

Catholicism: Conclusion

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Catholicism in Context

As we pointed out in Chapter I, Catholicism is not a reality that stands by itself. The word Catholic is a qualification of Christian, and Christian is a qualification of religious, and religious is a qualification of human. Thus, the Catholic Church is a community of persons (the human dimension) who believe in God and shape their lives according to that belief (the religious dimension); who believe in God as triune and in Jesus Christ as the Son of God and the redeemer of humankind, and who shape their lives according to that belief (the Christian dimension); who ritually express and celebrate that belief especially in the Eucharist, and who, in the words of the Second Vatican Council (*Lumen gentium*, n. 23), recognize the Bishop of Rome to be "the perpetual and visible source and foundation of the unity of the bishops and of the multitude of the faithful" (the ecclesial dimension). To be Catholic, therefore, is to be a kind of human being, a kind of religious person, and a kind of Christian disciple belonging to a specific eucharistic community of disciples within the worldwide, or ecumenical, Body of Christ.

After examining the foundations of Catholicism in chapters 1 and 2, we explored in sequence its human dimension (chapters 3-5 on nature, grace, and Original Sin), its theological dimension (chapters 6-10 on the triune God), its Christological dimension (chapters 11-15 on Jesus Christ and our redemption), its ecclesiological dimension (chapters 16-20 on the nature, mission, and structure of the Church), its sacramental and especially eucharistic dimension (chapters 21-24 on the seven sacraments), its moral dimension (chapters 25-27 on Christian values and norms), and, finally, its spiritual and eschatological dimension (chapters 28-31 on Christian life as rooted in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, transformed by the Holy Spirit, and destined for the final Kingdom of God).



To what extent, however, is the understanding of human existence, of God, of Christ, of the Church, of the sacraments, of the moral life, of spirituality, and of hope in eternal life distinctively Catholic? If Catholicism is distinguishable within the Body of Christ from Protestantism, Anglicanism, and Eastern Orthodoxy, it must be on the basis of some belief(s) or characteristic(s) which Catholicism alone possesses. One belief that is obviously distinctive is Catholicism's commitment to the Petrine office, more specifically, the papacy. At this point in the history of the Church, the Catholic Church alone affirms that the Petrine ministry as exercised by the Bishop of Rome is an integral institutional element in the Body of Christ, and that without the papal office the Church universal lacks something essential to its wholeness. It is the one issue which still finally divides the Catholic Church from all other Christian churches and traditions, notwithstanding various other differences regarding liturgy, spirituality, morality, polity, and doctrinal formulations. When all else is stripped away, the official Catholic position on the Petrine ministry and office is different from every other official and/or representative position of every other formal Christian church. This is not to suggest that it must always be so, however, and therein lies the difficulty in linking Catholic distinctiveness with the papacy alone.

The Lutheran-Roman Catholic consultation in the United States, for example, has already achieved a remarkable measure of consensus on the question of papal primacy (see chapter 20), giving promise of even greater breakthroughs. It is conceivable, in other words, that Catholicism's affirmations about the Petrine ministry will, at some later date, no longer be Catholicism's affirmations alone. They may be shared by Lutherans, Anglicans, the Orthodox, Presbyterians, Methodists, and others. Will all of Christianity at that point be identified simply with Catholicism? Will Lutheranism, Calvinism, Anglicanism, and Orthodox Christianity fade from the scene once and for all? Will there be, then, one theology, one spirituality, one liturgy, one canon law, one vehicle of doctrinal formulation? If so, it would be the first time in the entire history of the Church, not excluding the New Testament period itself (see, for example, Raymond E. Brown's *The Community of the Beloved Disciple*, New York: Paulist Press, 1979; see also chapter 17 of this book).

We have suggested from the beginning that a more fruitful, and more theologically and historically nuanced, approach to the question of Catholic distinctiveness would lie in the direction of



identifying and describing various characteristics of Catholicism, each of which (apart from the commitment to the papacy) Catholicism shares with one or another Christian church or tradition. But how can one distinguish Catholicism from other theological, doctrinal, spiritual, liturgical, moral, and institutional expressions of Christianity on the basis of characteristics which Catholicism presumably shares with one or another Christian church? It is true: There is no one characteristic, apart from the Petrine doctrine, which sets the Catholic Church apart from all other churches. On the other hand, a case can be made that nowhere else except in the Catholic Church are all of Catholicism's characteristics present in the precise configuration in which they are found within Catholicism.

The point is crucial to the central thesis of the first and now the last chapter of this book. An example may help to illustrate it. The flag of the United States of America has individual characteristics which it shares with the flags of other nations of the world. (1) It is tricolored. But so, too, are the flags, for example, of Australia, Belgium, Cameroon, Colombia, the United Kingdom, France, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, and Germany. (2) Its three colors are red, white, and blue. But so, too, are the flags, for example, of Chile, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, France, Iceland, the Netherlands, Panama, Russia, the United Kingdom, and New Zealand. (3) It has stars in its basic design. But so, too, do the flags, for example, of Australia, China, Honduras, Iraq, New Zealand, and Venezuela.

Despite these common characteristics, no flag in the entire community of nations is identical with the flag of the United States, a reasonably close similarity to the flag of the African nation of Liberia notwithstanding. What is distinctive about the United States' flag is not any one of its several characteristics but the precise configuration of those characteristics. So, too, with the Catholic Church in relation to all of the other churches and traditions within the Body of Christ.

General Characteristics of Catholicism

As its very name suggests, Catholicism is characterized by a radical openness to all truth and to every authentic value. It is comprehensive and all-embracing toward the totality of Christian experience and tradition, in all the theological, doctrinal, spiritual, liturgical, moral, canonical, institutional, and



social richness and diversity of that experience and tradition. Catholicism is not a post biblical phenomenon. It does not emerge from some historical moment and from particular historical (i.e., national, cultural, political) circumstances that are removed in time from Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom, his gathering of disciples, and the formation of the Church in the period encompassed by the New Testament. Catholicism does not begin as a distinctive expression of Christian faith in the sixteenth century, nor are its basic lines already fixed by the fourteenth. It is not itself a sect or a schismatic entity, although sectarianism and schism are not unknown to it. Nor is it inextricably linked with the culture of a particular nation or region of the world. Catholicism is, in principle, as Asian as it is European, as Slavic as it is Latin, as Mexican or Nigerian as it is Irish or Polish. There is no list of "Catholic Fathers" or "Catholic Mothers" which does not include the great theological and spiritual writers of the period before as well as after the division of East and West and the divisions within the West. Nor are there schools of theology which Catholicism excludes. Nor spiritualities. Nor doctrinal currents.

Catholicism is a comprehensive, all-embracing, catholic tradition, characterized by a both/and rather than an either/or approach. It is not nature or grace, but graced nature; not reason or faith, but reason illumined by faith; not law or Gospel, but law inspired by the Gospel; not Scripture or tradition, but normative tradition within Scripture; not faith or works, but faith issuing in works and works as expressions of faith; not authority or freedom, but authority in the service of freedom. There have been many moments in the history of the Catholic Church when these delicate balances were disrupted, often through events beyond anyone's control and at other times through narrow mindedness, blindness, stubbornness, and malice. But the Church is at once holy and sinful, not in the sense that sin exists alongside grace, but in the sense that even graced existence is ambiguous, fragile, and subject to disintegration. The record is always mixed. The Kingdom of God is neither coextensive with the Church nor totally divorced from the Church.

One person looks at a glass and sees that it is half empty; another looks at the same glass and declares it half full. One person looks at the story of the Church and sees only the Church's complicity in the feudal system, the Crusades, the pretentious claims of Innocent III and Boniface VIII, its blindness to the gathering storm clouds of the Reformation, its insensitivities to the East, its arid Neo-



Scholasticism of the post-Reformation period, its handling of the Galileo affair, its declaration of war against modernity in the nineteenth century, its suppression of theological freedom under Pope Pius X, its diplomatic hesitations in the face of Nazism, its authoritarianism, its patriarchal ism, and its sexism.

Another looks at the same Church and notes the extraordinary, and finally inexplicable, manner in which it drew unity out of seeming chaos in the Christological controversies of the fourth and fifth centuries. Still another marvels at how the Church can be the Church of John and Paul, of Luke and Timothy, of the martyrs and apologists, of Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine of Hippo, of Gregory the Great and Anselm of Canterbury, of Francis of Assisi and Thomas Aquinas, of Hildegard of Bingen and Julian of Norwich, of John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila, of monasticism and religious orders, of heroic reformers like Catherine of Siena, of contemporary saints like John XXIII and Dorothy Day, of Cesar Chavez and Mother Teresa, of Archbishop Oscar Romero and of the women martyrs of El Salvador. But perhaps more than anything or anyone else, one must marvel at the Church of Vatican II: a pluralistic Church open to pluralism, a modern Church open to modernity, an ecumenical Church open to the whole wide world (the literal meaning of ecumenical), a living Church open to new life and to the change it brings and requires, a catholic Church open in principle to all truth and to every value.

For Lutheran church historian Martin Marty, of the University of Chicago, "Catholicism is a family of apostolic churches, rich in regional, national, ethnic diversity; it is a faith that teaches me that because you have a core or center, you can make room for a variety of apparently competitive and interactive elements" ("Something Real and Lumpy," *U.S. Catholic*, vol. 44, May 1979, p. 24). Like the flag of the United States of America, there are colors here that others share; there are patterns here that others display; there are symbols here that others use. But no other church or tradition within the Body of Christ puts them all together in quite this way. It is in their special configuration that the distinctiveness of Catholicism is disclosed and expressed. It is expressed in its systematic theology, in its body of doctrines, in its liturgical life, especially its Eucharist, in its variety of spiritualities, in its religious congregations and lay apostolates, in its social teachings and



commitments to justice, peace, and human rights, in its exercise of collegiality, and in its Petrine ministry.

The Philosophical Focus of Catholicism: Christian Realism

Catholicism is not bound to any one school of theology, although there is something distinctively Catholic in the way the pluralism of theologies is integrated, systematized, and applied within the Catholic tradition. If the Catholic Church is not linked exclusively to a particular theology, much less is it linked to a particular philosophy: existentialist, process, phenomenological, even Thomistic. And yet there is a distinctively Catholic way of integrating the pluralism of philosophies underlying its various theological and doctrinal orientations. For want of a better term, that distinctively Catholic philosophical focus is Christian realism, as outlined, for example, by Bernard J. F. Lonergan (see his "The Origins of Christian Realism" in *A Second Collection*, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974, pp. 239-61).

Lonergan reminds us that infants, in contrast to adults, do not speak. They live, therefore, in a world of immediacy: of sights and sounds, of tastes and smells, of touching and feeling, of pleasure and pain. But as infants learn to speak, they gradually move into a larger world, a world mediated by meaning. That world includes the past and the future as well as the present, the possible and the probable as well as the actual, rights and duties as well as the facts.

The criteria of reality in the infant's world of immediacy are given in immediate experience. They are simply the occurrence of seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, touching, pleasure, and pain. But the criteria of reality in the world mediated by meaning are far more complex. They include immediate experience but also go beyond it.

"For the world mediated by meaning is not just given," Lonergan insists. "Over and above what is given there is the universe that is intended by questions, that is organized by intelligence, that is described by language, that is enriched by tradition. It is an enormous world far beyond the comprehension of the nursery. But it is also an insecure world, for besides fact there is fiction, besides truth there is error, besides science there is myth, besides honesty there is deceit" (p. 241).



Now this insecurity and ambiguity does not really bother too many people. But it does trouble philosophers and those whose sciences, like theology, depend in some significant measure on correct philosophical presuppositions. Philosophical answers to the question of reality differ. First, there is naive realism, which insists that knowing is simply a matter of taking a good look; objectivity is a matter of seeing what is there to be seen; reality is whatever is given in immediate experience. The offspring of naive realism is empiricism. The empiricist takes naive realism seriously. The only reality that counts is the reality that one can determine by quantitative measurement. Empiricism, in turn, begets its philosophical opposite, critical idealism (Kant), in which the categories of understanding of themselves are empty and refer to objects only insofar as the categories are applied to the data of the senses. This is the world of phenomena. We cannot know things in themselves, the noumena. "Insofar as Christianity is a reality, it is involved in the problems of realism," Lonergan suggests. First, Christianity itself is mediated by meaning. "It is mediated by meaning in its communicative function inasmuch as it is preached. It is mediated by meaning in its cognitive function inasmuch as it is believed. It is mediated by meaning in its constitutive function inasmuch as it is a way of life that is lived. It is mediated by meaning in its effective function inasmuch as its precepts are put into practice" (p. 244).

But there is ambiguity within the Christian's world, as there is in human life itself. For the Christian world is not exclusively a world mediated by meaning. There is also the immediacy of God's grace creating the new creature in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. The grace of God is not produced by the preacher, nor is it the result of believing the Gospel, nor does it come as a reward for good works. The offer of grace is present to the individual person, as we have seen in chapter 5, from the very beginning of the person's existence. In the order of salvation (which is the only real order we have), grace enters into the definition of what it means to be human.

Thus, the real is not only what we can see and touch, as naive realism suggests. Nor is the real just an idea in the mind, as idealism insists. The real is what we judge to be real. The reality of the world mediated by meaning is known not by experience alone, nor by ideas alone, but by judgments and beliefs.



It is this commitment to critical realism that has moved the Catholic Church, first at Nicea (325) and again and again in its official teachings, to deliberate, to issue decrees, to condemn, to explain, to defend, to make distinctions, to use technical terms, to engage in the most acute rational reflection. Indeed, it is this commitment to critical realism that is at the foundation of the medieval effort toward systematization and of our own contemporary systematic enterprises as well.

What does all this mean? It means that the Catholic tradition philosophically rejects both naive realism and idealism as adequate bases for Catholicism's theological vision. One contemporary form of naive realism is fundamentalism, of both a biblical and a doctrinal kind. For the biblical fundamentalist, the meaning of the Word of God is obvious. "Just take a look," the biblicist seems to say, "The requirements of Christian existence are clear. The answers are readily available in the pages of Sacred Scripture." For the doctrinal fundamentalist, the meaning of the Church's official teachings is also obvious. There is no need to take into account their original historical settings, the controversies that provoked them, the precise views that were condemned, the language and concepts in which the doctrines were couched. Moralism is another contemporary form of naive realism. "Just consult your gut feelings, or use your common sense," the moralist insists. "Of course, violence is against the Gospel of Jesus Christ." Or: "Of course, violence can be justified to counteract oppressive violence." But moralism provides no arguments, no war rants, no reasons. It is assumed that the convictions are self-evidently true and their intrinsic power compelling.

Idealism, on the other hand, makes of Christianity a system of principles and ideas, but without clear or meaningful connection with the pastoral situation or the human condition at large. One need not worry about the effectiveness of preaching and teaching, for example, if one is convinced that the ideas to be preached and taught are plainly, even though not infallibly, true. One need not engage in time-consuming and ultimately diverting moral speculation about what it is one must do in such-and-such a conflict-situation when there is a clear statement of moral principle already "on the books." The contemporary forms of idealism are dogmatism and legalism. Dogmatism assumes that salvation is linked primarily to "right belief" (orthodoxy) and that the rightness of beliefs is clear and almost self-evident. Legalism assumes that salvation is linked primarily to "right practice," i.e., of



obedience to church laws. There is never any serious doubt about what the law demands, so specific and so de tailed is it. Critical realism, or what Lonergan calls

Christian realism, insists that experience itself is not enough. One can "take a look," but one cannot be sure that what one sees corresponds entirely to what is real. "Appearances can be deceiving," the old saying has it. Christian realism also rejects the notion that clear and distinct ideas (doctrines, dogmas, canonical directives) are equivalent to the real itself. Ideas are never formulated except in relation to other ideas, to events, to one's associates, to the problems and resources at hand, to the historical circumstances, to social, economic, and political conditions, to one's own background, age, sex, nationality, occupation, income level, social status, and the like. Just as Christian realism rejects biblicism and moralism in favor of a critical and systematic approach to reality, so Christian realism rejects dogmatism and legalism in favor of a critical and systematic approach to reality, an approach that goes beyond what seems to be there and that takes historicity into account in the use and interpretation of ideas and principles.

This critical realism carries over into everything the Church does. Thus, the Church's moral vision and its approach to the demands of Christian existence are qualified always by its confidence in the power of grace and by its readiness to expect and understand the weaknesses and failures rooted in Original Sin. And so Catholicism is a moral universe of laws but also of dispensations, of rules but also of exceptions, of respect for authority but also for freedom of conscience, of high ideals but also of minimal requirements, of penalties but also of indulgences, of censures and excommunications but also of absolution and reconciliation.

The Theological Foci of Catholicism: Sacramentality, Mediation, and Communion

As we have seen throughout this book, no theological principle or focus is more characteristic of Catholicism or more central to its identity than the principle of sacramentality. The Catholic vision sees God in and through all things: other people, communities, movements, events, places, objects, the world at large, the whole cosmos. The visible, the tangible, the finite, the historical--all these are actual or potential carriers of the divine presence. Consequently, the Catholic sees all material reality ("nature") as essentially good ("graced nature"). It comes from the creative hand of God, has been redeemed by Jesus Christ, continues to be renewed by the Holy Spirit, and is destined to become



part of "a new heaven and a new earth" (Revelation 21:1). Grace, not sin, is the driving force of history.

Indeed, it is only in and through visible, material realities that we encounter the invisible, spiritual God. The primordial sacrament of our encounter with God and of God's encounter with us is Jesus Christ. The Church, in turn, is the fundamental sacrament of our encounter with Christ and of Christ's with us, and the sacraments, in turn, are the signs and instruments by which that ecclesial encounter with Christ is expressed, celebrated, and made effective for the glory of God and the salvation of women and men.

A corollary of the principle of sacramentality is the principle of mediation. A sacrament not only signifies; it also causes what it signifies. Thus, created realities not only contain, reflect, or embody the presence of God, they also make that presence effective for those who avail themselves of these realities. Just as we noted in the previous section that the world is mediated by meaning, so the universe of grace is a mediated reality: mediated principally by Christ, and secondarily by the Church and by other signs and instruments of salvation outside and beyond the Church.

Catholicism rejects naive realism, which holds to the immediacy of the experience of God as the normal or exclusive kind of encounter with the divine presence. Catholicism also rejects idealism, which holds that the encounter with God occurs solely in the inwardness of conscience and the inner recesses of consciousness. Catholicism holds, on the contrary, that the encounter with God is a mediated experience but a real experience, rooted in the historical and affirmed as real by the critical and systematic judgment that God is truly present and active here or there, in this event or that, in this person or that, in this object or that.

Consequently, for Catholic social doctrine human effort on behalf of the common good and the transformation of the world can and does make a significant difference to history. We are personally and corporately responsible (with God) for the welfare of all and for the care and well-being of the created world itself.

Finally, Catholicism affirms the principle of communion: that our way to God and God's way to us is not only a mediated way but a communal way. And even when the divine-human encounter is most personal and individual, it is still communal in that the encounter is made possible by the



mediation of the community. Thus, there is not simply an individual personal relationship with God or Jesus Christ that is established and sustained by meditative reflection on Sacred Scripture, for the Bible itself is the Church's book and is the testimony of the Church's original faith. The mystics (even in the narrowest sense of the word) rely on language, ideas, concepts, presuppositions when they reflect upon and share with others their intimate experience of God. We are radically social, i.e., relational, beings; our use of language and our sexuality are clear evidence of that. There is no relationship with God, however intense, profound, and unique, that dispenses entirely with the communal context of every human relationship with God. Indeed, we are defined by our relationships: with God, with neighbor, with the world, and even with ourselves.

And this is why, for Catholicism, the mystery of the Church has so significant a place in theology, doctrine, pastoral practice, moral vision and commitment, and spirituality. Catholics have always emphasized the place of the Church as both the sacrament of Christ, mediating salvation through sacraments, ministries, and other institutional elements and forms, and as the communion of disciples, the preview or foretaste, as it were, of the perfect communion to which the whole of humankind is destined in the final Kingdom of God.

And so it is with the mystery of the Church that we come at last to the point at which the distinctively Catholic understanding and practice of Christian faith most clearly emerges. For here we find the convergence of those principles which have always been so characteristic of Catholicism: sacramentality, mediation, and communion. They are principles grasped and interpreted according to the mode of critical realism rather than of naive realism or idealism.

These principles, at once philosophical and theological, have shaped, and continue to shape, Catholicism's Christology, ecclesiology, sacramental theology, canon law, spirituality, Mariology, theological anthropology, moral theology, liturgy, social doctrine, and the whole realm of art and aesthetics. The last item is a particular case in point. In contrast, Protestantism, as a religion of the word, has had a "mixed" record when it comes to the arts. It has been "uneasy about objectification of the divine drama in images which might themselves draw the devotion of the supplicant from the invisible God beyond the gods. It has often and maybe even usually been uneasy about unrestricted bodily attention, and has rather consistently feared the ecstasy of the dance through most of the years



of its history" (Martin Marty, *Protestantism*, p. 228; for a broader view of Catholicism's aesthetical impact, see Kenneth Dark's *Civilization*, New York: Harper & Row, 1969, pp. 167-92).

Baptist theologian Langdon Gilkey saw many of the same characteristics when he probed the reality of Catholicism in search of its distinctive identity. First, he concluded, there is Catholicism's "sense of reality, importance, and 'weight' of tradition and history in the formation of this people and so of her religious truths, religious experience, and human wisdom."

Second, there is, "especially to a Protestant, a remarkable sense of humanity and grace in the communal life of Catholics. . . . Consequently the love of life, the appreciation of the body and the senses, of joy and celebration, the tolerance of the sinner, these natural, worldly and 'human' virtues are far more clearly and universally embodied in Catholics and in Catholic life than in Protestants and in Protestantism."

Third, there is Catholicism's "continuing experience, unequalled in other forms of Western Christianity, of the presence of God and of grace mediated through symbols to the entire course of ordinary human life." For Gilkey, a symbol points to and communicates the reality of God which lies beyond it. A symbol can be viewed and appropriated "as relative, as a 'symbol' and not God, without sacrificing this relation to the absoluteness that makes it a vehicle of the sacred." The experience of the symbol can unite "sensual, aesthetic, and intellectual experience more readily than the experiences of proclamation or of an ecstatic spiritual presence." The Catholic principle of symbol or sacramentality, according to Gilkey, "may provide the best entrance into a new synthesis of the Christian tradition with the vitalities as well as the relativities of contemporary existence."

Finally, there has been "throughout Catholic history a drive toward rationality, the insistence that the divine mystery manifest in tradition and sacramental presence be insofar as possible penetrated, defended, and explicated by the most acute rational reflection" (*Catholicism Confronts Modernity: A Protestant View*, pp. 17-18, 20-22).

Conclusion

It is not a question here in this chapter, or indeed in this book, of arguing that the Catholic Church and the Catholic tradition are necessarily superior to all of the other churches and traditions on this



point or that, but that there is within Catholicism a configuration of values which enjoy a normative character in discerning the Christian tradition as a whole.

These values include Catholicism's sense of sacramentality (God is present everywhere, the invisible in the visible, within us and within the whole created order); its principle of mediation (the divine is available to us as a transforming, healing, renewing power through the ordinary things of life: persons, communities, events, places, institutions, natural objects, etc.); its sense of communion, or of peoplehood (we are radically social and so, too, is our relationship with God and God's with us); its drive toward rationality and its critical realism (reality is neither self-evident nor confined to the realm of ideas); its corresponding respect for history, for tradition, and for continuity (we are products of our past as well as shapers of our present and our future); its analogical imagination (the divine and the human are more alike than unlike); its conviction that we can have as radical a notion of sin as we like so long as our understanding and appreciation of grace is even more radical; its high regard for authority and order as well as for conscience and freedom; indeed its fundamental openness to all truth and to every value--in a word, its catholicity.

Summary

1. Catholicism is not a reality that stands by itself. The word Catholic is a qualification of Christian, and Christian is a qualification of religious, and religious is a qualification of human.
2. The Catholic Church alone affirms that the Petrine ministry, or papacy, is an integral institutional element in the Body of Christ. It is the one issue which finally divides the Catholic from all other Christians.
3. The distinctiveness of Catholicism, however, lies not simply in its affirmation of the Petrine office but in the unique configuration of characteristics which Catholicism possesses and manifests as a Church and as a tradition within the Body of Christ and Christianity at large.
4. In general, Catholicism is characterized by a radical openness to all truth and to every value. Catholicism does not emerge from a particular time after the foundational period of the New Testament, nor is it tied to a particular nation or culture. It endorses no one school of theology or



spirituality and no single interpretation of doctrine.

5. Catholicism is characterized by a both/and rather than an either/or approach to nature and grace, reason and faith, law and Gospel, Scripture and tradition, faith and works, authority and freedom.

6. The historical record of Catholicism is mixed: There are, e.g., the triumphalism and even the decadence of the medieval papacy and the simplicity and sanctity of Francis of Assisi, the condemnatory spirit of Pius IX and the openness of John XXIII.

7. Nowhere is the catholicity of the Church more evident, however, than at Vatican II: A Church at once pluralistic and open to pluralism, modern and open to modernity, ecumenical and open to the whole wide world, alive and open to new life, and catholic and open in principle to all truth and every value.

8. Catholicism's philosophical focus is critical, or Christian, realism. It sees the world as mediated by meaning, rather than a world of immediate experience alone (naive realism, empiricism) or of ideas alone (idealism).

9. Christian realism is opposed to naive realism in its various forms: fundamentalism, of both a biblical and a doctrinal kind, and moralism. It is also opposed to idealism in its various forms: dogmatism and legalism.

10. This critical realism carries over into everything the Church does. In the realm of moral demands, for example, Catholicism is a religion of laws but also of dispensations, of censures but also of absolutions.

11. The theological foci of Catholicism include the principles of sacramentality, mediation, and communion.

12. The principle of sacramentality means that God is present and operative in and through the visible, the concrete, the tangible, the finite, the historical: persons, communities, places, events, natural objects, the whole created order. Christ is the primordial sacrament; the Church is the fundamental sacrament.

13. The principle of mediation is a corollary of the principle of sacramentality. God uses signs and instruments to communicate grace.

14. The principle of communion means that our way to God and God's way to us is mediated



through community: the human community at large and the Church in particular. The communion of disciples is the preview or foretaste of the perfect communion to which the whole of humankind is destined in the final Kingdom of God.

15. Langdon Gilkey identifies the following as characteristic of Catholicism: its sense of tradition and history, its sense of peoplehood and community, its sense of symbol and sacrament, and its drive toward rationality and rational reflection.

16. It was not the purpose of this chapter or of this book to establish the superiority of Catholicism but to identify its distinctiveness by calling attention to the configuration of values which one finds nowhere else in the Body of Christ or in Christianity at large: sacramentality, mediation, communion, rationality, continuity, the triumph of grace over sin, the regard for authority and order as well as conscience and freedom, and its fundamental openness to all truth and to every value. In a word, its catholicity.

Suggested Readings

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