

CATHOLIC CULTURE

Its Narrative Structure / The Deep Story

When people hear the word “Catholic,” they may think about a whole system of beliefs; or they may think about the authority structure; or they may think about a whole range of rituals and practices; or they might just think about *what* describe its narrative structure, i.e., *what it feels like* to live in a rather Catholic world. The last notion named is really about culture. One helpful way of trying to understand a culture is to describe its narrative structure, or, as some call it, “the deep story.”

No one can ever fully tell any culture’s deep story. The most we can do—and it’s a lot—is describe the experience as it is lived, what T. S. Eliot calls making a “raid on the inarticulate” since we only have ample words, he says, for the things we no longer feel urgent to say.

Thomas Groome, a renowned and respected theologian at Boston College wrote a LARGE book, *Educating for Life* (1998), in which he names characteristics of Catholic culture. Because this seemed right to so many people, he was invited to write the same story in a smaller, more popular version, which has appeared as *What Makes us Catholic* (2002). He calls them the “eight gifts for life.” The following descriptions draw heavily on Groome’s work.

1. A Positive Reading of Human Nature

Everyone knows that being human is a mixed bag, fraught with ambiguities, and an on-going tilt between good and evil. But in the final count, Catholic culture says that human nature is more good than not good, but this is not a naïve statement. The struggle goes on. Paul said something similar when he wrote that “sin abounds, but grace superabounds.” God made us, as the saying goes, and God doesn’t make junk!

Our own tradition is mixed. In the tradition of Augustine and Bonaventure, there is more attention to our attraction to evil, i.e., original sin. In the tradition of Thomas, there is more attention to the ways in which grace works always and only through nature, which is open to its workings. But in both cases, human goodness is fully affirmed. In Catholic culture there is a basically positive anthropology.

2. World Affirming

This is similar to the previous element of deep story, except that it’s a judgment about the world. Catholic culture believes that in the long haul, the Judaeo-Christian tradition is world affirming. After each creative act, God surveyed what came into existence and said, “It is good.”

The theologian David Tracy names two different ways of imaging the world. One way dwells upon how different the creature is from the Creator, how large the gulf is between the natural and the supernatural, how difficult it is to make the world come out right, how suspicious we must be of the lures and attractions of the world. Tracy calls imagining the world this way a “dialectic imagination.”

One can also believe that while evil is truly present, the world was made by God, and every product tells the truth about its producer. The final judgment is that, with God, "It is good." Tracy calls this way of imagining the world an "analogical imagination," The overall way in which the world resembles God is the basis for the sacramental life which is so precious in Catholic culture.

We are world affirming in the final count.

3. Catholic Living Is Communal

In many ways Vatican II is a recovery of a deeply held vision of community. We call the church "the People of God" before we call it anything else. And the document on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, says that it has pleased God to save us not one by one, but as a people mutually related.

While we are certainly not always deliciously communal, we do, in Catholic culture, believe that community is very, very important. The existence of so many religious orders, women and men who live in community, has probably helped Catholic culture maintain this commitment.

Community matters a lot! That's why the notion of "the common good" (to which we return a little later) is so central to Catholic conviction.

4. Tradition! Tradition! Tradition!

While reading these few sentences, one might profitably listen to the song "Tradition" from *Fiddler on the Roof*. Honoring the past is a profound Catholic orientation. This is already a strong piece of inheritance from our Jewish foremothers and forefathers. When God is described in the Jewish scriptures, it is almost always in connection with the historical events in which God was experienced: the God who freed us from slavery, who made a Covenant with us, who took us to a land flowing with milk and honey. The books of scripture, written 2000-3000 years ago form us, as do Councils and many events.

The last 100 years of development of historical consciousness (often under the aegis of the hermeneutical tradition) helps us better to read our traditions critically so that they can speak more authentically than merely literally. Our reverence for the past is sometimes purified in these ways, but it remains clear and deep.

5. The Leap of Faith and the Future

The Jewish prophets did not foretell the future; they said what people should be doing now under the pressure of the Age to Come. Scripture scholar Walter Brueggemann says that what prophets do is enable people to participate in history. Jesus' language for the Age to Come is the Reign of God, a new future that contrasts with present conditions. Groome calls the Reign of God the defining passion of Jesus' life. Jesus asked his followers to launch out into the deep, and trust.

At some level, the experienced good is the greatest enemy of the better, because we know the good and would only risk that something else might be better. But trusting that something else might be the case is a heart matter, an openness to risk.

The strong dialectic between the claims of the past and the future, and the painful decision making occasioned by the dialectic, are often benchmarks in Catholic culture: a heart-rending and life giving commitment to the future.

6. Social Justice

One of the prized goals in the Judaeo-Christian tradition is captured in the Hebrew word *Shalom*, weakly translated by the English word “peace.” It names the human condition when all the ways God wants us to live are actually achieved. “Righteousness” is another such helpful word. It means that things feel right because what God rightly wants has happened to a large degree.

This part of the Catholic story is haunted by the Catholic relishing of community. Somehow, our destiny hangs together as a people.

When the Jews were forced into exile, Jeremiah wrote them a letter, sent from Jerusalem to Babylon. He tells them that as wretched as life in exile is, they are stuck there, and they have to work hard to make sense of what is less than ideal. They should plant their fields, educate their children, raise new families, etc. And, he tells them, “Work for the *Shalom* of your city and pray to God in its behalf, because you can’t find your *Shalom* apart from the *Shalom* of the city where you live” (Jer 29:7). This linkage between the personal and the social drives the rich social thought of Catholic life.

7. Inclusivity

The Catholic novelist James Joyce once wrote that “Catholic means ‘here comes everybody.’” That is probably overly boastful. The word “catholic” from two Greek words, *kata* [κατα] and *holos* [ολοσ], which mean “according to the whole,” or, everybody. Our name commits us to inclusivity, and our contemporary history demands it of us.

Groome rightly observes that “we harbor deep vestiges of noncatholicity. Racism, sexism, sectarianism and parochialism still flourish in our hearts and church institutions. On the other hand, and happily, the Spirit continues to work and there are signs of a new moment in becoming *catholic*.” The call to become a World Church means transcending many earlier habits in theology, in liturgy, and in patterns of spirituality.

8. Spirituality and Ascetism

One has “to practice” to be darned good at anything: ice skating champions, golf pros, actors, pianists, etc., etc. Being holy is no different. It takes a lot of practice, patience with failures, jubilation with successes.

In Catholic culture there are a lot of patterns of spirituality, most of them have developed out of religious orders: Marianist spirituality, Jesuit spirituality, Benedictine spirituality, Ursuline spirituality, Carmelite spirituality, etc. Each has its own guidelines, practices (one has to practice), disciplines, structures, etc. The language and rhetoric of “spirituality” have places of honor in the Catholic story. None of these has an absolutely unique character. Each results from how its

individual story is assembled and lived. It's more as though each "recipe" is unique, rather than any one of the ingredients.

"Ascetism" is a word often associated with spirituality. It comes from the Greek word that means something like "pruning," which is what we do with plants to shape them up and give them character and strength.

Summary

These eight characteristics help tell the Catholic story. None of them is unique. All eight of them together do not exhaust the Catholic story. But together they help draw an accurate, even if incomplete, tale of religious adventure.

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