BEING A CATHOLIC: DOES IT MAKE A DIFFERENCE?*

This is not a paper on theological faith; it would, indeed, be presumptuous for a psychologist to undertake such a project. Nor is this a paper on the psychology of faith because it does not follow the method of that social science although it acknowledges some of its findings. These are rather reflections from a highly individual viewpoint on existential faith, on believing in the life of Everyman inspired by Richard McBrien's question about the effect of Catholic experience on us as persons. It is, if anything, a poet's approach to understanding the shaping influences of our living Catholic religious tradition.

Being a Catholic does make a difference and these reflections will turn on a series of themes which, while not the exclusive property of the Catholic tradition, have been accented in a particular way by it. The first of these centers on the world view which, up until very recent years, was maintained with extraordinary integrity throughout Catholic cultures and subcultures. The eyes of faith allowed the Catholic to structure the universe in a unique and consistent fashion. Through them Catholics could look beyond this world and the evidence of ourselves to the intensely real supernatural sphere, to the heaven that ransomed the suffering and death of everyday existence, to the salvation mediated by the Church and its sacramental life and merited by a dutiful Christian existence. The motivating power of this firmly held vision of a hierarchically ordered universe has been enormous both in enabling Catholics to handle their experience of suffering and in releasing their energies for educational, parochial, and missionary enterprises.

This view was sustained by enormous resources of symbolism which, in a cumulative way, built an extraordinary sense of the eternal dimension of life. The pool of symbols—from holy water to ashes to the miracles at Lourdes, from the vaulted spaces of great churches to the ingrained rhythms of plainchant—was large and deep enough to cleanse anyone of the grime of this world. The transcendent was underscored in a thousand ways and this generated an amazing spiritual self-confidence about heavenly rewards as well as an undervaluing of this world, earthly crowns, and even scientific achievement. The Church stood against the world, which was coupled with the flesh and the devil, pointing always beyond to the only true home for the yearning pilgrim. Home lay across the horizon and one did not properly tarry nor grow attached to the things or scenes of this world.[1] The sufferings of this time were not to be counted against the glory to come. Such powerful visions lead to mixed consequences; everyone who has grown up in a Catholic culture has felt them.

If, for example, one characteristic Catholic attitude was to despise this world, then the self and one's talents–even the possibilities of one's achievements–could be thrown willingly onto the sacrificial fire. Overcoming the self meant achieving a mastery of the body and an exaltation of the spirit; the Catholic sense of values proposed an absolute and an heroic journey toward it. The negative implications of despising the body, ignoring the world's more urgent problems, and living with bags packed for the imminent parousia have been articulated clearly during the last decade. Was this, however, all loss, a viewpoint only to be regretted? Or was there something here that shaped the Catholic soul in a way not to be despised?

Part of the extraordinary mystery of living in the environment of the Catholic Church lay not only in the strongly reinforced sense of identity which it delivered but also in the special sense of presence in and through time which it offered. Living as a Catholic altered a person's sense of time, breaking its bonds not only in the action of the Eucharist but through collapsing the centuries of history so that one could feel a kinship with fellow Catholics across the ages. Catholics would only come late to a feeling of being orphans of modern times because they were so at home with the Christian persons and places–with the saints and shrines–of twenty light and dark centuries. The whole stance of believing Catholics relieved them of the oppression of time; they lived in their own time and place but were never out of

[1]So Thomas Merton could enjoin his fellow Catholics some years ago: "You should be able to untether yourself from the world and set yourself free, loosing all the fine strings and strands of tension that bind you, by sight, by sound, by thought, to the presence of other men. . . . Do not read their newspapers, if you can help it. Be glad if you can keep beyond the reach of their radios. . . . Do not complicate your life by looking at the pictures in their magazines."

relationship to a family of saints and sinners whose timeless presence stood behind the statues and medals, holy persons who could be prayed to for every need beyond the flickering banks of votive candles. There were, in other words, practical ways of not just remembering a glorious past but of constantly re-experiencing it, of inhabiting the spacious myth of Christendom in the living presence of the community of the saints. Seeing around the curve of time enabled Catholics always to see more than what seemed to be contained in physical reality. Miracles could be believed, a sense of the numinous quivered at the edge of every day; there was indeed more to be sensed about our destiny than just the facts. This contributed in no small measure to the sacramental consciousness of the universe that was a distinctive aspect of traditional Catholic experience.

Of paramount importance in the Catholic awareness was the experience of authority; there is little doubt that this was imprinted in the believer's soul from the earliest age and that even Catholics who feel that they have said goodbye to all that still sense its traces in their souls. The Church operated in a frankly authoritarian manner and, in a huge effort to hold itself together against the challenges of history, it imposed elaborate and effective controls on the lives of its subjects. The inheritance of this emphasis was a conditioned readiness to respect and accede to authority of all kinds—civil and ecclesiastical—and while it made good citizens, good soldiers, and generations of good policemen, it did so at an enormous psychological price.

One hardly needs to review the emphasis on conformity which was written in such bold letters on Catholic life. It was an extraordinary blend of conditioning techniques, not less effective for having been unconsciously adopted. As B. F. Skinner admits, the Church built Walden Two long before he offered his design for it. Proper behavior—the desired response for the virtuous life—was positively reinforced in a thousand symbolic ways. Indeed, the whole chain of behavior that was explicitly stated in the rules of various forms of religious life was sustained by the distant but powerfully reinforcing reward of heaven's promise. Add the principles of aversive conditioning from another branch of psychological behaviorism and even the thought of evil was so punishing that it would be immediately rejected. No one even had to be looking; you supervised yourself.

Mixed in with this was a steady demand for freely accepted responsibility, for listening to the voice of conscience in the face of all other persuasions, of being a free person who spoke his own *yes* to the Catholic creed. The experience of being accountable in the sight of God for all one's thoughts and actions–the sense of living in a Divine Judge's presence and of having no place to hide–constituted powerful, almost unforgettable parameters of Catholic experience. The Church constructed a portable environment so that Catholics carried their religion like radiation in their bones and could never quite run or fall far enough away from it.[2] Even those who break away from the institutional Church never seem fully able to escape their religious experience even if it looms only as something against which they can more clearly define themselves. Something as strong and challenging, even when judged absurd, is not to be shrugged off easily; they have lingering respect–and sometimes affection–for their adversary.

Even a brief look at the long lines of exiled Catholic artists and writers bears a mysterious witness to this truth. The tight boundaries of the institutional Church seemed to make it uncomfortable for many searching and creative individuals. The story is familiar: the artist confronts and rejects the tradition of the official Church ("He lost his faith," the abiding believers are told). It seems a condition of creativity for many. The list is long just in America: Dreiser, Hemingway, Fitzgerald, O'Hara, O'Neill, Farrell . . . . Jimmy Breslin, referring to the Catholic Church as the "Marine Corps of all churches," says that a man cannot write unless he rebels against it. But Catholicism does not depart from the lives or works of these men; they may break from the Catholic tradition but they are not outside it. The Church is a presence in their writings, a force, a power that can be felt even when it is criticized or rejected.

If one consults the works of Catholic artists and poets who have

[2]So, Joe Dallesandro, star of many of Andy Warhol's movies, recently told an interviewer: "I was brought up a very strict Catholic. I believe the movies I've made with Andy Warhol are a sin–*Trash* and *Heat* and *Flesh*. But in New York I would go to confession and the priest would say it was all right, I should go right ahead. It was what I needed to survive and to support my family. That's all the priests care about. They don't even care if you're married outside the Church. They just want to make you feel less guilt."

remained in the Church, the great themes of sin and salvation, of the mystery of good and evil, sin and forgiveness, of the never quite stifled pressures of conscience, are quite evident.[3] There is always the commanding challenge of the mediating Church, the beckoning of the absolute, the mystique of the rock plunged into eternity. A portion of the lasting fascination of the Church—of the lingering hold it has on the imagination of many of those who have lived in or with it—was its very vastness and seeming imperturbability. Something, one thinks, like Everest, something *there* that had to be taken on its own terms, outlasting the weather of history and the endless forays of climbers trying for a brief moment to conquer it. The imagery of an unchanging presence in human affairs has both attracted and disturbed people, breaking the hold of time and yet, in its secure self-containment, seeming immune to progress as well. The security of the symbol appeared inviting to those looking for a place to stand against the shifting winds of time while its craggy unresponsiveness to change repelled many others.

Something of this mythic changeless quality seemed to play a role in the conversion or return to the Church that could be observed in the lives of certain writers and poets. One thinks of the English writers of the past several generations and of the almost solemn return to tradition which membership in the Roman Catholic Church meant to them. Exercises in psychohistory may only be speculative at best but two qualities seem to have touched generations of Englishmen from Newman through Knox, Greene, Waugh, down now even to the erratic film maker Ken Russell who describes himself as a "sinning Catholic." The first is the staying power of the Church, the beyond time quality of its teeming mythic presence in the middle of history. The second was the absolute demand quality of this Church, the uncompromising insistence that you give up everything, in a sense, that you submit in order to live in it. There is a powerful mystique to such an invitation; it was just such a beckoning that so many artists seemed to hear shortly after the second world war. Becoming a Catholic had a certain fashionableness to it that seemed to reinforce the artist's own commitment. Thus poet Alan Tate and the searching Thomas Merton in our own country. The grail could be found no matter how difficult the journey; the unchang-

[3]See Francis Ford Coppola's *The Conversation* for a current film pivoting on a Catholic conscience and its conflicts.

ing Jesus lived in and through the fabled Church. Not the least of what the Church offered was the power to handle guilt, the power to forgive sin.

One hardly needs to describe the kind of guilt which has been associated with the Catholic experience. It is by no means only a neurotic difficulty, however, and we are far from understanding the complexity of the situation. That certain aspects of the institution generated guilt is undeniable; that the institution also stood as a forum in which persons could confront and deal with their experiences of guilt is also true. I speak now from a psychological point of view almost exclusively in wonder at the genius of auricular confession, for example, which allowed people to verbalize their sins, to accuse themselves out loud so that they could hear the charges which they brought against themselves and to have them acknowledged and ritually forgiven by God's representative. The therapeutic value of such a response on an individual level—the fact that sin could be dealt with explicitly in relationship to God—would be hard to overestimate. It matched the needs of human nature and, despite the development of communal penance rites, it still does. The Church had the power to deal with sin and guilt, one of the perennial existential problems that is manifested in a strange contemporary way by the urge to confess publicly that can be seen on television talk shows.

The obsessive urge to please may be one of the major characteristics of those Catholics who were caught up in the operational distortion of the Church's teachings on sin. The consequences of failing to be perfect were enormous; the need to find the right way—the exact route through the minefield of life—in order to feel approved here and hereafter became a strong dynamic in Catholic life. It moved persons to forsake their own freedom to discover the code or rule from outside themselves that would guarantee that they were doing the right thing and thereby deliver a sense of security. For many Catholics freedom, as Camus once wrote, was "too heavy to bear." The Church—the perfect society of laws—would tell us what to do in order to be saved. One can only marvel at the sincerity and earnestness of so many Catholics who broke themselves on the slowly turning wheel of obsessive perfectionism.

This tendency to offer a detailed account of the good life was in many ways a departure from and a betrayal of the more mystical and symbolic aspects of the Church's life. One is tempted to say that the Church, like a poet, is at its best when it does not quite know what it is doing and when it does not self-consciously try to analyze the process by which it is present to persons. Excessive intellectualization destroys mythical symbolization; trying to explain everything in mental terms cripples the possibility of speaking mysteriously to the deeper levels of human consciousness. As the Church focused more on the control of behavior it obscured its own somewhat unchartable gift to penetrate the depths of personality.

The results could be observed in a blurring of a sense of what serious sin really was and of a use of the confessional to clear the conscience of what came to be known as imperfections. In certain areas, such as those associated with human sexuality, the experience of guilt was pervasive because there was so little leeway for experiencing sexual feelings of any kind outside the married state. The fundamental unfriendliness toward human feelings has been documented often enough. What is striking is the way in which obsessive mechanisms came to be employed on a large scale in order to handle feelings not only of sexuality but also of anger and a wide range of other emotions. The obsessive keeping of rules or following the instructions of others on how to live provided a way of handling the anxiety about one's behavior that would otherwise necessarily arise. At its most intense form this obsessiveness was revealed in scrupulosity; in its milder versions in the slightly mistrusting of the self that characterized the experience of many Catholics. It could be found also in the brooding melancholy of more sensitive persons who were existentially dissatisfied with their continuing failure to meet what were sometimes bizarre self-imposed standards of behavior. To live in view of the expectations of others estranged many Catholics from a sense of themselves. This has been the theme of a thousand rueful Catholic recollections; they resembled children experiencing the famous "double-bind" of conflicting parental expectations: Don't sin but I have the power to forgive you. And, oh yes, come home before you die.

This led not only to the use of frankly obsessive mechanisms like the repetition of ejaculations in order to keep one's thoughts and feelings in line but also to a hesitancy about investing in or enjoying fully this life. The bags must remain packed and our resources must be saved rather than spent because a long journey was yet to be made. This attitude of not being able to let go, of holding back, of not being able to spend one's affectional or spiritual capital for fear that there would be none at some later and vaguer time was not uncommon among those who experienced the Catholic culture. It was given words in Eugene O'Neill's famous *Long Day's Journey Into Night* as the father, the old Irish actor James Tyrone, stands up to tighten a lightbulb he had previously loosened in order to economize. It is a revelation of one fearful and unresolved Catholic style. Tyrone's wife, formerly in the convent, is a drug addict; one son is an alcoholic, the other tubercular. The old man pauses, "What was it, I wonder, that I wanted to buy that was worth . . . ? Well, no matter, it's a late day for regrets. . . . No, I can't remember what the hell it was I wanted to buy . . . ." I have heard that groan a countless number of times from Catholics who had denied themselves something of their lives which they no longer felt free to reclaim; from those who were struggling with the feeling that they could never quite please themselves or anyone else; with somewhat sad and restless people ready to believe in anything but themselves.

It is clear that this obsessive conflict may reflect only one period of Catholic experience and that it is no longer the problem it once was. But, I submit, it is undeniable that it affected many American Catholics whose religious environment was shared by what one writer called "post famine, west of Ireland spirituality." It may have blunted the creative possibilities of many persons caught in this conflict. The present reaction against rules of all kinds—the dramatic rejection of institutional authority—the search for different gurus: these are not unrelated to the long chilly night of Catholic obsessiveness.

Other aspects of Catholic experience invite our attention. There is another side to this ambivalence toward human beings, a quality never extinguished by the obsessive conflict. This was a residual compassion for the human condition, a willingness to suspend the rules that was built, through epikeia and canon 209, into the very rules themselves. This potent sense of solidarity with imperfect man has been preserved in its people, in the living tradition of its ministers and its members. What could sound strict and unbending in the abstract would almost always be more forgiving and understanding in the concrete. This willingness to understand frailty and to view the human struggle with unaffected tenderness has also been part of the Catholic inheritance. The Church possesses some awareness of all the history through which it has lived; it is, in a sense, the Here Comes Everybody of *Finnegan's Wake.* That is part of what has made the Church fascinating even in its failures and why it can not be easily dismissed from one's imagination. It is the reason that so many of those who have lived in it experience ambivalent feelings—as they would toward an imperfect parent—of irritation and affection, of bitterness and longing toward it, of why some want to get out of it and then miss it, of why its experience of the tree of Eden and the tree of Calvary, fall-redemption, and death-resurrection resonate still. A People of God; Here Comes Everybody, indeed.

Let me conclude with some thoughts on the Church as the nourisher of the unconscious, as the great reservoir of myth and symbol that provides interpretations of life far more subtly and far more surely than rules or laws ever do. The creative Church, one might call it, the existential and poetic aspect of the Church that has never submitted fully to rules and which has been the source of symbols for so much of Western history. It is this Church that awakens men to life, the authentic underground Church that cannot speak except in myths and symbols, the unconscious Church that speaks to the unconscious of the race. It fits, to some extent, what Jung once said of the unconscious:

> We might call it a collective human being combining the characteristics of both sexes, transcending youth and age, birth and death . . . he would be a dreamer of age-old dreams and, owing to his immeasurable experience, would be an incomparable prognosticator. He would have lived countless times over the life of the individual, of the family, tribe and people, and he would possess the living sense of the rhythm of growth, flowering and decay.[4]

The Church, I am suggesting, has been hooked into the dynamics of human development at a level which it does not fully understand. It has a poetic function in history which at times it has attempted to disown or repress. Indeed, it has muffled it frequently in its massive efforts to impose an intellectual understanding on aspects of human

[4]C. Jung, *Modern Man in Search of a Soul* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1956), p. 215.

behavior–like believing–which cannot be summed up or understood with complete success in this way. It has tapped into history and responds with all the genius of its mythical intuition and its profound religious language of symbols. In its efforts to be literal it has diminished its own poetic power. It is somewhat out of touch with this side of its being and does not at times recognize its own richness. This symbolic power is, however, one of the reasons that it can speak beyond all logic to the hearts of its members.

The declaration of the dogma of the Assumption may be a case in point. While insisting on a literal acceptance of the dogma and buttressing this with a variety of rational arguments the Church was also speaking a symbolic language that it no longer understood. That is why Jung counted the declaration as the most significant religious action of the century; he could hear and see the image which the Church was offering to mankind. It was something from the Church's own unconscious, a powerful symbolization at the dawn of the space age of mother earth returning to the heavens. The inter-stellar age would see, of course, that the heavens and earth could no longer be divided against each other, that the earth was *in* the heavens, and that a new era of understanding about the unity of the universe had begun. A not unreligious insight because of its implications for the unity of human experience as well.

The Eucharist may be a classic example of a powerful ritual that spoke to all levels of human personality–that fairly teemed with what scientists call "surplus" meaning–and which may have been diminished through modernizing it into the vernacular. The reasons, of course, have been good but the changes may have been built on an intellectual conviction that a Eucharist more understandable intellectually would be more effective. It does stand to reason. But, of course, symbols transcend reason and the extraordinary grace of the Latin Mass–along with its power to speak to us viscerally–was not totally appreciated in the liturgical renewal. The liturgy is not an area for rationality; it is where the poetic Church touches us with profound sacramental power. It is the sphere outside time in which we believe with our total selves. It may be too early for second questions about the liturgical renewal but they are bound to arise and the Latin Mass may reappear before the century ends. It will be a return not to dead tradition but to living religious experience.

These reflections must be considered in view of the reality of what Catholic experience has meant to many sensitive persons at the present time. Joseph Campbell anticipated the struggle several years ago as he contrasted the Protestant symbolic impoverishment with what was then a different condition for Catholics:

> The plight of the Catholic, on the other hand, is today precisely the opposite. For he is not deprived; he is overladen with symbols which have been built into his very nerves but have no relevance to modern life; and his dangerous exposure, therefore, is not to a void within, but, as a kind of Rip van Winkle or perennial Don Quixote, to an alien world without, which in his heart is dogmatically denied and is yet, to his eyes, visible before him . . . if the walls of the Church break apart–as they had for many already in the Middle Ages–he has literally Hell to pay. His problem then is either to liquidate to himself the structuring mythology of his mythologically structured life, or else somehow to unbind its archetypical symbols from their provincial Christian, pseudo-historic references and restore them to their primary force and value as mythological-psychological universals–which in fact has been the typical effort of unorthodox Catholic thinkers in the West ever since the military victory of Constantine and the enforcement, then, by Theodsius the Great of one incredible credo for the Western World.[5]

The present crisis of Catholic experience centers on the mythic dissociation which has taken place. The Catholic world no longer holds together quite as it once did. It is not surprising that, in view of our need for mythic renewal, theologians have rediscovered narrative. The task, I suggest, however, is not to force theologians to become storytellers but to free them and encourage them to rediscover the unconscious life of the Church, to learn to speak its many languages and to understand its varied symbols once more. It is a time for theologians to sense all the theology that lies in poetry rather than to try to force all their theology into poetic terms. It is a difficult time of liberation and re-discovery, of experiencing Catholicism in a way that transcends but does not destroy the rational. We all meet at the tree of Eden and the

[5] J. Campbell, *The Masks of God: Creative Mythology* (The Viking Press, 1970), pp. 368-9.

tree of Calvary, in fall-redemption and death-resurrection. Here Comes Everybody.

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