

The Catholicity Of Catholicism

By THOMAS STORCK

"Catholic" means universal. But in what sense is the Catholic Church catholic? In these two ways at least: Because she is spread over almost all the world, and because she has a commission from her divine Founder to all men.

But I think that both the Church, and the culture and way of life that she fosters, are universal in another way, too. This is that Catholicism, both as religion and as culture, is for all men because it is based on man *qua* man. Catholicism, precisely because it was created by God, the Creator of man, is based on the real needs, desires, and conditions of humanity. It is not based on 16th century German man, for example, or 20th century urbanized man. Because it is universal we know that there is no people on earth for whom Catholicism is not suitable. It is not merely for Latins, or Slavs, or ancients, or medievals, or rich or poor. It is for everyone, because it is not limited by the accidental states and degrees of mankind.

Every sect or movement on earth, except the Church, was a response to a particular set of historical conditions in a certain place; thus its relevance is necessarily limited to those whose lives approach the same conditions as those of its originators (not to speak of the question of the truth of its teachings). Only the Church, because God, not man, founded it, is able to respond to man as man. And the kind of civilization that the Church fosters is necessarily also meant for all, since it is inspired and brought into being by God's Church.

This is not to say that Catholic culture is a kind of insipid cosmopolitanism; on the contrary, like our Lord, Catholic culture is incarnated, as it were, into the life of particular peoples, so that Hispanic, Irish, Maronite, and every other Catholic culture is both truly Catholic and truly unique. But a Catholic belonging to any of the true Catholic cultures has a universal side to him that the most cosmopolitan secularist lacks. This is because every true Catholic culture contains the necessary elements of universalism, a universalism based not on geographical extent, but on the fact that human nature is the same everywhere, and to understand man in one place is to understand him in every place.

Thus a Catholic, orthodox in faith and raised in a traditional Catholic culture, will have a kind of universal outlook, even though he will usually be fiercely attached to the particular devotions and customs of his own land. For, as I said, his universalism will be because his religion and his culture both respond to what is universal in

man. Of course, the particular customs and habits of each Catholic nation will suit that nation for a complex of reasons that are doubtless historical, ethnic, and geographical. Yet by being thoroughly steeped in his own set of customs the Catholic acquires a universal outlook, for each set is simply a way of expressing the universal.

When the Second Person of the Trinity took human nature it was necessary that He be born in a particular place and time, and of a particular people. His being Jewish does not limit Him, since it is simply His way of possessing a human nature; it does not mean He is cut off in any way from those who are not Jews.

Similarly, a Polish Catholic will have different customs from an Austrian, but each one's customs will be ways of expressing Catholicism's regard for man's real needs and desires. The best images of our Lady are decidedly rooted in a particular artistic tradition, yet they communicate the Mother of God's universal love by their very cultural concreteness. Any artist who tried to work without reference to some tradition would likely produce a weak, bland image. It is in being particular that Catholicism is universal.

But what are we to do, those of us raised and living in a non-Catholic culture? How can we attain this catholic outlook I am speaking of? Although we can be orthodox in faith, we do not have the advantage of living in an environment that is Catholic, an environment that gently shapes our lives and habits after the mind of Christ.

But we can achieve this, to some extent, I think, by drinking from the immense ocean of Catholic learning and literature: theology, philosophy, and every other area of knowledge and letters. We can also, of course, partake of and nourish whatever elements of genuine Catholic culture exist in our locale. But as we do so, particularly as we read Catholic writings, we must remember what we are trying to do: abstract from the particulars to seize the universal. This is not to say that it is wrong to know about many different customs, or that in studying theology and philosophy we should not pay attention to detail. It is simply to assert that there is a difference between a Catholic's universalism and a dilettante's familiarity with a multitude of particulars. For a universal outlook is attained more by grasping the essential than by a preoccupation with many individual things.

A Catholic outlook is not a substitute for learning. They are two different though related things. An uneducated Catholic living in a Catholic culture will

possess a gift that a scholar, Catholic in faith but largely non-Catholic in culture, does not enjoy. But for the Catholic scholar both are desirable, the one so that he does not fail to discern what is important among many details, the other necessarily demanded by his scholarly task.

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