then represented, in a sense, the lay people on the sanctuary, and it was evident that his participation was governed by the elaborate rules relating to dress, responses, movements, etc., emphasizing that the sanctuary was a sacred place which bound its occupants to an attitude of care and reverence.

No doubt such popular institutions reflect an incomplete expression of the Faith. To some they may seem so superficial and mediocre as barely to merit preservation - or, when lost, regret. Yet they do represent at the popular level a living integration of spiritual faith and social reality.

People at Prayer

The description by Evelyn Waugh of the ordinary faithful at Mass may appear as the picture of an embarrassing failure; but it is more truly the picture of a people - a people struggling to pray:

"We are assembled in obedience to the law of the Church. The priest performs his function in exact conformity to rule. But we - what are we up to? Some of us are following the missal... Some are saying the rosary. Some are wrestling with refractory children. Some are rapt in prayer. Some are thinking of all manner of irrelevant things until intermittently called to attention by the bell. There

is no apparent 'togetherness'. Only in heaven are we recognizable as the united body we are. It is easy to see why some clergy would like us to show more consciousness of one another, more evidence of taking part in a social 'group activity.' Ideally they are right but that is to presuppose a very much deeper spiritual life in private than most of us have achieved.

"If, like monks and nuns, we arose from long hours of meditation and solitary prayer for an occasional excursion into social solidarity in the public recitation of the office, we should, unquestionably, be leading the full Christian life to which we are dedicated. But that is not the case. Most of us, I think, are rather perfunctory and curt in our morning and evening prayers. The time we spend in church - little enough - is what we set aside for renewing in our various ways our neglected contacts with God. It is not how it should be, but it is, I think, how it has always been for the majority of us and the Church in wisdom and charity has always taken care of the second-rate." (Spectator, London, 23 November 1962).

One of the difficulties which have arisen with the intensely 'reformist' mentality of the past decade is that the Church has come to be depicted in some quarters as totally ineffectual in its 'unreformed' state; as previously lifeless and unattractive in appearance and effect. James Hitchcock, in his study of liturgical reform, *The Recovery of the Sacred* (1974), has commented on the fact that, in practice, "the new ways were so often justified through denigrating the old. This in turn engendered a good deal of bitterness, resistance, and suspicion. It demoralized people who were made to feel that all their lives they had not been praying properly, that there was something profoundly flawed about their faith." Yet, at any period of history, the Church is variously performing its task of sanctification and redemption, for it embodies the mysterious handiwork of God and not merely the visible endeavours and defects of man. As Hilaire Belloc pointed out:

"It is the Church as-it-is which commands attention, convinces and receives assent... The Church, as-it-is, alive, bears on reality." (Many Cities, 1928).

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A problem in the recent past has been the anguish and inadequacy felt by many ordinary Catholics who have not yet managed to experience any unique sense of liberation or relief in the post-Vatican II Church. This has not been due, for the most part, to any attitude of blind resistance to change on the part of the Catholic people. It is due to the fact that they actually felt far less oppressed and discontented in the Church - far more conscious, indeed, of the perpetual need and struggle for salvation - than has lately been implied.

Not so Novel

The Second Vatican Council's call for a renewal of faith was an eloquent and much-needed call, but it did not strike such an unnervingly novel note in the ears of the Catholic people, particularly in Australia, as has been imagined. For ordinary Catholics, this had been the constant message and exhortation of the Church throughout the ages, and the richness of Catholic vocational and institutional life in Australia testified to the depth and persistence of the Catholic people's response to this message.

In the tumultuous decade which has just passed, the religious continuity of the Council - the Fathers' emphasis on the riches of the Catholic tradition and on the need for developments to be compatible with that tradition - became seriously obscured, a loss of vision which played a significant part in the confusion and dismay experienced among ordinary Catholics.

In the words of Charles Peguy, the Church is still, as it has always been for Catholics, "the one and only vessel for the one and only journey." The average person feels an intimate and inseparable part of it. He knows he belongs to what Evelyn Waugh has called

"that middle rank of the Church, far from her leaders, much farther from her saints; distinct, too, from the doubting, defiant, despairing souls who perform so conspicuously in contemporary fiction and drama. We take little part, except where our personal sympathies are aroused, in the public life of the Church, in her countless pious and benevolent institutions. We hold the creeds, we attempt to observe the moral law, we go to Mass on days of obligation..., we contribute to the support of the clergy. We seldom have any direct contact with the hierarchy. We go to some inconvenience to educate our children in our faith. We hope to die fortified by the last rites. In every age we have formed the main body of 'the faithful' and we believe that it was for us, as much as for the saints and for the notorious sinners, that the Church was founded." (Spectator, 23 November 1962).

A Popular Faith

Such a description sounds the authentic note of a universal Church and a popular faith. It shows that an accurate and complete picture of the Church is impossible if we ignore or discount the presence of the Catholic people - not merely those who are apostolic or actively engaged, but all the People of God, the great host of 'the simply practising.' It is they who shape and animate the external expression of the Church; who reveal to the world the human face of the Mystical Body of Christ; who help to set the roadmarks of a unique way and draw the features of a unique life.

In the Australian environment, the Catholic people manifest a distinctly pragmatic and unpretentious style. They exhibit a certain matter-of-fact reverence about the existence of God and a quiet contentedness in His Church. In general they discern that the Church and its life is not primarily a matter of 'relevance' or even 'fulfilment' - but that it is primarily mystery, sacrifice, struggle, forgiveness, resurrection; a glimpse of God; a quiver of hope; a hold on reality; strength through the dark night; and peace at the last.

In recent years the wish has often been expressed that religious faith be more effective - that it have a far greater impact on the life of the ordinary believer and the world around him. Some have intimated that such effects should be the fundamental criterion of the Catholic Christian, a change in the use of the term which is subtle but enormously decisive, for 'Christian has traditionally referred, first and foremost, to belief rather than behaviour. Ultimately, indeed, the word should encompass both spheres of reality, but the priority of application is nonetheless of crucial significance, for the universality of the Church is severely jeopardized by the confining of the term Christian' to those who are 'Christ-like'.

Historically, the Church has always been more disturbed by deviations from orthodox doctrine than by deviations from orthodox morals. The priest who is a victim of drunkenness has generally been treated more leniently than one who is preaching heresy. For so long as doctrine is not questioned, the objective basis of Christian morality remains intact, and moral lapses are at least recognized for what they are.

Furthermore, as the French author, Georges Bernanos, once observed:

"I don't consider the Church capable of human reformation, at all events in the manner of Luther or Lamennais. I don't wish the Church to be perfect, for the Church is a living thing. Like the most lowly, the most destitute of her sons, the Church struggles haltingly from this world into the next;

she sins and expiates and whosoever shall turn their eyes from her splendour will hear her praying and sobbing with the rest of us, in the darkness." (Diary of My Times, 1938).

Mediocre Men

It is a most instructive exercise to meditate on the kind of men whom Christ summoned to be His first Apostles. Not only were they of humble status - mostly fishermen who could claim no position of standing in the society of their time - but they were also unmistakably ordinary in character, neither exceptionally appealing nor resolute nor even devout.

One of them was destined to betray Christ - for a paltry reward of thirty pieces of silver - and then to hang himself. The others were to prove less conspicuous failures, but, on balance, still fairly frail and mediocre; as shown, for example, in their lack of faith on the Sea of Galilee, when the storm raged and threatened to engulf them, until Christ awoke and calmed the waters. And the leader of the Apostles? What an astonishing choice Christ made in the person of St. Peter! St. Peter - who denied his Master three times; St. Peter - who could not keep awake on the night of Christ's Agony in the Garden. Yet, as G. K. Chesterton pointed out:

"When Christ at a symbolic moment was establishing His great society, He chose for its cornerstone neither the brilliant Paul nor the mystic John, but a shuffler, a snob, a coward - in a word, a man. And upon this rock He has built His Church, and the gates of Hell have not prevailed against it. All the empires and the kingdoms have failed, because of this inherent and continual weakness, that they were founded by strong men and upon strong men. But this one thing, the historic Christian Church, was founded on a weak man, and for that reason it is indestructible. For no chain is stronger than its weakest link." (Heretics, 1905).

Without doubt the very commonness of the First Twelve - men handpicked by Christ Himself - throws into even sharper relief the stupendous achievement of their apostolic efforts. It makes all the more vivid and indisputable the work of the Holy Spirit in fortifying their wills and directing their activities.

At the same time, it serves also as an enduring sign of the tolerance of Christ - and of the abiding hospitality and catholicity of His Church. How unlikely it is - the question, perhaps, will prod occasionally at our minds - that any of us would have picked similar men! Would we not have been tempted to seek out the naturally strong and impressive, the socially renowned, the intellectually brilliant, the impeccably devout? Would we not have been particularly prone, in an age of specialists, to look for 'the expert'?

For our 'fishers of men', would we have pinned, our faith to the twelve whom Christ selected? In our winning of converts, would we have expected to hear an echo of Ronald Knox's admission when he became a Catholic: "Now I have joined the Church of Judas Iscariot."?

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The historical singularity of the Catholic Church has been to combine a deep attachment to goodness with a firm awareness of evil; a vision of moral heroism with a benign acceptance of human frailty. It has always allowed for the "simply practising" and not made them feel unwelcome or hypocritical in the Church because they fall far short of the standard of the saints - or even of the personally committed and fervently minded. The Church has always been prepared to accommodate the sinner - in imitation of Christ himself, who ministered so much to sinners that he suffered rebuke for it. When the Pharisees criticized Christ for eating with tax collectors and sinners, he

replied that "it is not the healthy who need the doctor, but the sick... And indeed I did not come to call the virtuous but sinners." (Matthew, 9: 11). The reproach which Christ suffered is, and must be, the reproach borne by the Church he founded; namely, that it too harbours sinners within its fold. The Church must be for all men. In the words of Sir Arnold Lunn, it "is not only the nursery of saints, but a hospital for sinners." The key factor is faith: "as long as a man continues to believe," maintains Lunn, "there is some chance that he may return to the practice of his religion and to the obligations which that religion involves." (Come What May, 1940).

The Church for the Sinner

It is part of the consequences of this attitude that the demands made upon the Catholic people, and the expectations of their achieving perfection, be not excessive. No one can live constantly on the stretch - and Catholicism is a religion which accepts the inevitability of repeated failures. Indeed, on Christ's own testimony, it is a religion for the failed, and the Catholic scheme of spiritual support, centring upon the Mass and the Sacraments, is designed for the sinner, offering to him throughout his life, and particularly at its critical points - his birth, maturity, marriage and death - the sustenance of God's grace.

"The main task of the Catholic Church," contended Sir Arnold Lunn on another occasion, "is to get as many souls as possible into Purgatory." (Enigma, 1957). Such a task is both delicate and demanding: it involves steering a middle course, avoiding the rocks of condemnation, on the one hand, and the whirlpools of permissiveness, on the other. There exist the two extremes of intensifying the standard of Church discipline and of adjusting it to the weakness of human nature.

As St. Francis de Sales remarked to Mother Angelique and her nuns at Port Royal in 17th century France, there will always be those who want to draw the meshes tight, so as to bring the little fishes in too, and those who want to leave the meshes wide, so that every catch shall be really worth catching. Would it not be better, asked St. Francis de Sales, not to catch such big fish - but to catch more of them?

A Question of Souls

The practical benefits of this outlook are revealed by the continued membership in the Church of all those whose behaviour seems so often in contradiction of its ideals. The question is not one of numbers, of mere statistics, but of human souls. Many Catholics would feel a sense of instant affinity with the attitude of Evelyn Waugh, who often remarked that he saw no contradiction between his commonly outrageous behaviour and his state as a practising Catholic. "You have no idea," he said to a friend on one occasion, "how much nastier I would be if I was not a Catholic. Without supernatural aid I would hardly be a human being." (Quoted in Christopher Sykes, Evelyn Waugh: a biography, 1975).

Total Commitment?

In the past decade, there has emerged within the Church a powerful tendency to shape the presentation of the Catholic faith in terms other than the needs of sinners. In particular has enormous stress been laid upon the necessity for a total Christian commitment, in action as well as in faith, which far exceeds the simple profession of Christian belief and the basic obligations of the Christian life. Fr. Denis O'Brien, Catholic Chaplain at Melbourne University, has acutely noted that this new emphasis in catechetical instruction can produce disturbing pastoral effects, causing many of the Catholic people to experience undue anxiety at their unworthiness. It is now not uncommon

for young Catholics to admit that they feel hypocritical when they go to Mass - or even too guilty to go to Confession. The temptation to expect or demand too much is a constant one for those who have to carry the heavy onus of teaching the Faith. As Michael Novak has stated most incisively: "Hoping too much of men in the abstract, they heap too much guilt on men in the concrete." (All the Catholic People, 1971).

Nothing will complete the de-Christianization of Western culture more rapidly than the attempt to limit the Church to those who are conspicuously engaged in its mission and actively responsive to its demands. A true pastoral concern will be founded on a living awareness of the Catholic people, and on a sympathetic appreciation of the conditions which make such a people possible - the social and institutional milieu within which religious belief is made credible and the religious life practicable.

Popular Catholicism

There is, perhaps, no deeper need within the Church at present than for a renewed sense of popular Catholicism; a more heartfelt affinity with the hungers, joys, tediums, trials and even torments of the ordinary Catholic life. The task before us is to strengthen the awareness of belonging among the Catholic people; to deepen the sense of peoplehood, and not merely the experience of community, within the Church.

The need is imperative for a revived sense of incarnate Catholicism - of the Faith as atmosphere, as ethos, as social environment, as sacramental reality. Everything possible should now be done to rekindle the Catholic capacity for conceiving life in sacramental terms, for seeing the visible as a manifestation and reminder of the spiritual. "I would advance it to be true," wrote Hilaire Belloc, "that the soul is supported by all sacramental things; that is, by all unison of the mind and the body upon a proper object; and that when great architecture and glorious colour and solemn music, and the profound rhythms of the Latin tongue, and the ritual of many centuries, and the uncommunicable atmosphere of age, all combine to exalt a man in his worship, he is made greater and not less. He is supported. He is fed. (Many Cities, 1928).

Catholicism has always been a richly incarnational religion: it has expressed itself, not merely in word, but in symbol - in gesture, in art and in ritual. The Word was made Flesh, and the Church, as the extension of the Incarnation in time, has always tended to embody itself in cultural forms - architecture, art, literature, music, drama, social customs and institutions - which serve as the outward expression of its spirit and the instrument of its mission to the world.

In the pre-literate past, the Faith was largely transmitted by such cultural and non-verbal means. The trappings of culture served to make religious beliefs and values accessible to ordinary people, and ensured that they were not merely a privilege reserved for the small number of spiritually minded who do not need such material stimulation. A multitude of images and symbols, ornaments and edifices, festivals and pilgrimages were developed and enlisted in the service of the Faith, functioning as channels of religious inspiration and instruction, and bringing to people the message of Christ in a concrete form, as something visible and tangible, by which they could seek to sanctify their lives.

A Catholic Culture

It is only through a cultural environment that most people can comprehend spiritual insights and values - and thus have continuing access to the mysteries of religion. A Catholic people requires a

Catholic culture - a social atmosphere which provides the scope and mutual support necessary for a people to order their lives in accordance with the demands of their faith.

As the late Jean Cardinal Danielou has commented:

"Experience shows that it is practically impossible for any but the militant Christian to persevere in a milieu which offers him no support. Think of the many who attend service in their villages but cease to go once they live in a town. Are we then to speak of sociological Christianity and conclude that it is better to be rid of Christians such as these? It would be entirely wrong of us to do so. The Christianity of these Christians can be real, while yet not personal enough to prevail against the current. Such Christians have need of an environment that will help them. There can be no mass Christianity outside Christendom." (Prayer as a Political Problem, 1967).

Faith - a Public Reality

For ordinary Catholics, the existence of a culture makes the Faith a public and not merely a personal reality; a social witness and not just an individual experience. The local parish church which has long been frequented is the architectural embodiment of a people at prayer. As Ronald Knox has written:

"It sums up our history for us; we can look round us, and think of all the souls which have been nourished, generation after generation, at the same communion rails, all the stories of guilt which have been whispered and have died away at the same confessionals, all the new recruits in Christ's army who have been regenerated at the same font. We can remember, in Christ, our fellow worshippers who knelt here at our side, and are now separated from us in body, though still united to us with the same links of prayer. It is a kind of sacrament of the parish life; its fabric, so closely knitted together, reminds us of the unity which ought to exist among the Christian family. Are you one of the gossipers? Are you one of the quarrellers? Are you one of the mischief-makers? Then the very stones of this edifice cry out against you, and reproach you with their silent endurance. It is a second home, in which we meet as children of the same Father round a common table. All that the parish church is; and we, so wedded by nature to the things of sense, find comfort in its abiding witness to the life of the spirit." (Occasional Sermons, 1960).

The Local Church

The local church itself abounds in innumerable symbols and memories suggestive of God's presence and providence. The darkened sanctuary before the beginning of Mass or at Saturday afternoon confession; the quivering lamp near the tabernacle - a perpetual sign that God is at home; the yellow flicker of altar candles; the haze and aroma of incense and the rhythm of the thurible; the triumphant red of Pentecost and the radiant white of Easter; the special crib at Christmas; the marked forehead on Ash Wednesday and the sombre ceremonies of Holy Thursday and Good Friday - all of these features and customs crowd the memory: they are full of the nuances of darkness and light, of birth and of death, which symbolize the spiritual condition and destiny of a people.

(5)

To be a Catholic is to belong to a people. It is to be born into a web of inherited experiences and historic symbols, which shape one's life in all sorts of conscious and unconscious ways. It is to be in touch with deep and ancient roots, and to know intuitively that they are the source and staple of one's existence. It is to be conscious of a pull on the appetites and a limit on ambition; of a spiritual affinity with all periods and all peoples - and yet, at the same time, a lingering sense of

estrangement as well, in the knowledge that this earth offers no lasting city. It is to feel the reality of evil and of spiritual struggle, and to have an ingrained distrust of earthly perfectibility. It is to be profoundly cynical of the uses to which human power is put, and yet to proclaim a delight in creation and its natural fruits - children, beer, horses, holidays, festivals. To be a Catholic is to affirm that life has a meaning - but that it is also a mystery.

"Every day people 'leave the Church,' [remarks Michael Novak] and every day the inner erosion of that imagination and instinct which constitute belonging to a people proceeds a little further in innumerable other modern persons. Still, those in whom a Catholic imagination and instinct are strong cannot escape by leaving the institution or by trying to make themselves modern." (All the Catholic People, 1971).

One's roots are not so easily torn up; one's rebellions are not necessarily so conclusive and fatal. There is at the heart of the Catholic experience an irresistible tug - a force of adhesion, of attachment, of entanglement even. As Francois Mauriac has testified:

"I belong to that race of people who, born in Catholicism, realize in earliest manhood that they will never be able to escape from it, will never be able to leave it or re-enter it. They were within it, they are within it, and they will be within it for ever and ever. They are inundated with light; they know that it is true." (God & Mammon, 1936).

The Catholic Atmosphere

The Catholic atmosphere is a powerful thing: it is the product of long and intimate familiarity with the supernatural, and it fashions a certain spirit and style, leaves a distinctive stamp, an indelible mark. It produces, indeed, a different kind of human being. In the words of Michael Novak:

"Catholics do tend to differ in their sense of ultimate reality, in their version of realism, in their particular passion for justice, in their sense of the meaning of family and children, in facing death, in their approach to education, to suffering, and to personal relations." (Commonweal, 17 January 1975).

Francois Mauriac has not been alone in asserting the inescapability of the Church: he acknowledges that there is "no hope of escaping from the Christian grip; no possibility of abandoning the Christian scheme of things." A convinced Catholic, continues the French author,

"is incapable of making a gesture to set himself free because any gesture will assume some significance in the religious scheme. Of course he may escape from grace - but falling into sin is not escaping from Christianity; on the contrary, it may even be an inexorable bond to Christianity.... Neither doubt nor negation nor even renunciation can tear off this garment which is glued to his skin."

Lapsed Catholics

The deep and indelible marks of the Catholic attachment are in some ways more manifest in the case of those who have lapsed from the Faith than with those who are still practising; for the lapsed Catholic tends to bear out Georges Bernanos's dictum that faith is not a thing which a person loses -- he merely ceases to shape his life by it. The yearning for salvation remains, even if it has grown weak; the shame for sin might have become obscure, but it cannot be rooted out; the expectation of evil survives, as well as a tolerant understanding of failure.

The English novelist, Anthony Burgess, author of *A Clockwork Orange* (1962), has confessed his continuing ambivalence about the Church, even though he no longer believes in it:

"I find that I have no quarrel with any aspect of the whole corpus of Catholic doctrine: granted the ignition spark of faith, all the tenets of the Church would hold for me. Indeed, I tend to be puristic about these, even uneasy about what I consider to be dangerous tendencies to slackness, cheapness, ecumenical dilutions. . . I am unhappy about Papal ditherings over clerical celibacy and the use of contraceptives. It is the ancestral voices inside me, prophesying war....

"I avoid envying the believer, but it is with no indifferent eye that I view the flood of worshippers pouring into the Catholic church at the corner of my street. I want to be one of them, but wanting is not enough.... The state of being a lapsed Catholic is so painful that it sometimes seems to generate a positive charge, as though it had in itself a certain religious validity. Perhaps some of the prayers that go for the souls in purgatory might occasionally be used for us. Those souls at least know where they are. We don't. I don't." (*Triumph*, February 1967).

Again, one of the leading socialists in the U.S.A., Michael Harrington, who has recently described himself as "a pious apostate, an atheist shocked by the faithlessness of the believers, a fellow traveller of moderate Catholicism", is nonetheless alive to the real source and nature of religious fidelity.

He has averred that

"the priest, nun, and Pope must, if they remain true to their commitment, insist that there is some supernatural inspiration that brings them to the common struggle with the atheist and the agnostic. Activism can never replace faith even though it can be fecundated by it." (*Fragments of the Century*, 1974).

In human terms, the plight of the lapsed Catholic - or even of the irregular one - can be explained by the fact that Catholicism does not cease to be true simply because its moral demands prove to be too exacting. This distinction is especially critical in the area of religious education, for unless this is firmly and clearly maintained, any programme of catechetics will implicitly identify the Catholic with the saint, or even with the actively devout - with the result that sin will come to be equated with apostasy, and there will be a false tendency to regard as 'no longer Catholic' those who may objectively be in a state of sin, but yet have not repudiated their faith.

Such an approach would be fatal to the existence of a Catholic people, for it would make the standard of morality the criterion of admission and of continued membership - a standard which great numbers of people do not fulfil, at least on an uninterrupted basis.

A scene from Graham Greene's novel, *Brighton Rock* (1938), affords a valuable insight into what lies at the heart of the ordinary Catholic's experience - a spiritual struggle, which, though it might be perceived dimly and waged intermittently, is nonetheless central to a Catholic's understanding of the meaning and purpose of human life. In this scene, Pinkie, "the Boy," a young gangster, is talking with his companion, Rose:

" 'What's that?' the Boy said when something clinked in her bag; she showed him the end of a string of beads. 'You a Roman?' the Boy asked. 'Yes,' Rose said. 'I'm one too,' the Boy said. He gripped her arm and pushed her out into the dark dripping street. He turned up the collar of his jacket and ran as the lightning flapped and the thunder filled the air. They ran from doorway to doorway until they were back on the parade in one of the empty glass shelters. They had it to themselves in the noisy

stifling night. 'Why I was in a choir once,' the Boy confided and suddenly he began to sing softly in his spoilt boy's voice: 'Agnus Dei qui tollis peccata mundi, dona nobis pacem.' In his voice a whole lost world. moved - the lighted corner below the organ, the smell of incense and laundered surplises, and the music. Music - it didn't matter what music - 'Agnus dei,' 'lovely to look at, beautiful to hold,' 'the starling on our walks,' 'credo in unum Dominum' - any music moved him, speaking of things he didn't understand. 'Do you go to Mass?' he asked. 'Sometimes,' Rose said. 'It depends on work. Most weeks I wouldn't get much sleep if I went to Mass.' 'I don't care what you do,' the Boy said sharply, 'I don't go to Mass.' 'But you believe, don't you,' Rose implored him, 'you think it's true?' 'Of course it's true,' the Boy said. 'What else could there be?' he went scornfully on. 'Why,' he said, 'it's the only thing that fits. These atheists, they don't know nothing. Of course there's Hell. Flames and damnation,' he said with his eyes on the dark shifting water and the lightning and the lamps going out above the black struts of the Palace Pier, 'torments.' 'And Heaven, too,' Rose said with anxiety, while the rain fell interminably on. 'Oh, maybe,' the Boy said, 'maybe.' "

(6)

In the mental climate of our times, it is readily assumed that the religious process involves man's search for God. The spectacle of modern man, agonizing over his condition and interminably restless in his own preoccupations, promotes the impression that the initiative is not God's but man's; that the religious quest is governed by a human impulse rather than a divine will. Yet many witnesses of the spiritual life have testified that the reverse is true - God pursues man and refuses to abandon him.

For the ordinary practising Catholic, and even for the one who has ceased to practise, the theme of a divine pursuit - of a God who will not be ignored and cannot finally be brushed aside - is perhaps closer to the reality of the spiritual struggle. Malcolm Muggeridge has described this circumstance in his reflections on "Is There a God?":

"Temperamentally, it would suit me well enough to settle for what this world offers, and to write off as wishful thinking, or just the self-importance of the human species, any notion of a divine purpose and a divinity to entertain and execute it. The earth's sounds and smells and colours are very sweet; human love brings golden hours; the mind at work earns delight. I have never wanted a God, or feared a God, or felt under any necessity to invent one. Unfortunately, I am driven to the conclusion that God wants me." (Jesus Rediscovered, 1969).

For the Catholic people, God will often appear as, in the words of Francis Thompson's poem, the Hound of Heaven; He hounds His people with His love; He pursues them, for they have gone astray; He offers refuge to them, for they are lost and homeless. Despite their impiety, they remain His people: for each of them He did not disdain to die.

Importance of Habit

The emphasis on a spiritual struggle - a struggle not only against positive evil but against indifference and laziness - imparts a new importance to the role of habit in religious practice. There now exists a widespread opinion that a life marked by habitual acts is more likely the sign of a stagnant spirit than a secure faith; and that spontaneous thoughts and actions are intrinsically more valuable than those dictated by habit.

In the Australian context, the effort to generate spontaneous acts and emotions often proves frustrating and futile - for such tendencies do not spring naturally from the Australian milieu and they sit uneasily with the Australian temperament.

Sunday Mass?

The practical wisdom of the Church in insisting upon habitual observances like Sunday Mass lies precisely in their serving as a regular and imperative occasion for spiritual renewal, an opportunity (which, without the effect of habit, many people might easily miss) to seek communion with God.

There is no doubt that Catholics will often attend Sunday Mass without notable enthusiasm. Yet the influence of habit can be decisive in bringing them to church at all - and thus within the special orbit of God at least once a week, there to be exposed in a dramatic and unique way to the loving presence of their Saviour, which the anxieties and distractions of the week may have helped to overshadow. The primacy which now tends to be accorded spontaneity in prayer and worship can easily prove counter-productive in the popular sphere. It can obscure the importance of divine adoration as a duty, which all owe to God regardless of the personal feelings that might prevail at any particular time. As James Hitchcock has attested:

"Prayer never seems more meaningless than when I have neglected it for a while, or more nourishing than when I have forced myself to practise it for a few days."

Religious Enthusiasm?

Many people will be troubled when they experience no spontaneous upsurge of religious enthusiasm. They may begin to doubt whether the effort of religious practice is really worth while, since the result is so frequently - and so dishearteningly - imperfect, and their efforts in any case seem to be implicitly denigrated because they are the product, of external habit instead of inner illumination. In any attempt to revitalize faith, the style and tempo of popular religious practice are of overwhelming importance. Such realities have not always been adequately understood or allowed for in the recent past.

At this moment, in some obscure church, a mother clasps her hands in anguish and pours out her heart to God for the welfare of her teenage children. Some distance away, an old man kneels before a tired and patient priest and recounts the history of a wretched life; outside the confessional, a young boy waits nervously to admit his guilt and to be cleansed by Christ.

Such scenes of a people at prayer have been silently, and countless, repeated throughout the history of the Church - and they will not be absent in the future. They testify to the great paradox of Catholicism, that between the individual and the Church there is an organic solidarity of the most intimate kind. The Catholic Church, as Christopher Dawson has pointed out,

"in spite of its elaborate hierarchical organization, its world-wide extension and its authoritarian claims, has never lost contact with its individual members. The men of power and the men of learning have quarrelled with the Church, but the little men and women of all ages have made it their home. For the relationship of the individual Christian to the Church is never external or legalistic: every Christian has a direct access to the heart of the mystery, and his importance does not depend on his social or ecclesiastical position but on his personal participation in the life of the spirit by which the Church is animated.... In this way Catholicism depends, and has always depended, on the spiritual contributions of its individual members." (The Formation of Christendom, 1967)

All God's People

Such contributions are not only those of its outstanding members - the saints - but those of all the People of God. The broad impact of the saints in Christian history has been due in significant measure to the reserves of faith and spiritual will that have been accumulated by the anonymous activity of ordinary imperfect men and women. It has been due to the energy and co-operation of the Catholic people, each of whom has made an individual contribution, however minute it might have seemed, to a new order of Christian life.

For more than a decade the Catholic Church has been in the throes of a vast upheaval, and the religious senses of many Catholics have been undoubtedly heightened as a result of the Vatican Council's call for Christian renewal. Such circumstances give rise to an atmosphere and outlook in which the unity and universality of the Church need to be strongly reaffirmed, for they can be easily and tragically imperilled by the triumph of a phenomenon that has recurred through out the history of Christianity - a movement of religious fervour and elitism, which emphasizes the sanctity and apostolic dedication of the Church at the expense of its catholicity.

A renewed perspective is required, which will assert once again the intensely popular nature of Catholicism - and the historic attachment of the Church to the value of a Catholic people.

As Michael Novak has stated:

"Catholics are the people of concrete detail, the people not so much of saints or even flamboyant sinners but of ordinary sinners, the people of ordinary parents in ordinary places, as they are the people, in Lincoln's words, God made so many of. Those who have vocations of leadership do well to trust that people, to ask more of them than has been asked, to organize them, and to get them moving again. They are a pilgrim people." (All the Catholic People, 1971).

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