

THE IMPORTANCE OF QUÉBEC THEOLOGY FOR NORTH AMERICAN THEOLOGIANS

When I was invited by Professor John Boyle to give a workshop presentation "on the general topic of church, culture and theology in Québec," I asked myself: why could it be important for English-speaking theologians in North America to become more familiar with the way(s) Québec theologians deal with the question of relations between church and culture? Expressed in its simplest form, my answer is: it is *this* moment of our Québec history that invites us to think anew the relations between church and culture.

I could have satisfied myself with aligning statistics. But I rather tried to introduce the workshop participants to some of the questions and hopes this moment of our history brings to Québec theologians.

I. THE CRISIS OF A CLERICAL CHURCH

During the last 25 years, our Québec church has gone through some dramatic changes. To take the full measure of these changes, one has to keep in mind the essential character of our heritage, as expressed by two sociologists, Lemieux and Montminy: our church used "to supply a politico-religious vision of the world, with a theocratic flavor," and on such a vision rested "the fundamental orientations of society" (*Le retour des certitudes* [Paris: Le Centurion, 1987] 90). I would make that judgment more explicit by stressing four points:

1. Our church was a *powerful* force in the Québec society, shaping its fundamental orientations, even in the economic and political spheres.
2. Our church was a *clerical* church, the "theocratic flavor" manifesting itself in the power of our "men of God," the clergy.
3. The relation between church and culture was essentially a *deductive* relation, *from* the church to culture.
4. Such was also the movement (a deductive one) followed by our theology.

To illustrate the dramatic changes suggested above, I would still quote Lemieux and Montminy on what they have to say about the present state of our Québec church. They speak of a "quasi-disappearance of any influence of our church institution" (p. 88), of a church that has been "pushed aside to the fringe as an official force" (p. 90), of a church that "has been disqualified about ten years ago and is still disqualified" (p. 91).

To begin understanding the present crisis of our church, I would readily ask: *who is* the church? Who can really say: "*I am* or *we are* the church"? Such a question places in the forefront the structure of the relations between *clergy* and *laity*. Very quickly, however, one has to go beyond that first level of questioning, into deeper waters.

Numerous factors indicate that the Québec clergy, so powerful till the sixties, is now struggling with an identity crisis. Just a few years ago, *Prêtre et Pasteur* (a magazine which addresses itself mostly to the clergy) published an issue on "The Québec Priests and their Future" (83, [1980]). The presentation asked: "Who are we, Québec priests? We are the object of countless conversations, interrogations, inquiries. We question ourselves regularly on our own *identity*, our insertion in today's church, *without ever obtaining a definitive answer.*" Indeed, we have to recognize a fact which, at first sight, may seem surprising: just as laypeople used to feel excluded from the church life and organization, so are priests and bishops now going through a deep crisis of ecclesial identity.

Our Québec clergy has been formed in the "mediator between God and world" theology. Priests understand themselves and have been understood as responsible for a double passage: a passage of God to the world, of the world to God. There lies, I think, the first reason for the clerical uneasiness. On the one hand, priests and bishops have learned to live nearer to laypeople, many of them being deeply involved in the world *as a response to their faith*. So that most priests and bishops have come to recognize that they do not "possess" God more than the people to whom they are supposed to "give" God. On the other hand, our Québec society has known such deep transformations that priests and bishops realize how de-rooted they are from the second pole: the strangeness of their way of speaking suffices to manifest how the world is far from them. In other words: bridge between two shores ("mediators between *God and the world*"), they have begun doubting their real roots on both shores.

As for laypeople, the spontaneous language of our Québec Catholics still speak of them as "ordinary laypeople" or "simple faithful." This spontaneous language suggests that just as the clergy perceived itself and was perceived as being "superior," so have laypeople been used to a church situation of "inferiority." To illustrate that judgment, it is enough to listen to the spontaneous ways Québec Catholics speak of the church. Indeed, one discovers that the church is almost always identified to a particular person (the pope), a collective person (priests and bishops), one moment of space (the parish or the diocese) or in time (the Sunday mass). So that our Québec Catholics continue very widely to *identify* the church with persons, places or moments that are *exterior* to their daily human experience. Hence the question: how could those believers pretend to be the subject of a reality that they continue to locate *outside* themselves

II. TOWARDS A CHURCH OF ALL THE BAPTIZED

We have to recognize that laypeople are more and more invited to participate in the life of our church. But a great number of Catholics would certainly assume the following judgment of the sociologist-theologian F. Dumont: "How could we, laypeople, not have the impression that we are left to deal as we can with our day to day problems, while the function of the clergy is to continue repeating the general principles? The risk being that we will come progressively to a second *clandestinity*, not that, anymore, of the church inside society, but a sort of 'moral poaching' inside the church herself" (*Relations* 458 [1980] 114).

Indeed, we speak very widely, in Québec, of "adapting" the existing church structures to a changing culture. Laypeople have entered the organization, but it is to help the parochial and diocesan structures, *while fundamentally remaining what they were*, go toward christians and non-christians in a more efficient way. The dynamics are the same: *from* the parish or *from* the diocese *towards* world and culture. Hence the dilemma that so many Québec Catholics have to face nowadays: either they do not take an active part in church life, because they think that the church structures have ceased to have any human and historical relevance, or they participate, but with the constant fear of being swallowed by the existing structures and of being clericalized.

The ecclesial paralysis of our Québec people is but the symptom of a more devastating illness: our Catholics have a hard time establishing a link between the *church* and their *faith*. Our church has been so identified to the clergy that laypeople have not learned to look for the church *in* their act of faith. Faith deals with the "vertical" relations; very few realize, I think, that christian faith commands a type of "horizontal" relations, where the church would find her "natural" habitat.

Such a divorce between faith and church breeds strange phenomena. Most Québec people, for instance, continue to say that they believe in Jesus; in some places, he would even know a kind of renewed popularity. But where are the ecclesial fruits of that new popularity? The extreme form of the paradox is that many, having rediscovered the community dimension of christian faith, leave the church because, as they say, she presently constitutes an obstacle towards a real community life.

III. THE RELATIONS BETWEEN FAITH AND CULTURE: A CHALLENGE FOR TODAY

We still have to go further. Under the question of a divorce between *faith* and *church*, our Québec church is now experimenting a more fundamental *dichotomy* between *faith* and *culture*. Our Catholics are used to considering faith as a reservoir *from which* norms can be drawn that will guide (or be imposed upon) our existence in history. But a great question arises: if human history is but an empty vase, at most capable of "receiving" the objects of faith, in what way does christian faith institute us as the subjects of our human life? Consequently, does faith constitute such an immediate encounter with God that it could be identically the same anywhere and everywhere, and that our only task is to apply it to the moment we are living or to the bit of space we inhabit?

Quite a great number of our Catholics are now learning to exist and to act in history in an *hopeful* manner. To be more precise: in a manner that proclaims that christian hope is also a hope *concerning human history and culture*. God's very nature is at stake here. A liberating experience of the mystery of God, of Jesus Christ and of the church is denied to any person or community who absent themselves from history when they leave to meet the church, Jesus Christ and God.

Of course, the clericalism of our Québec church has translated itself into *uniformity*. But the emergence of originality should *spring from the act of faith itself* when persons and communities, answering the call of a universal communion, re-

spect the autonomy of history, of their history, of their own situation in history. Needless to say, such a principle of faith is not evident in Québec. We are such a small French-speaking minority in an ocean of English-speaking people. We go to France and realize that we do not belong entirely to the French culture. We go to the United States and realize that we do not belong totally to the American culture. Who are we? What are we called to become? At times, the question seems literally to be a question of life or death. There is no easy answer. There is no easy christian answer, specially for Catholics who have been taught that universal love means loving all in general and nobody in particular.

In a way, however, our particular situation may be a privileged one and does already favor the birth of a new kind of church-being. And it may be a privileged situation in at least two ways.

1. First, we are almost forced to learn that our christian faith is also, and essentially, a *question*. Faith rests on a certainty, without the possibility of degrading that certainty into a recipe, an answer that would be possessed *before* the surging of history, and before the surging of questions to which nobody was accustomed. Our own truth, as believers, unfolds itself in and through the historical answers that, often in obscurity, we try to give to the calls of history.
2. If this is true, the Québec church is in a privileged position to learn a second lesson: the certainty of our faith always has to translate itself into an *historical decision*. Persons and communities have to decide, under the impulse of their faith, the future of their world. And they are sure that, in so doing, they decide the *future of God*. As long as theology does not help them marry in their decisions love of God and love of human history, it breeds disastrous dichotomies.

The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, *the* great human decision in favor of God which is inextricably a decision of God in favor of history, deserves that all become the *subject of God* exactly where all are trying to be the subject of history and culture. Such is the lesson our Québec church has to re-learn. There also unfolds itself the fundamental task that is challenging the service of our theologians.

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