
WHAT MAKES US CATHOLIC: EIGHT GIFTS FOR LIFE

THOMAS GROOME, HARPER SAN FRANCISCO, 2002.

Reviewed by Donna Frazier

Whether devout or alienated, all Catholics have stories to tell about growing up in the family of the Roman Catholic Church. While the stories are as diverse as the storytellers themselves, the truth remains that all Catholics share a common spiritual ground. This common spiritual ground is the attitudes, values, worldview, traditions, and experiences that Catholics have been “marinated” in since baptism. Groome, a professor of theology and education at Boston College, explores what shapes our Catholic identity through “the defining attitudes of Catholic Christianity as these might shape how people engage in the world, how they respond to the great questions of life” (p. xviii). Catholicism is not simply participation in the organized activities of the Church, but the source of a God-centered, life-giving spirituality.

Groome contends that while it might be easy for some to leave the local church, they cannot leave behind the traces of Catholic socialization. Inviting those who have left the Church to “critically reconsider and deliberately choose what could be life-giving from their faith tradition”(p. xiv), Groome reminds all Catholics, regardless of their present relationship with the Church, that the gift of Catholic spirituality is still a part of their identity. This could be especially comforting to those people who have left the Church out of anger or hurt, yet still have a tremendous spiritual hunger that other faith traditions have not been able to fill.

What makes us Catholic are the responses we give to the great questions in life. Who do we think we are? In what will we invest? What is our heart’s desire? The answers to these and five other basic questions reveal Catholicism’s central outlook. These answers, for Groome, are “gifts for life,” and this basic outlook is at the heart of Catholic spirituality.

There is no more significant question, from Groome’s perspective, than “Who do we think we are?” Our Catholic image of the person as well as our attitude toward life is central to our faith. While some religions see people as basically sinful, Catholicism believes that humankind is basically good. “We are not nearly as sinful as we are graced” (p. 56). Catholicism affirms and celebrates the whole person. The Catholic perspective also views life as a precious gift to enjoy and celebrate each day. These two perspectives on life and the people of God are a distinctly Catholic response, a gift for life. Groome makes clear that the Church has sometimes lost sight of these fundamental beliefs, but the Holy Spirit is the guiding force behind these images and guides

the Church back to its spiritual foundations.

Groome identifies the Catholic image of society as another gift for life. Often faith traditions stumble on the question of individual rights versus that of the common good. It is not unusual to hear other faith groups speak loudly for personal relationship with God while downplaying or ignoring the equally important relationship with the community. Catholicism does not take an either/or position; rather, it gives equal value to the person and the community. Catholic Christians are expected to support the community actively, but it is the duty of the community to provide for its members. Groome states that we need to “care for ourselves as ‘persons-in-community’ and to care for each other as a ‘community-of-persons’” (p. 110). It is the ongoing struggle to balance these two positions that makes the Catholic view of society unique. Groome contends that the Church has not always done a favorable job maintaining the balance, but the official position is that both personal discipleship and Christian community matter.

Groome’s understanding of tradition and Scripture as a gift for life might cause some Catholics to pause as he states that “the Church’s teaching authority is symbolized but certainly not limited to the papacy” (p. 156). Groome understands that a large part of our Catholic identity is rooted in the teaching authority of the Church. However, Catholic Christians need to remind themselves that the Church includes the people of God. Groome argues that Thomas Aquinas in the 13th century understood that the lived faith of ordinary people was a source of teaching and learning for the Church, along with the research of scholars and the official magisterium. Groome agrees with Aquinas that the total Church, consisting of all members of faith, is both the learning and the teaching Church. Catholics need to feel comfortable with actively reflecting and critically interpreting Scripture and tradition, an integral step in developing their spirituality and appreciating the gift of Church.

The final question Groome asks is, “What is our heart’s desire?” This same question is a focus of New Age spiritualities, but such spiritualities ignore the crucial fact that it is God who initiates the desire in our hearts. The longing in our hearts can only be filled by the One who created it. Groome points out that many New Age followers and faith seekers try to separate their spirituality from any organized religion. Spirituality and organized religion go hand in hand, if we are indeed “social beings by divine design” (p. 111). For Groome, trying to live a spiritual life without a faith community is risky and unwise, and actually goes against the image of humanity created for relationships within community. Organized religion provides a space where we are nourished and guided, prayed with and prayed for, encouraged and corrected. Groome states that the purpose of organized religion is “to provide people with a community and a tradition of faith to nurture their spirituality” (p. 272). Organized religion has often let its members down, offering neither a faith-filled community nor an environment where their faith can be nurtured. Their departure should be a red flag to the Church that it needs to examine whether its purpose and mission are being fully realized. According to Groome,

“Religion that does not nurture people’s spirituality is as dead as a doornail” (p. 273). Nevertheless, the Church, though flawed, has usually been able to support and guide people as they search for a deeper spirituality in their lives.

Groome’s style is engaging and personal. A story begins each chapter to introduce the reader to the central question he addresses. Groome also includes reflection questions as well as spiritual practices, which make the book more than just an essay on Catholicism. This format encourages people to bring their life to their faith and their faith to their life. Groome writes for the devout, the alienated, the radicals, and the reformers of our Church, but also believes that Catholic spirituality has something to offer other faith traditions. Those readers who have left the Church might not recognize Groome’s positive vision of the Church as the same institution that hurt or disappointed them. However, as one of his storytellers points out, “the greater good here outweighs the sinfulness” (p. xv). Groome maintains he is talking about the Church at its best. For those who love the Church, with all its flaws and failings, this book will affirm the beauty of Catholic spirituality and the gifts for life that make us Catholic.

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THE END OF EDUCATION: REDEFINING THE VALUE OF SCHOOL

NEIL POSTMAN, VINTAGE BOOKS, 1996.

Reviewed by Molly Welzbacher

Neil Postman, social critic and former elementary and secondary school teacher, poses a possible explanation for the current crisis in the American public school system in *The End of Education: Redefining the Value of School*. According to Postman, schooling should be about “how to make a life, not how to make a living” (p. x); therefore, conversations about schooling should be about ends and not means. Educators tend to focus on the means, or the “engineering” of learning. Because there are many valid ways to engineer learning, the attention of educators should instead be on the “metaphysics” of schooling: “For school to make sense, the young, their parents, and their teachers must have a god to serve, or, even better, several gods” (p. 4). Postman is quick to point out that this does not necessarily mean the God. Instead, the word god is a synonym for narrative, defined as a story that “tells the origins and envisions a future...constructs ideals, prescribes rules of conduct, provides a source of authority, and, above all, gives a sense of continuity and purpose” (p. 6). Without such narratives around which to organize life