

FRANCOPHONES IN NORTH AMERICA

The task of this workshop was to focus on inculturation and catholicity within the francophone milieu of North America. The complexity of such a task soon made itself apparent when we began to enumerate the various existing francophone milieu of North America: Louisiana; New England and other States bordering on Canada; Québec; Ontario; Manitoba; Saskatchewan; Alberta; and the Acadians of the Atlantic Provinces. Moreover, the members of the workshop recognized that important cultural differences existed even within the geographic entities listed above. Given this diversity, is it possible to characterize the typically francophone inculturation of the Catholic faith? Of necessity, we had to limit our remarks to the category of "general traits" of such a multifaceted reality.

The paper presented by Thomas R. Potvin focused on the Franco Ontarian milieu. During the reading of the paper and the subsequent discussions, comparisons were made with other francophone milieux, especially those of Québec and the Atlantic Provinces.

The first point to be taken into consideration is, of course, the francophone culture at stake here. It finds its roots in France, but has been established in North America already since the latter part of the sixteenth century. Close ties have always been maintained with France, but specifically local aspects have been developed on this side of the Atlantic while major events in France, e.g., the French Revolution, had little influence here. Moreover, geographic and historical circumstances exposed the francophones of North America to the cultures of Great Britain and of the United States of America, not to mention that of the Native Peoples of North America. In recent years, immigration has widened the spectrum of cultures francophones encounter in their everyday lives. Given these facts, the question arises as to the staying power of French culture in North America. Outside of Québec, it is usual for francophones to be bilingual. The educated Québécois has at least a working knowledge of English.

Not more than forty years ago, it was often affirmed that "Language is the Guardian of Faith"—in fact the contrary was often true. Be that as it may, we are obliged to recognize the fact that things have drastically changed since the early sixties and the "Quiet Revolution" in Québec, and that for all intents and purposes French culture in North America has become "secular." The francophone believer is invited to appreciate the intrinsic value and legitimate autonomy of French culture as such and, rather than find a prop for his faith in it, allow his faith to furnish it with ultimate meaning. In Québec, the strength and quality of this French culture are manifesting themselves more and more firmly as time goes on. Outside of Québec, many wonder out loud if French culture can maintain itself now that it has to go it alone without the support of faith. Only time can answer that question since, at present, there are indications which speak both for and against

its survival. Whatever the outcome, it seems evident that faith cannot rely on French culture—or any other culture—in order to remain alive and active.

Nevertheless, the faith of the francophone in North America does still find its expression within French culture. It has been transmitted and received within the context of such a culture even though the Anglo-Saxon traditions of faith, both Protestant and Catholic, have also exercised both a positive and negative influence in this domain. Some traits of North American French culture, therefore, should be kept in mind when speaking of inculturation. The demands of survival have made of the North American francophone a proud and fiercely independent people. Authoritarianism, be it religious or political, is met with tenacious resistance. Ideas must be accepted personally before they have a real influence since many past incidents of betrayal, exploitation and abuse, with resulting wounds and rancor, have engendered a deep sense of suspicion without, however, rendering the francophones hostile towards all contributions from other cultures. When one's primary concern is, of necessity, sheer survival, there is less inclination to indulge in academics, ecumenism or social justice, and yet there has always been interest in such realities among francophones with greater emphasis being placed on them in the past thirty to forty years.

Once this has been said, it remains extremely difficult, if not impossible, to categorize in general the faith of the North American francophones. A fundamental distinction would have to be made at least between the Québécois and the other francophones of North America¹ for the simple reason that the former have dissociated more drastically culture from faith, and are finding it more difficult to integrate their faith in their secular society. Yet, common traits do exist between the two groups alongside real differences which must be recognized.

Religious practice has diminished across the board, but much more drastically in Québec than elsewhere. Candidates to the ordained ministries as well as to religious life are rarer all over, and this is compounded by the drop in the birth rate among French Canadians as a whole, passing from the highest in Canada to amongst the lowest in the world along with West Germany. Needless to say the "sexual revolution" has had its effect among francophones along with the use of artificial birth control. The perceived importance of the declarations of the "official Church," especially in matters of sexual and even social ethics, has greatly diminished even in the eyes of practising Catholic francophones. Where they already exist, the need for Catholic, confessional schools funded by the Provinces is more and more contested in favor of nonconfessional French schools. And even

¹For Québec, see: Commission d'étude sur les laïcs et l'église, *L'église du Québec: un héritage, un projet*, 6 vols., Fernand Dumont et al., eds. (Montréal: Fides, 1971–1972); Jean-Guy Bissonnette, ed., *Situation et avenir du catholicisme québécois. Collection à hauteur d'homme*, 2 vols. (Montréal: Leméac, 1982). For the situation in Ontario, see Robert Choquette, *Language and Religion. A History of English-French Conflict in Ontario*. Coll. Cahiers d'histoire 5 (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1975); idem, *Langue et Religion. Histoire des conflits anglo-français en Ontario* (Ottawa: Editions de l'Université d'Ottawa, 1977); idem, *L'Eglise catholique dans l'Ontario français du dix-neuvième siècle*. Coll. Cahiers d'histoire 13 (Ottawa: Editions de l'Université d'Ottawa, 1984); idem, *La foi gardienne de la langue en Ontario, 1900–1950* (Montréal: Bellarmin, 1987).

in the existing French, Catholic, confessional schools, many parents register their children for ethics courses rather than for religion courses.

Such recent developments seem to be, at least in part, reactions against the recent past where a jansenistic morality was in vogue within a clergy-dominated church. The francophone believer of North America is coming of age, and laying claim to his/her rights and duties within society in general and within the Catholic Church in particular.

This coming of age manifests itself in at least two fields: theology and the role of women in the church. In theology, we find a certain amount of impatience to make one's mark, to make a theological statement, without the full benefit of prolonged critical analysis. A similar independence and impatience is also discernable on the grass roots level so that pastors and theologians have their work cut out for them when they wish to present a teaching to the people. The role of woman, which has always been important among francophones, is expanding to tasks outside of the home. In the church, women have traditionally played a key role as guardians of the faith in the home as wives and mothers and in the schools as members of religious communities. Now the call is for greater participation in the ordained ministries in the church. This demand is not, for the most part, virulent or fanatic in nature since the francophone woman has learned long ago, through the examples furnished by Marguerite Bourgeoys and Marguerite d'Youville, that if you lean heavily and steadily enough on authority, it will eventually cave in.

Recourse to the sacraments varies according to the francophone milieu and the sacrament in question. Participation in the Sunday eucharist is down all over, and especially in Québec. So is recourse to the sacrament of reconciliation, although here pastors are heard to complain that there are more communicants than there are penitents. Many parents still insist on having their infants baptized within a reasonable period of time, but rarely on the date of their birth as was customary not so many years ago. Many still insist on having their marriage blessed by the church even though their knowledge of faith and religious practice leave much to be desired. At the end, they will often ask for the sacrament of the sick and a christian burial. In this, they resemble a certain category of French Catholics who proudly proclaims to be "croyants non-pratiquants." Nevertheless, we have a testimony here of the depths to which Catholic faith and tradition are rooted in the French culture as a whole.

On the positive side, we note that interest in catechetical instruction in the schools seems to be picking up. Adult education of the faith is popular in many francophone dioceses. Among those who practice their faith, parish activities, both social and religious, are relatively high, thanks to a greater lay participation in the planning and execution of the same. Devotion to Mary and the saints is popular, yet within theological bounds. The contemporary international movements are almost all represented among the francophones of North America, e.g., Charismatic Movement, Cursillo, Marriage Encounter, Serena, etc. It is much more difficult to judge exactly to what extent believing francophones witness to the gospel values within our secular society. Based on their heritage, they should be people willing and able to dialogue in order to find common grounds for an accord. Knowing from experience what it means to be long-suffering, they should be sympathetic with those in a similar situation, and appreciate the value of cultures which

happen to be in a minority position. Family, friends and persons in general are highly valued by the francophones. Forgiveness and reconciliation, even in most trying times, are values which they often actively seek.

The members of the workshop realize that we have merely scratched the surface of this complex question of the inculturation of the Catholic faith in the francophone milieu of North America. We have, nevertheless, gained some insights into this reality, and come to realize that it entertains many similarities with the inculturation of the faith in other cultures and, in particular, with those of the occidental world where believers are obliged to distinguish between a legitimate secularity and an atheistic secularism.

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