

"Living Our Catholic Faith in the Postmodern World"

Excerpt from Talk

January 17, 2013, Brompton Oratory, London

Last week I wrote about the relationship between "modernism" and "postmodernism" in order to raise the question of how we can practice our faith in the culture in which we live. The first point to be made is that, as Catholics, we do not reduce history into three distinct phases: pre-modern, modern, postmodern. Actually, the very idea of "modern" vs. "medieval" is itself an invention of the age of modernism. In the Catholic perspective, we are all contemporaries; our ancestors in faith and in thought continue to walk with us today. We do not reject one epoch in favor of another, but seek to discern the best that each has to offer so we may make progress in knowing the truth and living lives of virtue. My basic invitation would be for you to see your Catholic identity as a noun, not an adjective. We must have a primary self-understanding which embraces and unifies the various strands of our personal, social, political, and cultural identities. And, if we take God seriously, he must have first claim on our love. The fundamental profession of faith in the Old Testament, that which is held sacred in the heart of every devout Jew, is the great Shema Yisrael: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" (Deuteronomy 6:4-5). This absolute claim is repeated often in the New Testament, with the demands Jesus makes on those who want to follow him.

Real relationship makes demands

We hear many people today describing themselves as "spiritual, but not religious": They welcome experiences of the numinous, but reject the demands of religion. This, in my opinion, is to reduce God to a source of our pleasure, not a personal being. Real relationships make demands: When we read the pages of the Gospels, we find Christ insisting that the disciple's relationship with him must hold first place, and every other tie of family, tribe, or country must be understood in the light of that primary self-understanding of discipleship. If we do not give first place to God, religion becomes a hobby and the church becomes a club. Our relationship with Christ, lived out in the community of his body, the church, must hold our first allegiance.

This means that we must nourish our faith. If we do not intentionally and regularly pray, study, worship, and serve others as Catholics, the secular environment which surrounds us will have a corrosive effect. There are many inactive Catholics today, some in our families and among our friends. Most of them have not left the church, they have just drifted away. Other concerns and interests engaged their attention, and gradually the whole Catholic vision of life became something foreign to them. So I urge you to participate as much as possible in the liturgical life of the church, maintain a regimen of daily prayer, and involve yourself in the charitable works of the church. And read. Study the Scriptures and be inspired by the lives of the saints. Delve into the rich patrimony of Catholic writers, past and present, who have wrestled with many of the questions that the modern and postmodern worldviews raise. We have been blessed in our time with two popes who have brought keen philosophical and theological minds to their service

to the church. The writings of John Paul II and Benedict XVI provide rich fare, drawing on the treasures of two millennia of Catholic wisdom and articulating it in a way that responds to contemporary issues and modes of thought.

Catechism as teaching resource

A very helpful resource to foster this integration is the Catechism of the Catholic Church. The catechism brings together the essential doctrines of our faith; but more than that, by its organization it invites us to not only know what we believe, but live what we believe. The catechism follows a traditional four-part structure: 1) what we believe; 2) how we worship; 3) how we live; 4) how we pray. These four parts of the catechism are mutually related: what we believe shapes our worship; the grace of the sacraments strengthens us to live the mystery we celebrate and nurtures our spiritual life.

The more we deepen our relationship with Christ and live that relationship in his body, the church, the more effectively we can share the riches of our faith with those around us. Contemporary society seems to be polarized between the exaltation of the individual at the expense of the common good, and the demand that the individual be sacrificed for the benefit of the collective – the individual has value only insofar as he or she can consume and, especially, produce. Our Catholic faith offers a vision of human society founded on the mystery of the Trinity, wherein each individual finds his or her identity precisely in relationship. Along with the polarization between the individual and the community, the contemporary world often creates false dichotomies: religion vs. science, objective truth vs. human experience. The Catholic faith proclaims the great "and": revelation and reason, objective truth and personal experience.

Truth is one

If our most basic self-understanding is our relationship to Christ, we can welcome what nourishes that relationship in the modern and postmodern worldviews, and reject what weakens it. We can find common ground with the modern world in recognizing the importance of reason, and show how the faith does not contradict reason, but imparts truth beyond what human reason can attain. With the postmodernist, we can acknowledge that every statement of truth has something of a provisional element to it so long as we are on earth, for we always have something new to learn; but we can also assert that, while legitimate statements of truth can be complementary, they cannot be contradictory: Truth is one. The exercise of reason and the assent to revealed truth do not negate personal experience, they purify it.

While it is good to share our faith by discussion, and even healthy debate, argumentation to gain points or crush an opponent does not further the Gospel. As the great orator and evangelist Archbishop Fulton Sheen used to say, "Win an argument, lose a soul." Our finest argument by far is example. At the end of the New Testament era, St. Ignatius of Antioch wrote, while traveling to Rome for execution: "Our task is not one of producing persuasive propaganda: Christianity shows its greatness when it is hated by the world" (Letter to the Romans, cited in the Office of Readings, Monday, 10th

Week in Ordinary Time). Let us be, like Ignatius, witnesses to the truth that what was good news in the ancient world, and in the middle ages, and in the modern world, is, in our postmodern world, good news still.

This is the second of two parts. The first part appeared in the Feb. 15 issue of Catholic San Francisco newspaper: http://www.catholic-sf.org/files/digital_paper_201302195245.pdf