

Protagonist Corner

Gift and Quest: Believing in the Holy Catholic Church

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A member of the church I serve came to see me a couple of years ago to discuss the upcoming baptism of his son. I'd already met with this man and his wife to talk about the meaning of baptism in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), and to review the liturgy we use for that sacrament in worship. This time he wanted to discuss concerns about his extended family who would be attending the baptism. They were from a rural mountain branch of Baptists, and an infant baptism by a woman minister was likely to cause furrowed brows and heart palpitations among the clan. Interestingly, those two issues were not his main concern. The issue he really wanted to discuss had to do with the Apostles' Creed, which he knew we would recite before the baptism. He wanted to know how to explain to his relatives that line: "I believe in the holy catholic church..." "They'll never understand that," he told me. "They think I'm Presbyterian."

Now, this member of my church is a very smart man. In fact, I think of him as our farmer theologian. He probably ought to have a regular guest spot on National Public Radio, like that cowboy who does guest commentaries from time to time. He often e-mails me with insightful observations about life and farming and God. With dirt under his fingernails, he'll type out messages on his computer keyboard. He asks probing theological questions or offers his own deep answers on a wide range of topics. We've discussed everything from tobacco to angels, from the wonder of a lamb's birth in the middle of a cold night to the justice of dropping bombs on Afghanistan in the bright light of day. This time, face to face, the subject was the meaning of catholicity. He thought he knew what "catholic" meant in that context and creed. I thought I knew what it meant, too: the whole church of Jesus Christ in every place and time, each church connected to the whole in a mystical way by the Holy Spirit. We talked it over just to think out loud together. The more we talked, the more we decided that "catholicity" is probably abstract enough in both concept and practice that he could convince his family not to worry too much about it.

I thought of that episode again when, one year ago, I was invited to take part in the 2001 Campbell Scholar Seminar at Columbia Theological Seminary. This eight-week seminar brings together two pastors, five international scholars, and a member of Columbia's faculty as the group convener to explore a topic of interest to the church. After I had enthusiastically agreed to take part in the seminar, I received a letter informing me of our assigned topic. I'd spend eight weeks discussing "Contextuality and Catholicity."

When I told the session of my church about this invitation and the topic to be explored, I could tell they were unsure about what I'd really be studying and discussing for so many weeks. Frankly, I wasn't sure either. For all of us in the local church, catholicity can be abstract in both concept and practice. The one-page

seminar description listed some of the questions we would explore: Does a diversity of contexts and contextual theologies contradict the oneness of the church catholic? Is contextualization a threat or a gift to the unity of the church? And in the midst of great diversity, is there a common mission for the church catholic? While the elders were supportive of my participation in this seminar on catholicity, I'm pretty sure they didn't think it was anything to really worry about.

I arrived on the seminary campus only a week after the attacks of September 11, 2001. Suddenly, understanding diverse contexts and gaining a better understanding of catholicity seemed very relevant and useful indeed. For the next two months, I sat around a table in a small room with Christians from the United States, Jamaica, Germany, Taiwan, South Africa, and Cuba. In the company of these colleagues, contextuality was not abstract at all; it had specific names and faces and life stories. The diversity of our individual contexts was evident as we shared the stories of our lives and the national, cultural, and theological experiences that had shaped each of us for better and for worse. Differences in language, skin color, age, gender, personality, and perspective made every conversation more interesting and colorful and complex than it might otherwise have been. Far from being a threat, such diversity was a gift that, over time and with intentional effort, deepened our unity.

Catholicity turned out not to be so abstract either. We listened carefully to what it meant to live the faith in each of our contexts, and in the process of our discussions and meals and prayers together, we discovered how truly connected we are—or need to be—in the church and in the world. On our first day together, our colleague from Jamaica told us that when the World Trade Center collapsed in New York City, Jamaica lost twenty percent of its phone lines. Their telephone communications had been linked to the antennae on top of the tower. Dependent on, yet marginalized by, our economy and policies, Jamaican lives are deeply affected by what happens in our country. Although in the United States we are able to live largely unaware of our relationship to Jamaica, the same cannot be said for Jamaicans, who have a saying that, “When America catches a cold, Jamaica gets double-pneumonia.”

One day, in a discussion about computers and the growing number of church web sites, I asked our colleague from South Africa if church web sites were common in his country. He paused and then said with piercing kindness, “No, when one is overwhelmed with the reality of death there is little time left over to develop web sites.” In South Africa, where HIV-AIDS claims many lives, ways of dying compete with the need to find new ways of living in a post-apartheid nation. For Hispanic Christians, a vibrant faith seeks to speak hope in the midst of poverty, oppression, and despair. We are beginning to realize how much we have to learn from Christians—not only those who live in Latin America, but also from those who live (as our Cuban-American colleague put it) “in the fourth largest Hispanic country in the Western Hemisphere—the United States.”

From our colleague in Taiwan, we learned of the struggle for national Taiwanese identity in the midst of diverse ethnic groups and the might of China. There is also a quest to develop a theology of identification. We learned that some Taiwanese people have faced pain and hardship in turning from the folk religions of their land to become Christians. One story in particular has stayed with me. Our

friend told us of a man whose father tied him to a table in their home each Sunday to prevent the son from going to church services. One Sunday morning, the son struggled to his feet, the table still bound to his back. He walked all the way to the church carrying this table, so determined and courageous and faithful was he. Our German colleague works in an ecumenical partnership in Ethiopia. We were all moved by the name of the church there. It is known as the Ethiopian Church Mekane Yesus, which means: "The Place Where Jesus Lives." May all of our churches deserve that description!

These are a few glimpses of the church catholic and the challenges the church faces as it lives faithfully in the world. These conversations and relationships occurred at an important time for me. In the wake of the September 11 attacks, I was deeply aware of the false sense of independence and even isolation we North Americans hold. I was awakened to the leisure my denomination has in its comfortable life to fight over matters of polity while the church in other parts of the world struggles daily with matters of life and death. In a world where diversity leads to differences that lead to death, for my denomination to be threatening division and carving schism is a scandal to the Gospel and a contradiction of God's mission to reconcile and unite all things.

Gathered as we were for this seminar in the wake of global death, destruction, and division, we shared more than sadness. We shared a sense of urgency for the church, in both its local and universal expressions, to deepen its understanding and practice of catholicity not only for the sake of the church, but also for the sake of the world so broken and divided. We put our convictions into writing. Here are some excerpts of what Christians from eight different contexts felt moved to write after eight weeks together in one room:

Catholicity is both a gift of God and a quest of the church. Catholicity underlines the permanence and the value of diversity within the body. By catholicity we mean a unity that stretches across centuries and places, by which Christians are joined in one body, not in spite of their differences, but with and by them. It is a unity that affirms the rich variety of God's creation, the limits of every human perspective, and the purpose of God to bring all things together in their final consummation. ...The catholicity of the church is a sign and a foretaste of the unity which is God's intention and calling for all of creation. ...When faith is conceived as unshakable certainty in every detail of doctrine and practice, the result is a quest for uniform universality. When faith is conceived as a call to risk, trusting in the God who goes ahead of us, the way is open for true catholicity. Catholicity is not the opposite of contextuality, particularity, or identity, but their fullest expression. When these are affirmed, respected, and open to each other, there is true catholicity.

It turns out that when a bunch of Baptists from the mountains of Western North Carolina joined a bunch of Presbyterians from the city to worship the same God while a woman minister baptized an infant, we were truly catholic. As we move from Easter toward the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, who is still at work reconciling and uniting all things, this catholicity that is both a gift and a

quest, needs to be expressed. One day toward the end of the Campbell Seminar we read together, our different voices blending into one, this Hispanic Creed:

We believe in God, the Father Almighty
Creator of the heavens and the earth;
Creator of all peoples and cultures;
Creator of all tongues and races.

We believe in Jesus Christ, his Son, our Lord,
God made flesh in a person for all humanity,
God made flesh in an age for all the ages,
God made flesh in one culture for all cultures,
God made flesh in love and grace for all creation.

We believe in the Holy Spirit
through whom God incarnate in Jesus Christ
makes his presence known in our peoples and our cultures;
through whom God, Creator of all that exists,
gives us power to become new creatures;
whose infinite gifts make us one people:
the Body of Christ.

We believe in the Church
universal because it is a sign of God's Reign,
whose faithfulness is shown in its many hues
where all the colors paint a single landscape,
where all tongues sing the same praise.

We believe in the Reign of God—the day of the Great Fiesta
when all the colors of creation will form a harmonious rainbow,
when all people will join in joyful banquet,
when all tongues of the universe will sing the same song.

And because we believe, we commit ourselves:
to believe for those who do not believe,
to love for those who do not love,
to dream for those who do not dream,
until the day when hope becomes reality.

Contextuality and catholicity *indeed*.