

AQUINAS LECTURE: ACU, BRISBANE, NOVEMBER 23, 2009
CATHOLIC IDENTITY: LOST, AND FOUND

When asked for a title for our talk this evening, I discussed with the Fr Dave Pascoe various possibilities. In the present global context, it could have been called “Catholic Identity [CI]: Exploding or Expanding”, or, perhaps a little closer to the bone, “Catholic Identity—living off it, or, for it”? Then, pointing more to the solution in the long run, “How to put the “-holic” back into the “Cat-holic”? Well, we opted for the general title, leaving it open to you to entitle what follows as you see fit!

True, “Catholic Identity: Lost and Found” is hardly a catchy title. But a loss of identity is an unsettling experience being felt the world over. We have seen whole empires, the British and the Soviet, wane and retire from the scene. Our own country is renegotiating its identity in the world of Asia. The Catholic Church, the oldest institution in Western history, had to find itself when confronted by the awesome might of the Roman Empire, only to see that empire collapse and wither away, just as the kingdoms and empires centuries later came to an end. We think we have identity problems today, but history would suggest that an “identity crisis” is something like a permanent state. Post-Christendom Europe itself is struggling to find a united and inclusive identity over these decades past. And of course those “masters of the universe” whom the world most trusted to preside over the global financial system have left us all aghast at the silliness and shameful short-term greed behind it all. In the great wash of our time, cultures, political parties, whole nations and peoples are being tossed about. The pain has been particular great with indigenous peoples. Yet, in some ways, the patience, courage and hope evident in our own indigenous Australians may well become an example for all peoples and cultures as we move into the future.

When we address the question of Catholic identity, we are involved in something more challenging than recovering a furtive sock in laundry dryer. There is level of deep sadness with loss or disaffection of so many who once walked with us on the way of Catholic faith. If Catholic identity is to be affirmed and invigorated, imaginative spiritual, pastoral and theological responses will be necessary—in regard to the disaffected, the laicized, the divorced, and the forgotten generally. Grief must be suffered with patience and hope, but the prospect of an increasing Eucharistic starvation throughout the Church resulting from the diminishing number of priests strikes at the heart. If the Eucharist is focal sacrament of Catholic identity, we must pray for something to happen here, be it through a flowering of vocations as we know them, the discovery of new vocations and new kinds of ordination—or whatever else—that the Eucharistic identity of the Catholic people will not suffer any terminal loss.

There are the negatives and the positives. We may recall, for instance, the WYD of last year, when, from different perspectives either as participants or somewhat detached observers, we contemplated that remarkable event. But, more generally, as our eminent respondents will make clear, discussion of CI is cropping up everywhere—not only in those huge, enterprising sectors of Catholic Education, Health Care, Social Work, and so forth, but also even in our Catholic University itself! Clearly, it is a time of regrouping if we are to be what we claim to be. To consider who we are and what we are called to be is, admittedly, to experience enormous pressures. I recall reading of a strange experiment performed by the US General Electric Company in 1960. The scientists subjected a couple of ounces of peanut butter to enormous pressure under extreme heat—a million pounds per square inch. The result? No, not just a

squashed lump of peanut butter, for it was now so carbonized that it had become tiny diamonds. In the pressure of our times, our deepest Catholic identity can feel like squashed peanut butter. My hope is that we are becoming diamonds in our way, tough in the ability to resist what might erode who we are, yet sparkling with the light.

Given the extent of current discussion and the immensity of the topic, it would be pretentious on my part to aim for anything other than contributing some small ingredient to the mix. Accordingly, I offer to your consideration just four remarks as background for all the discussion that must go on:

1. Watching our words;
2. Dimension of Catholic Identity;
3. Identity or Vocation?
4. Basic Theological Factors

1. WATCHING OUR WORDS

Any talk of Catholic identity is, first of all, part of a much larger conversation; indeed, it contributes to the long conversation that the Church embodies, as it testifies to God's own Word becoming flesh in order to enter into the unending conversation we call "human history". In that world of communication, Catholic faith today thinks of itself in more conversational and dialogical terms compared to more defensive times of persecution and conflict. It reaches out to Christian peoples everywhere; and, indeed, to all good people in all the varieties of their religious searching and finding.

In our present exploration, I would like to include from the beginning all other churches and communities and religious traditions which might happily associate themselves with our examination of authentic Catholic identity, even if there are limits beyond which they cannot go. Still, something wonderful has happened in the Catholic Church when it recognized that its identity is far more porous and alive than solid granite; and that the ecology of its life included, in ways that are still struggling for expression, the presence of what Catholics regard as authentic elements of the Church in other Christian communities. And, of course, we recognize the transforming presence of Christ's paschal mystery and the workings of the Spirit in all lives. Theologians continue to discuss those words of the Council on how the fullness of Church "subsists" in the sacramentally and institutionally structured communion of the Catholic Church in communion with the Bishop of Rome—a seemingly technical point on the use of a rare word instead of the straight out "is".

But it provokes us to reflect on how Vatican II felt impelled to acknowledge more clearly the larger communion of grace in which the Lord of the Church is acting. It is as though the dynamism of Catholic faith must admit a two-way traffic: it is centripetal in that it is ever coming back to an enduring scriptural, sacramental, doctrinal and institutional centre. It is centrifugal, as it moves out, on the path of friendships, reconciliation, dialogical events and

collaborative enterprises that turn us outward to the limitless domain of the Spirit; and invite us upward into the Father's house of many rooms.

I have to admit that I am inclined to avoid the word, "Catholicism". It is not, first of all, a Catholic word, and, as far as I know, never appears in any official Church documents. It was a word employed in French Ultramontane contexts in the first half of the 19th century, though it had some currency in English from the 17th century. It gives the impression, like all "isms", of an ideology, of a closed system of principles and positions. It represents an attempt to reduce the personal *fides catholica* ("the Catholic faith"), or the communal *ecclesia catholica* ("the Catholic Church") to a system of ideas—one more 'ism' in a world of then burgeoning 'isms'—that is far too rigid in the dialogical context of the Church today. We are not "catholicists", proponents of a particular ideological system, but Catholics, committed to follow Christ in confessing "the catholic faith", as the Catholic people who make up the 1.3 billion members of the Catholic Church. In other words, "Catholicism" does not suggest change, development, outreach, let alone evoke the full dimension of the Catholic faith with an engagement of mind, heart, imagination and moral responsibility.

While we're at it, I am also averse to using the term "Roman Catholic"—except to designate the Catholic people of Rome, who, incidentally, seem to hear of Vatican pronouncements rather later than we do here in Australia. I know the term, "Roman Catholic" was imposed by the British government in the context of Catholic emancipation in England, but, though often used in the US, it was never part of the European, Irish and Australian usage. I would prefer to say that I, for instance, am an Australian Catholic of the Latin rite, in communion with the Bishop of Rome, and a member of an international religious community. Admittedly, ecumenical etiquette may recommend against any rigidity on this point, since other Christian communities may wish to use the word "catholic" of themselves. Fair enough; but, as I say, I fail to see why we Catholics are the only ones who must have an identity crisis!

Interestingly, despite the frequent tendency to translate the word, 'catholic', as simply as 'universal', the early Church chose to use, not the Latin word, *universalis*, but a Latinised Greek word, *catholicus*: *Credo in unam, sanctam, catholicam et apostolicam ecclesiam*. *Universalis* would have connoted something immense, but still homogenous and uniform throughout. *Catholica* implies something different, a living, communing, expanding reality, with the whole in each part, and each part functioning within the living whole, in a communicating plurality of ecclesial expressions. The many rites – 19 by one count– Latin, Ukrainian, Chaldean, Maronite, and so forth, are an often unnoticed witness to a unity in diversity, just as these promise a possible way of conceiving of church unity in future. Something like this is implied in Benedict XVI's recent Apostolic Constitution, *Anglicanorum Coetibus* (Nov 2009) which allows for corporate reception of Anglican communities into the Catholic Church, though keeping much of their traditions through the setting up of "ordinariates" within the present Church structure.

Vatican II imagined catholicity in a particularly dynamic and diversified manner. The dynamism consists in it being a "gift of the Lord whereby the Catholic Church tends efficaciously and constantly to recapitulate the whole of humanity with all its riches, under Christ the head, and in the unity of the Spirit" (LG 13). A kind of ecological diversity is suggested when it states, "In virtue of this catholicity each individual parts brings its particular gifts to the other parts and to the whole Church, so that the whole and the individual parts are enriched by the mutual sharing of gifts and the striving of all for the fullness of unity..." (*Lumen Gentium*, #13). The

council was careful to present the Church as a diversified unity of the local with the universal. The pope, as Bishop of Rome, was understood to preside over the whole assembly of charity so as to protect legitimate differences and to prevent them from becoming divisive (LG #13)—a rather large job description. The cooperation of the local churches, under their respective bishops, was viewed as ‘particularly splendid evidence of the undivided Church’ (LG, #23). Similarly, the Church’s missionary activity must respect the requirements of genuine catholicity. The Church proclaims the Gospel because it is impelled by ‘the innermost requirements of her own catholicity’ (*Ad Gentes*, #1), to ‘perfect its own catholic unity by expanding it’ (AG, #6). In so doing, the Catholic vocation is to heal, ennoble and to perfect all the authentic values present in the traditions and cultures of various peoples (AG, #9, 22).¹¹

On this point of Catholicity I have two further remarks. The first one deals the need to understand Catholic faith as a movement within history. There is no point in speaking about the Catholic Church, let alone Catholic identity, if we have no sense of the history of Catholic identity over the last two millennia, and the long line of apostles, evangelists, saints, doctors, pastors, martyrs, missionaries and mystics, visionaries, reformers and religious founders who populate that great communion reaching beyond time, and into which each of us, and every generation, is being gathered. To have such a sense of corporate communion extending in and beyond time is difficult in the modern amnesiac context, when history is general, and our Catholic history in particular, are notably lacking in educational curricula, even in Catholic schools and universities.¹ A state of amnesia is not notably creative, and it is ill-advised to press someone suffering a memory-loss to be more precise about their identity! Without its sense of history, Catholic identity becomes at best a flimsy tissue of opinions and convictions.

Secondly, there is the matter of catholicity as universality. Here, Catholic identity is not realized by modeling itself on the world-wide web, or on systems of global communication (and surveillance) more generally; nor on global governance of the UN kind, let alone on that kind of lamentable globalization that tends to standardize consumerist aspirations of everyone on the planet. Macdonalds does it better, and Coca Cola was there first. Mere planetary universality in aspiration or effect is not what the Catholic identity is about. Of course, Catholic identity has a large global reach, but the horizon of its universality accords with the intentionality of faith, hope and love. If God so loves the world, how can anyone be left out of the concerns of the Church? If God wishes all to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth, this implies an ecclesial communication designed to represent and make available to all, in word, deed and sacrament, the saving mystery of God’s will. If all things are made in Christ and for him, and if in him all things hold together (cf. Col 1:15-18), there is a wholeness, a ‘catholicity’ that is not the homogenization of a system or a universal product or design, but that of the personal love of Christ for each and everyone. We cannot corner the market in regard to limitless gifts of God, nor administer the infinite treasure of Christ. In the universe of grace, we are all sinners; and, as called out of ourselves to be something infinitely more, it is only by reason of a gift coming from beyond anything we are or can do in ourselves.

2. DIMENSIONS OF CATHOLIC IDENTITY

Within the focal identity of the Church in Christ, there is a kind of composite: there is Peter the Rock; and Jesus saying “you are Peter and on this rock I will build my church” (Mt 16:18). But there is the presence of Mary in the Church is a vital part of Catholic identity, and a source of lively ecumenical dialogue. For example, there is the Anglican-Catholic statement a couple of

years back, *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ* (2004);² and then a US document produced in the dialogue between Catholics and Evangelicals this year, *Do Whatever he tells you: the Blessed Virgin Mary in Christian Faith and Life*. But there is Mary, too, as Jesus address his Mother from the cross, ‘Woman, here is your son’, and speaks to the beloved disciple, representing the whole Church, “Here is your mother” (Jn 19:26-27). It seems to me that Catholic identity today is calling for the blending of the organizational Petrine rock-like structure of the Church with the Marian maternal nurturing aspects of *sancta mater ecclesia*. Mary embodies the identity of the Church, and shapes its vocation, with her words, “Do whatever he tells you” (Jn 2:5). You could, of course, add the Pauline dimension, the summons to continual conversion and outreach embodied in the great Apostle. Then, there is the Johannine depth of communion—in the words of Jesus’ prayer, “that they may be one, just as we are one” (Jn 17:22). For us Catholics, at least of an older generation, the challenge is to so understand our Catholic identity more as a hologram in which each of these dimensions interweave. Without wishing to underplay the Petrine dimension, nor intending any disrespect to St Peter, a distortion enters into Catholic identity if we reduce its whole living communal reality to the Petrine element alone.

For some, the Catholic problem appears more like an environmental threat, as though our identity is like that of a polar bear on a shrinking island of ice. It may be of little consolation if the animal knew that some of its kind survives quite well at *Sea World* down there on the Coast. There has indeed been a change in the Catholic environment. In the course of this past century, a huge demographic shift in the composition of the Catholic Church has occurred. At the beginning of the 20th century, 70% of Catholics were in Europe and North America. At its end, that percentage is found in the Southern regions of the world, namely in Africa, South America, Asia, Oceania... The recent Synod of Africa brings this home to us. This is to say that most Catholics today belong to the younger, poorer, non-white (or racially mixed), politically unstable, and culturally religious parts of the planet, in contrast to the rich, secular, economically dominant, aging and secularised populations of North Atlantic countries. Of course, Australia is somehow in the middle of all this—not quite one or the other. But go to any of the bigger city parishes on Sunday and you will know what I mean. Our familiar Irish-Catholic world has so clearly changed.

On the other hand, the loss may be more particular and irritating, not so much a loss of identity, but a loss of particularly elusive something that needs to be there. Yes, it is a bit like that odd sock in the dryer. We certainly have one sock; and in terms of resources and organization and professional expertise, it is a splendid sock. However, the other sock was somehow lost in the wash...the sock of vision, or faith, confidence, creativity and sense of purpose, it may be—the Catholicity from within, of faith, hope and love. As we backtrack through the washing and drying cycle of this past fifty years, how is it to be retrieved?

We all know that there are seasons for the freeze and the thaw that the polar bear can’t do much about. We all know that losing the occasional sock is basic to the human condition of modern life. An identity loss, however, is rather more threatening than environmental or laundry problems. Questions nibble at the edges, and even start biting into the centre, of what was easily and assertively assumed in ages past to constitute ‘catholic identity’.

3. IDENTITY or VOCATION?

Now, it might be that we are asking the wrong question. As we would readily recognize, when life is fired at us point blank in this time, and in this place, in the company of these people, it is not most healthily and creatively lived if we are always looking over our shoulders and asking who or what we are. True, Socrates held that “the unexamined life is not worth living”. On the other hand, the over-examined identity makes the mind fixated and anxious—especially when in the pluralistic jumble of today it is inevitable that we find people on the outside of our community looking in, either with religious interest, scholarly curiosity, antagonism or pity.

I find myself wondering whether what is most needed is not to focus first of all on our own identity, but on how we identify the Other: “Who do you say I am? (Mk 8:27). A self-conscious identity is fragile, and tends to conform us to what we imagine are the expectations of others. At the other extreme, when we centre our identity on that “Someone other”, the issue is *vocation*, and what are we being called to. The self-referential anxiety about Catholic identity then loses itself in the call to witness to the infinities of God’s saving love for ourselves and the whole world. To begin there, is to find a burden lifted, even though the demands of that vocation expand to the dimensions of the limitless mystery of love, mercy and life at the heart of who we are: “Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed we shall be like him, for we will see him as he is” (1 Jn 3:2-3). Through the word of the Gospel, Christ asks us, not, ‘Who do you say *you* are?’, but, ‘Who do you say *I* am?’ It is a melancholy possibility that we have been missing the point. The more we realize what that point might be, the more we take will take seriously the role of being the Church as the Body of Christ in the world. If that is the case, the invocation of the Holy Spirit will be not just a perfunctory formula at the beginning of our endless meetings, but the deep mood in which we meet, plan, and act with Spirit-given resources: “To each is a given a manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” (1 Cor 12:8). The old style clericalism of blaming the Vatican or the bishops for acting/ not-acting has to move into a more mature responsibility shared by the whole People of God. That might make no big noise, but it will mean risking to live from the leading edge of what God is calling us to be. As the Chinese proverb has it, “When a tree falls to the ground it makes a big noise. When the whole forest grows, no one notices”. Against the static background noise of the mass media sensationalism and the voyeurism fascinated by trees crashing to the ground, there is no harm in making our own the vast, ironic silence of the whole forest—or, if you like, that of the low-crawling roots of the humble mustard seed. Still, there are surprises: listed among the ten largest Catholic countries are no longer Poland and Spain, but Nigeria, Uganda and the Republic of the Congo. In regard to the way our times are shaping the responsibilities of the Catholic vocation for the future, I can do no better than to refer you to John Allen’s latest book, *The Future Church: How Ten Trends are Revolutionizing the Catholic Church* (New York: Doubleday, 2009).

Nothing I have said so far on a more inward and intentional Catholicity is meant to suggest turning away from the world in a detached spirituality. ‘Spirituality’ is a good word of undoubtedly Christian origins, originally describing the state of one possessed and transformed by the Holy Spirit. It came to mean the study of Christian experience and styles of prayer, etc. But now it is a word among the best weasel-words of our time: anyone can claim to be

“spiritual” and to possess a “deep spirituality”, especially in contrast to what is disdainfully termed, ‘organised religion’. It would suit the agents of the massive inhumanities of our day if faith had no public, socially organised expression, and if Christian spirituality retired from the contest into some interior domain. If there were no Church to offer both an alternative vision and resistance to what demeans and degrades our humanity, those who serve the familiar idols that shape our world would be unimpeded. They would gladly make room for a Christian spirituality for souls only; they might even see a use for a Church as a kind of spiritual Disneyland of saints, exhibiting the angels and demons of Dan Brown’s literary fantasies. Harmless enough; but the Catholic Church, an identifiable body in history and society, committed to the great human struggle, sometimes succeeding, sometimes failing, always wounded in the process, that is a another thing. And yet this “other thing”, this Church-thing, is just what is essential to Catholic identity. Indeed to be Church is essential to the Catholic vocation—to be called to mediate the mystery of salvation, in word, sacrament, personal witness, to the world of suffering. It is sent as a promise of healing into those dark zones of guilt, despair and absurdity, and to offer the bread of life to the deepest hungers of the heart—even if a vocabulary for our deepest needs and longings now scarcely exists.

The Catholic vocation is to be Church, to be the suffering Body of Christ in the world, an ever-growing dimension of his incarnation. But that is a long, conflicted, and often agonizing, process, as the whole Church participates in the death and resurrection of Christ: there is no replay of highlights once our team has won. No, the Church, and each of us in it, must take part in the cosmic contest that is being played out to the end. At the origins of the Church, the risen Lord appeared in that upper room locked against the forces that had just executed him as a criminal. He came, and said, ‘As Father sent me, so I send you’ (Jn 20:21). It was and is, as we all know, a message of love and the offer of new life to that world beyond. But at no stage—and is this not a consistent refrain in the NT and in the lives of the prophets?—was there ever any assurance that, because Christians went out to the world in the name of God’s saving love, that the world would love them back. If our identity is built on the false expectation that we will be greeted, always and everywhere, with praise, gratitude and celebrity-acclaim, then we are in more trouble than we think. A special gift of the Holy Spirit is fortitude. We Catholics need it, having become so culturally timid and diffident. Have we lost our nerve? We must be prepared for opposition and, often enough, public contempt, though not to the point of losing either a sense of proportion, or our sense of humour.

Perhaps the Church in this country would get more plaudits if modeled itself more precisely on the Salvation Army—or more precisely, on how Australia sees the Salvos, a humane, generous organization looking after those the rest of us don’t care about much. “God bless the Salvos”, indeed; but don’t bother us too much with the ‘god-stuff’. In some ways, it is dreadful task being Church, especially when the culture is going in the opposite direction—but this is the only chance we have, at this critical time in history, to witness to the love that nothing in all creation can overcome.

If we do not lose our nerve, it might be our finest hour, even if there other strange enmities to be faced. Those negotiating a constitution for the new Europe could not bring themselves to make mention of God, or even the formative role of Christianity in the history of Europe. That is a long way from Hilaire Belloc’s resounding declaration generations before, ‘Europe is the

faith; and the faith is Europe". Recently the European Court at Strasbourg ruled that Italian public schools could not display crucifixes. Italy was enraged. A growing nastiness toward the Catholic Church in particular will probably and paradoxically reinvigorate Catholic convictions. As for old Europe, a kind of historical amnesia is one thing, but a deliberate option to suppress the historical and cultural truth of the past is self-harming to an extreme degree. Still, the Church must face cultural and political realities as they are, and wherever possible promote human dignity, human rights, and the way of peace, despite the shaky foundations on which all these rest after the most bloody and violent of centuries. Old Marx made his point in speaking of religion as the "opium of the people". But now in the world's developed countries it becomes remarkably clear that the real narcotic today is that driven consumerism. It is a drug that colonises the cultural imagination, wastes even the environment, and plunders the resources of the planet. In the wake of the "global financial crisis" still with us, many are becoming sadder and wiser, in the realization that the mindless idolization of mammon offers no peace, no unity, nor a decent way of living together on this planet. How is the Church called to respond when what it identifies as the seven deadly sins have become the engines of modern consumerist culture? Reading the signs of the times also means being vigilant when it comes to the tsunami of militant secularism, or the gently lapping tides of indifference, typical, say, of the Australian mood. As we, like the prophet, "gaze into the visions of the night", there will always be, bathing the scene, the gentler moonbeams of any number of higher lunacies. But that is how it is: as GK Chesterton said, when people cease to believe in God, they begin to believe anything.

We are all prone to criticize Church leaders, seemingly without even noticing there is something wrong with the world in which they live. We can luxuriate in scandal, and chuckle at the words, "In the world, it is dog eats dog; in the Church, opposite is the case". Media attention follows those who rock the boat, while those who row it, even as they struggle against the tide, make no news. If rocking the boat is the main preoccupation in our polarised world, the Church is less the "barque of Peter" which we crew, and more a some sort of rocking horse on which we work of our ideological energies.

More to the point, the unthinking, automatic opposition of conservatives and progressives is sounding very old. I know it offers a kind of template for conciliar debates of nearly fifty years ago, as in Ian Linden's informative, but rather non-theological, book, *Global Catholicism: Diversity and Change since Vatican II* (NY: Columbia University Press, 2009). John Allen, the noted US columnist already referred to, points to the presence of a new generation of Catholic leaders who don't buy into the old Left-Right, Black-White, progressive-conservative divisions.³ Their identity is more differentiated and discerning. There is too much at stake to reduce the life of the Church and the integrity of the Catholic vocation to the divisions belonging to another time.

4. BASIC THEOLOGICAL FACTORS:

I have been emphasizing the ecclesial aspect of Catholic vocation. In the ordinary course of things, what is most taken for granted gets overlooked. So, I mention three rather large matters, God, the Incarnation, and our common humanity.

First of all, God. The Church is the People of *God*. We are quite good at stressing the "people" aspect of identity, given all the resources of the human and social sciences at our disposal.

But, “of God”? How can that ever be expressed, or even raised as a question? Perhaps best by saying what God is not, since our faith-language can sound very banal. We often speak of the Holy Spirit as if the “Lord and giver of life” were simply a friendly angel of some kind. It is easy to go along with the flat discourse of those who refer to a “supreme being” or even a “higher power”, as though God were a somewhat bigger being compared to other beings, or a more powerful force than those typical of this world’s power-plays. Still, we can get jolted into a new sense of wonder and immensity. Today we are the privileged inheritors of the marvelous explorations of science into a world in which our little planet Earth circles around a medium-sized star in the Milky Way of perhaps a hundred billion such stars—in the 15 billion year old cosmos of billions of galaxies—which has brought us forth in this instant of time. In contrast to such immensity, people can be put off by what appears to be a little god of churchy language. Of course, we all suffer a splendid defeat when it comes to talking about God; indeed the great theologians like Augustine and Thomas Aquinas say that we know God best when we realize that we don’t know him. St Thomas Aquinas, who gives his name to this annual lecture series, insisted that God was not the biggest “being”, but sheer, limitless *Is-ness*, “Be-ing-ness”, absolutely unlimited pure “To Be”—not a noun, note, but a verb. When our minds are teased by such an acute and reverent sense of God, all our religious words return to us with an astonishing depth of meaning: God, this God, so loved the world...God is present in every moment and in every aspect of existence. Shocking as it sounds, God is “no-thing” in our little world of things. God cannot be fitted into the world, since the world and all that exists, is really “in” God, not as part of God, but as held into existence by the creative hand of limitless love.

Thinking gets us so far; but doing takes us further: “loving the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your mind, with all your soul and with all your strength”. Love and longing translate into particular ecstatic attitudes and actions—as when “it is fitting always and everywhere to give you thanks”. The people of God must live in the world in ecstatic thanksgiving for the wonder of existence, for the universe itself, for the varied wonder of creation as we know it, and in all the depths and dimensions that we can barely guess at: angels and archangels, cherubim and seraphim! You have to ask, given the nameless anxieties of our times, whether our prayerful selves have atrophied in some measure: do we “abound in thanksgiving”, as Paul so often exhorts us? Is the praise of the infinite depths of God’s creative love part of our prayers? Do we adore that abyss of life and love from which everything comes and finds its home? Indeed, to bless oneself and one another “in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”, does not involve a blind faith in a mind-defying puzzle, but rather a consciousness of being already plunged in the undying life of the Trinity—dwelling in that boundless mystery, the origin and end of all things. Our minds are already illumined by the Light, and our hearts already stir with the inexhaustible energies of the Holy Spirit of love.

But if this sense of God as the milieu of our faith and life is absent, Catholic identity is a shell of moralising and ritual; and the Catholic vocation withers in a void. But if we are continually relearning the meaning of the words such as adoration, praise, thanksgiving, then a huge vitality enters into our public discourse and shared identity. The noble words of the Christopher Fry are always worth quoting, especially when faith is under pressure:

Thank God our time is now/ when wrongs come up to face us everywhere,/ never to leave us till we take/ the longest stride of soul man ever took./ Affairs are now soul-size,/ the enterprise/ is exploration into God.

All this is to say that our deepest identity is ecstatic, as prayer and adoration take us out of ourselves into that depth in which “we live and move and have our being” (Ac 17:28). Has our faith, instead of ecstatically unfolding in the wondrous gift of existing in this uncanny universe, become a little musty, churchy, self-enclosed?

The second theme is the Incarnation. The mystery of God, at once so infinitely beyond, and yet so unimaginably intimate to us, has appeared amongst us: The Word was made flesh. In the words of the poet, Paul Celan, “A Rumbling: truth/ itself has appeared/ among humankind/ in the very thick of their/ flurrying metaphors”.⁴ The NT speaks always of the universal significance of Christ—not only as our Saviour, but as the One in whom and for whom all things are made, “and in him all things hold together” (Col 1:18). Because of this vision of all creation deriving from, directed toward, and cohering in Christ, the Catholic sense of reality is marked by the conviction that all things “hold together” in him. It has resulted in what some would call “the analogical imagination”.

In general, this kind of Catholic imagination interprets the world as a field of mutually-illuminating relationships, since everything radiates the one Light of Christ. It is not a matter of fitting Christ into our world, but of seeing our world, in all its structures and dynamics, in Christ. As the incarnate Word, he is God’s affirmation of the value of all creation. As the Crucified One, he reveals how love keeps on being love even when exposed to maximum evil. As the Risen Lord, he is the first fruits, form and the source of a cosmic transformation. As ascended into heaven, he fills every dimension of space and time.

In the fullest light of the incarnation, the Catholic tendency is always toward the complementarities of ‘both-and’ rather than the disjunctions of either-or, in the more classical Protestant mode. In practice, it means that faith in Christ must be open to all truth and all kinds of learning, in an effort to appreciate the transformation of the world that is occurring in Christ. It means being genuinely “Cat-holic”, being open to the whole and each of its parts. God’s creative power in calling the universe into being and sustaining it in existence is not to be played off against the evolutionary dynamics inscribed into life on this planet. The incarnation is the genesis of God amongst us. The Word does not drop down from heaven, but takes flesh within the genetic development of life itself, or as the Advent antiphon has it, *aperiatur terra et germinet salvatorem*, “the earth be opened and let it bud forth the saviour”. Through the incarnation, the all creative mystery working in every aspect of creation, expresses itself, born of a woman, within the struggles and sufferings of that creation. Thereby, creation is lifted into a new level of life.

A mutation has taken place in the incarnation of the Word. Not only is creation conscious of itself in the human mind and heart, but also, when human consciousness shares in the mind and heart of Christ, it is already participating in the life of the Trinity itself, life without end. To such an outlook, faith can well turn to physics and cosmology, to biology, psychology and sociology, and all the rest, to illumine the world of creation, in an expanding horizon of truth and meaning. That is why it strikes one as strange that the eminent Richard Dawkins is so militant in his atheism. Forty years ago the young Dawkins wrote a fine thesis on the pecking behavior of the domestic chick. He has gone on from there to proclaim on the absurdity of the religious behavior of humankind. His approach cannot but strike a Catholic outlook as extremely narrow minded. It is no bad thing for faith to have room in its worldview for the science of evolutionary biology—and any number of other “-ologies” as well—even if people

like Dawkins insist that the universe must be limited to what they know something about. In contrast, there is another view, a limitless horizon centred on the Incarnation. As Vatican II has it,

For God's Word, by whom all things were made, was himself made flesh so that as perfect man he might himself save all human beings and sum up all things in himself. The Lord is the goal of human history, the focal point of the longings of history and civilization, the centre of the human race, the joy of every heart and the answer to all its yearnings (GS #45).

Without an expansive sense of the incarnation, Catholic identity loses its focus, and is all too prone to get lost either in a spiritual stratosphere or a complacent secularism.

Then, there is a third point following from what we just mentioned about the incarnation. Catholic tradition is never waiting on the whole world to become Christian or Catholic or religious before it tries to engage everyone in a common language of concerns. If faith is not yet a shared reality, our humanity is—we are human beings together, on this planet, capable of eye to eye, heart to heart, communication of what most matters. It would be absurd to think that the 15 billion years that have gone into our making, that vast tract of time that has uncannily brought us forth in this instant, that our significance is exhausted in being the creatures of selfishness, violence and consumer frenzy that we so often are. What does our being together in care, respect and compassion require? How are we to understand ourselves as human beings in the politics, the economy and the ecology that shape our lives? To promote this sense of common humanity, and the values and meanings that underpin it, to affirm the dignity of each human person, is quite essential to the Catholic vocation. It reaches repeated expression in Catholic social teaching which seeks to address all people of good will rather than Christian believers alone. True, disillusionment with the evil, the savagery and stupidity that we human beings are capable of, often makes talk of our “common humanity” or “natural law” seem quite naïve. But even here, the Catholic vocation is not to lose hope for our humanity even at its worst: for God himself has plunged himself into the depths of evil through the crucifixion of Jesus, and the Father's love for this humanity has kept on being love, in the resurrection of the Crucified.

For Catholic faith, all that is best about us will not forever be at the mercy of what is worst. From this point of view, the Catholic vocation and identity is never to lose hope for our humanity and always to affirm the dignity of each human being. This kind of humanism, though flowing from the realism of Catholic faith in the incarnation, is prepared to defend and promote the value of humanity by whatever means—art, science, philosophy. By communicating within the experience of our shared humanity, with the meanings and values accessible to reason, we can already work toward a decent co-existence, whatever our religious differences or ultimate hopes. This aspect of the Catholic outlook is paradoxical: where our tradition most affirms the divine gift of faith, it is also most ready to exalt the role and effectiveness of human reason.

In one of its more extraordinary passages, Vatican II's *Gaudium et Spes* states:

When we have spread on earth the fruits of our nature and our enterprise—human dignity, fraternal communion, and freedom—according to the command of the Lord and in his Spirit, we will find them once again, cleansed this time from stain of sin, illuminated and transfigured,

when Christ presents to his Father an eternal and universal kingdom... Here on earth the kingdom is mysteriously present; when the Lord comes, it will enter into its perfection.⁵

Conclusion

And so we conclude. Catholic faith is an anvil that has outlasted many hammers. Even in times of stress and pressure it shapes an identity and inspires a vocation that can make the Church a sacrament of life for the world. This is not to minimize the challenges ahead—especially in the formation of our Catholic people in every domain of the Church’s mission. We move on, content with whatever evidence faith and intelligence can supply. We can take inspiration from the way blind people use a white stick to feel the way ahead. In our case, if we hold the stick of Catholic identity too rigidly, there will not be enough feedback to feel the contours of where we need to go. But if we hold it too loosely, it will merely serve to trip us up in aimless confusion.

It has often occurred to me that if we keep moving with hope and humility, that we will be experience something of the delightful shock of those who first looked up at the ceiling of the Sistine chapel as it was unveiled after the restoration work was completed. When the mould and other accretions that had built up over centuries had been removed, the colours glowed with hitherto unsuspected brilliance. Dare we hope that, not without a cleansing, restoration and conversion, the truth of our faith will further inspire us with its beauty and its mystery.

Speaking of conversion, let me end by quoting one particular convert and poet. Siegfried Sassoon, a WWI military hero turned pacifist, celebrated his conversion in the following words:

This, then, brought our new making. Much emotional stress—

Call it conversion; but the word can’t cover such good.

It was like being in love with ambient blessedness—

In love with life transformed—life breathed afresh, though yet half understood.

There had been many byways for the frustrate brain,

All leading to illusions lost and shrines forsaken...

One road before us now —one guidance for our gain—

One morning light—whatever the world’s weather—wherein wide-eyed to waken.⁶

It is time to begin again, summoned beyond ourselves by the Lord of history. If the mystery of an infinite love called the whole universe into existence out of nothingness, surely it can make something out of us.

Anthony J Kelly, CSsR

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FOOTNOTES

¹ For a good resource, see Thomas E. Woods, *How the Catholic Church Built Western Civilization* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 2005).

² <http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/angl-comm-docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_20050516_mary-grace-hope-christ_en.html>

³ John Allen, "The Next Generation of Catholic Leaders", *NCR* Oct 30.

⁴ Paul Celan, *Poems*, M. Hamburger, trans. (Manchester: Carcanet, 1980), 202-203:

EIN DRÖHNEN: es ist/ die Wahrheit selbst/ unter die Menschen/ getreten,/ mitten ins/
Metapherngestöber".

⁵ *Gaudium et Spes*, "The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World", par. 39, in Austin P. Flannery OP (ed.), *Documents of Vatican II. New Revised Edition* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1984), 938.

⁶ Siegfried Sassoon, *Lenten Illuminations* (