

# Catholic Faith, Catholic Culture, Catholic Life

*Thomas Storck*



One evening I was listening to a folk music show on one of the local National Public Radio stations. There was a very interesting interview with a Native American musician who had been taken as a youth from his home on a reservation to a school run by the Bureau of Indian Affairs. There Indians from numerous tribes were mixed together, forcing the pupils to communicate in English, since they did not understand each other's native tongues. The musician also told how the government authorities on the reservation forbade anyone younger than fifty to take part in the traditional Indian dances. The point of all this, he said over and over, was to destroy their culture.

The concept of destruction of culture, cultural genocide, is a thing of which one hears a fair amount today, though the fact of it has unfortunately been with us for centuries. From the efforts of Antiochus Epiphanes to wipe out Jewish culture in the first century B.C., to the partially successful English attempts to rob the Irish of their culture, to our own treatment of Native Americans, it is a sad part of mankind's story.

Now, it is easy to see why it is wrong to steal a someone's house or his farm or goods. But why is it a crime to steal his culture? Does this take from him anything which matters? I think it does, and in order to understand why this is true, we must look at the place culture has, and necessarily has, in our lives.

Culture is the distinct way that a society, be it a nation or a tribe, lives. It includes the way they make their pots and their barns as well as their songs and their tales. Without a culture a man is a poor naked thing, a weak two-legged mammal. That is, looked at in isolation, without a culture and a society, man is a creature devoid of meaning, because devoid of anything that exemplifies our specific nature as rational animals. To live as a human, one could almost say to *be* human, we must do things which require a culture. What is our choice of food to be, our type of cookware, the kind of house we will live in, the music we will make and the instruments with which we will make it?—indeed, what are the very words we will speak? All these distinctively human things bespeak a culture. And we avoid having a culture only by avoiding performing human actions, almost by avoiding being human. A naked man shivering on a rock begins, as soon as he clothes himself and begins to build shelter, to create a culture. Without a culture he is hardly a man.

But of course there is much more than that. Over the course of the centuries we have created complex cultures

with long traditions. Each of them is joined not only with a particular human group, but usually with a particular piece of the earth. The type of dwelling we make depends, for example, in part on the climate and the materials available, so that a culture is rooted in people and in land. To deprive someone of his culture is to pull him from his particular way of being human, to make him, in a sense, the naked man on top of the rock, in the hope of forcing him to adopt the culture of his oppressors and conquerors.

It hardly needs to be said that cultural mores are not absolutes, and that they may contain elements which hinder rather than aid man in establishing and expressing his real humanity. False religions, false philosophies, false moralities—all these debase a culture and need to be corrected. But even when this is done, a culture will still be itself. Catholic life is not the same in Germany as in Mexico, nor need it be the same in Zambia or Japan. A culture can be purified without being destroyed.

If this is the case, though, it follows that religion and morality have an important place in culture. And in fact many cultural practices are outward expressions of religious or philosophical truths. The way we build our houses, for example, can be a big influence on whether we encourage large families or make them something only the heroic will undertake. The design of neighborhoods or apartment buildings can encourage community or make it unlikely that anyone will ever discover who lives next door. The system of property ownership and marketing of produce can encourage economic stability, justice, and cooperation, or it can encourage ruthless competition and perpetual economic discord. Our customs of courtship can encourage chastity and healthy marriages or make fornication and subsequent adultery more likely.

The thing to note, however, is that different cultures have different arrangements for such things because of what the cultures and societies believe and think. For example, in the ancient Greek city-state of Sparta, all the institutions of daily life—the harsh education of boys, the separation of men from their families in military barracks, the prohibition of foreign travel—were for the sake of creating a formidable military machine, because the rulers of Sparta were convinced that this was what was good for their state. The militaristic ideas of the rulers found concrete formulation in militaristic cultural practices.

Likewise, capitalism and industrialism arose in Protestant, and not in Catholic, Europe because they were more

akin to the Protestant ethos than to the Catholic. Now if this is the case, we have to ask ourselves about our own cultural practices and the ideas they embody. Do they reflect the Catholic faith that we profess or some alien set of beliefs?

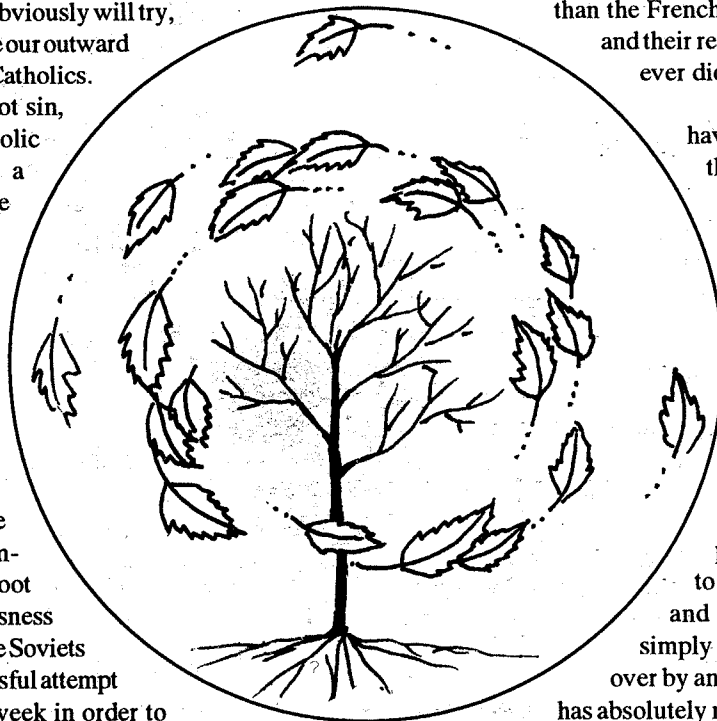
### THE SITUATION OF NORTH AMERICAN CATHOLICS

We who live in English-speaking North America necessarily live in the midst of a largely secularized Protestant culture. Everything in our public culture, from attitudes toward Sunday, toward gambling, toward drinking, toward money-making, toward the family, toward work, were originally formed by Protestantism and are now modified by secularism. But if we are Catholics, if we really believe the Faith, then we obviously will try, as much as possible, to make our outward lives reflect our beliefs as Catholics. Even in matters that are not sin, we will want to live a Catholic life, that is, to live out a Catholic culture. And for the time being, we can do that most successfully within the family and within small groups, since we have very little influence on the larger public culture.

One way we can do this is in the matter of sacred time. The way a culture organizes time is very important. In their efforts to root out all Christian consciousness from the Russian people, the Soviets made an early and unsuccessful attempt to replace the seven-day week in order to eradicate the concept of Sunday. Likewise, the French Revolution abolished our familiar months and began renumbering the years from the Revolution, beginning with "Year One." We can see that in a less radical way the official civic culture of the United States also desires to organize time. As I write, we are approaching Thanksgiving Day, a day meant for thanksgiving to Almighty God, yet—is this not strange?—initiated by the public authorities, not the Church: in fact, a secular civic holy day. And, of course, there are other titles that name other days: New Year's Day, Memorial Day, the Fourth of July, and many others. We even have Jefferson Davis' birthday (June 3) and Wright Brothers' Day (December 17). If you are interested, look into your almanacs and you will probably find a civic celebration for nearly every day of the year. And what do these days teach us?

They teach, I think, that our life is bounded by the state and by this life. The heroes who are honored in them served the nation (or at least we thought they did), contributed to its

industrial progress or its land-grabbing or to some other aspect of its history. They teach us that duty to the state is our whole duty and that this duty is accomplished entirely in this world. By saying that a day is the Fourth of July or Veterans' Day they assert that the community of Americans is the most important community to which we belong, the one that is primary in our lives. We are given holidays from work and take part in common celebrations (the Thanksgiving turkey or the fireworks) only according to this schedule. Any other is at best supplementary and private and at worst a competitor to be driven underground. In fact, one could argue that the secular American calendar has banished the notion of the Church year with its progression of holy days from the consciousness of Catholics much more effectively than the French or Russian revolutionaries and their reformulations of the calendar ever did.



Perhaps some readers might have thought of one holiday that was not created by the State authorities, and yet is given full honors by our society. This, of course, is Christmas. But what of it? It is clear that the general official North American celebration of Christmas has nothing to do with God become man, with the fact that Almighty God himself came to be touched, held, played with, and suckled, not to mention spat upon, whipped, and killed. Our Christmas is simply a winter festival presided over by an elf named Santa Claus, who has absolutely no living connection with the holy bishop of Myra.

According to the Church's calendar, Christmas begins on the evening of December 24 and extends for a period of days. Preceding Christmas comes Advent, a time of preparation for the celebration of the birth of our Lord. It hardly need be said that this preparation does not primarily mean the buying of gifts and suchlike, but rather the preparation of our souls for the Holy Infant.

In the public culture of North America Christmas begins to be celebrated sometime in November. Store displays may be put up even earlier. Christmas parties and the like are often held in early December. The "Christmas spirit" is certainly fully present by mid-December, and builds up to a climax on December 25, when it suddenly disappears. But what about the Church? She is just beginning her celebration. But who is celebrating? Are her children among those who have observed Advent, who have refrained from holding and attending parties before the evening of the 24th, who are now in a proper

state of soul and mind to rejoice? Or are they with the secularists, already sick of Christmas, jaded, happy to toss out the tree and buckle down to the next holiday, New Year's Eve? That many Catholic schools and other organizations hold Christmas celebrations during Advent shows that they lack the minimum understanding of how culture expresses faith. Of course, there are all sorts of good reasons why they must make that compromise—people will be away for the holidays, etc., but these all make about as much sense as celebrating Easter on Good Friday because someone will be out of town on Sunday. Those who do so proclaim that for them faith is separate from culture, a thing that hardly seems to affect their lives. They are so unwilling or afraid to depart from our culture's customs and dictates that they would rather ignore what Holy Church is doing. She may patiently await the coming of the Lord during Advent and rejoice afterwards; they will stubbornly try to rejoice before and sit around in disgust or boredom afterwards.

### TACTICS FOR RESISTANCE

To create or recreate an authentic Catholic subculture, we must more or less ignore the culture around us, including its observance of what it calls Christmas. One important and necessary way to do this is to observe the Church's real cycle of feasts and fasts. The calendar was never meant to be something observed merely within the church building for liturgical purposes only. The fact that this tends to be the case in countries of Protestant culture, such as the United States, indicates that there is something lacking in our Catholicity. It does not permeate our life, especially our public and corporate life. Too often it does not even noticeably affect our family life. But for those Catholics who recognize that culture is the outward sign of Faith and who know that the Church's year must reign supreme outside the sanctuary, there is much that can still be done.

Unlike those who live in countries of traditional Catholic culture, we have few public acknowledgements of sacred times. Our secular world does not blink an eye for the feast of Our Lord's Ascension or of our Blessed Lady's Assumption or Immaculate Conception, let alone the patronal feast of our parish or town. But if we are to be faithful Catholics, then it is right for us, as much as we reasonably can, to observe these feasts. Within families, apostolic groups, a neighborhood here and there, things can be done.

For starters, have a real Christmas party, i.e., a party sometime between December 24 and the Epiphany. Invite people, shock some of them. And, of course, refuse, as much as is consistent with keeping your job, to attend Christmas parties that desecrate Advent. Be militant. Do not conform. Make the Faith and its expression the most important thing.

For those families and groups with the time to do more, there are books that suggest ways to observe the well-known

and lesser-known feasts of the Church year. The Liturgical Press in Collegeville, Minnesota, at one time published a series of books covering most of the Church year, giving suggestions for the home or apostolic group. They contained everything from suggested ceremonies to recipes for traditional food. Though they appear to be no longer in print, there are other resources available. Those interested should check Catholic bookstores and mail-order firms. But even without a book, one can easily come up with many practices, ranging from dressing up and having a party for carnival (the night before Ash Wednesday—we encourage our children to make masks from paper grocery bags), to lighting an Advent wreath during family prayers in Advent.

Parents might well decide also to observe their own and their children's name days (that is, the feast day of the saint after whom they were named), as is traditional in Catholic regions. This is perfectly feasible in a family, and can either be in addition to, or instead of, observance of birthdays. This could be done in Catholic schools, too, but alas, few pastors, principals or teachers are aware that the Faith is something to be lived in a corporate as well as an individual manner.

Some might think that because the Church is in such a mess we should concentrate just on getting people to believe the Creeds and observe the basics of God's law. But I do not think this is so. Certainly the Creeds and the Commandments are primary, but if the full practice of the Faith is to spread, then it must be practiced in its fullness. We cannot wait for the problems in the Church to be solved (they will never be entirely solved, anyway) before we begin our own small efforts at restoration. We must do whatever we can to make our lives and our families integrally Catholic. And if we strive for that, at the same time striving for that holiness without which no one will see God, then, with confidence in God's Mother, we can expect our life both here and hereafter to be filled with God and to reflect him forever.

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