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that perfectly possesses
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Catholicism: The perfection of religion

By Thomas Storck

■ In one of his talks C. S. Lewis made an interesting distinction about religions. He spoke of those that were thick and of those that were clear.

We may . . . divide religions, as we do soups, into "thick" and "clear". By Thick I mean those which have orgies and ecstasies and mysteries and local attachments: Africa is full of Thick religions. By Clear I mean those which are philosophical, ethical and universalizing: Stoicism, Buddhism, and the Ethical Church are Clear religions. Now if there is a true religion it must be both Thick and Clear: for the true God must have made both the child and the man, both the savage and the citizen, both the head and the belly. And the only two religions that fulfil this condition are Hinduism and Christianity. But Hinduism fulfils it imperfectly. The Clear religion of the Brahmin hermit in the jungle and the Thick religion of the neighboring temple go on *side by side*. The Brahmin hermit doesn't bother about the temple prostitution nor the worshipper in the temple about the hermit's metaphysics. But Christianity really breaks down the middle wall of the partition. It takes a convert from central Africa and tells him to obey an enlightened universalist ethic: it takes a twentieth-

century academic prig like me and tells me to go fasting to a Mystery, to drink the blood of the Lord. The savage convert has to be Clear: I have to be Thick. That is how one knows one has come to the real religion.¹

I believe that Lewis's distinction is correct and is a useful way of looking at religions. And I would add, moreover, that within Christianity it is only Catholicism that perfectly possesses both the Thick and the Clear.² In the Catholic faith we have not only the same sacraments and the same doctrine imposed on all, theologian and philosopher or peasant and convert from a primitive tribe, but all participate in both the Thick and the Clear aspects of the Faith. Pilgrimages to local shrines attract both the highly educated and the less well educated and both groups make use of the Rosary, scapulars and other sacramentals. Though it is true that not all the faithful have an interest in or capacity for philosophy or theology, yet unlike Hinduism,



where the learned Brahmin and the peasant each believes different things and has in effect a different religion, all Catholics are bound to believe the same truths, even though some may understand them in a more sophisticated manner. And moreover, it is not always the most highly educated who understand the truths of the Faith best, but holy souls who are close to God often have an intuitive knowledge of the deepest mysteries of our religion that surpasses simple academic knowledge.

Though all this is true of Catholicism, it is also true that since the Second Vatican Council the Church has presented a more Clear image to her faithful. Instead of darkened churches with flickering candles, instead of Latin chant, instead of a priest at the altar celebrating Holy Mysteries, we now have a cheerful community meal in a well-lighted building that often looks like a large multi-purpose room. The vernacular liturgy *per se* is not incompatible with a sense of Thickness (witness the Eastern liturgies or the old Anglican liturgy), but in the Latin rite of the Catholic Church, liturgy in the vernacular,

and the other changes, such as the priest saying Mass facing the congregation, have definitely contributed to an increase in the Clear and a decrease in the Thick.

This change in the ratio of Thick to Clear elements in our religion has upset the balance in Catholicism, a balance that not only tends to attract and nourish the greatest number of people in the Faith, but presents the most true image of the Incarnate Lord, Thickness and Clearness in exactly the right proportions. Thus the most important consequence of the increase of the Clear is that both the truth and the beauty of the Faith are hidden from the faithful and from the world.

But there is another aspect that also has special consequences for our own time. I would suggest that each century or cultural epoch has a special attraction to either Thick or Clear religion. The Romantics of the early nineteenth century, for example, were definitely inclined to the Thick. Consider poetry such as Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* or Keats's *The Eve of St. Agnes*. But the 1950s of this century, on the other hand, seem to have been disposed toward a Clear religion. This fit in well with the sense of industrial and technological progress, the increasing scientific knowledge that seemed to allow us to control reality as never before.

But much has changed since the 1950s, and I think that today the leading elements of our cultural situation are definitely inclined toward the Thick.³ An example of this is the popularity of novels of fantasy and magic that abound for both young and old. Now I would never suggest that the Church should alter the balance of her Thick and Clear elements in order to attract men of a particular era to the Faith. In both the short and the long run it is better for the face of the Church to exhibit the historic balance of Catholicism, rather than to attempt to accommodate any one single age. But unfortunately that is exactly what we have not done. The men who implemented

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the Second Vatican Council were men of the previous epoch. In an attempt to make the liturgy attractive to the age, they only made it attractive to the age that was passing away. In the 1960s young people were turning to Hinduism, to Hare Krishna, to Zen, to meditation before incense in a temple, not to an atmosphere of increasing rationalism and well-lit buildings. Eventually this spiritual movement of the 60s coalesced into the New Age, obviously a manifestation of the Thick. As a result, at the very time when our Thick features ought to exist in their fullness, in order to attract a spiritually-starved age, we have weakened them and continue to weaken them.⁴

It is interesting and useful to see what the practitioners of contemporary New Age Thick spirituality actually say about the Thick/Clear distinction. The following quote is quite interesting, though in all probability its author never heard of Lewis's distinction.

The goal of this old "sacred game" [of patriarchal religion] is to get away from the ordinary, the natural, the "unsacred"—away from women, fleshly bodies, decaying nature, away from all that is rooted in mortality and dying. "Up, up and away" is the cry of this religious consciousness as it seeks to ascend to the elevated realm of pure spirit and utter transcendence where nothing gets soiled, or rots, or dies.⁵

"Patriarchal religion," of course, is a code term for chiefly Christianity. And the description of this patriarchal religion is the caricature of Christianity actually held by some people. They see all Christian religion, even Catholicism, as nothing but a desiccated kind of Deism. Before proceeding to suggest one remedy for this, I want to instance another and striking example of the spiritually Thick in contemporary religion.

There is a movement known as Urban Primitivism or Modern Primitivism, that looks to the initiation rites of primitive or eastern religions for its spiritual inspiration.

Many of these rites involve painful acts, such as hanging by hooks, cutting the flesh, lying on beds of nails. But the most extreme of those associated with this Primitivism engage in rites using their own blood, cutting each other, drinking the blood, spattering it on one another. But what is most interesting is how some of these invoke religious imagery or language to explain what they are doing. For example:

I consider blood a symbol of the life force.

All the people in this book [a book on blood rites] are merely seeking to emulate Jesus Christ, whose blood washed away the sins of the world. Or maybe just their own sins. Everybody's gotta start somewhere.

Consumed with guilt over failing to prevent [his girlfriend's] death, Clark needed to process the pain somehow. He says he allowed his new girlfriend, dressed as a Catholic schoolgirl, to lash him to a wooden crucifix. To the astonishment of the club, she then pulled out a scalpel and carved a big cross into his chest.⁶

Now I am far from denying that some of this might be simply a following of perverse fashion, and I also fully recognize that Satan either has his hand in it or soon will. But still I think it is important to recognize that some of our contemporaries are so eager for a Thick spirituality that they are willing to be cut and to have their blood drunk in order to achieve it. However perverse their rites are, one must admire their willingness to suffer and their desire for ritual that goes beyond the blandness of everyday life. Their activities are about as far from the polite discussions over tea of cultured skeptics as one can get.

The Rosary: a remedy

In the face of all this, what are Catholics to think or to do? Harking back to the quote about patriarchal religion, let us look at the specific charges the author makes. She says that patriarchal religion's "goal . . . is to get away from the ordinary, the natural, the

'unsacred'—away from women, fleshly bodies, decaying nature, away from all that is rooted in mortality and dying." Now of course, it is nonsense to say that any religion that makes the Incarnation of its God into human flesh, into the womb of his Mother, a central article of its Faith, that such a religion flees "women, fleshly bodies, decaying nature, . . . mortality and dying." Jesus Christ sought out a woman to be his Mother, and came into this world in order to show his mortality and to die. "Up, up and away" could hardly be the cry of the religion of the Incarnation, let alone of the bodily Ascension of our Lord and our Lady's bodily Assumption. And if the bloody death of our Lord on the Cross and the conversion of bread and wine into his Body and Blood were presented and preached to the faithful and to the world, would those who feel compelled to engage in blood rites perhaps have a more sane outlet for their spiritual strivings?

But where do we find all these doctrines presented, and presented in a way so as to highlight this aspect of the Catholic faith? It is in our Lady's Rosary, the fifteen mysteries that contain the chief moments of the Lord's Incarnation; it is in these mysteries that we can find an excellent summary of the Thick elements of Catholicism. For the Incarnation is the foundation of that juxtaposition of the Divine and the human that characterizes Catholicism so well. Religions that are Clear either entirely lack or underplay this mingling of the Divine and the human. In religions such as Ethical Culturalism or Unitarianism, for example, it is missing altogether. And in liberal Protestantism, the emphasis is on the human Jesus, either denying or downplaying his divinity. But in the Thick religions, in paganism, and in Hinduism, there is obviously a mixing of gods with men, a mixing that assumes a wide variety of types. And in Catholicism the Incarnation is the basis of the cult of the Mother of God and ultimately of

the saints, which includes the many shrines and devotions in their honor. It is the particularizing aspect of such devotions that constitutes the Thick factor, that is, the shrine is *here*, not everywhere, the blessed medal or the holy water is a particular concrete thing in a particular place. For one aspect of the Thick/Clear dichotomy is the distinction between universal and local. In paganism the principle of the local prevailed to the extent that different gods might be worshipped in different places. While the notion of different gods governing different localities or tribes is plainly contrary to reason (a universalizing element), in Catholicism the local principle is represented by patron saints and angels of places and people, by shrines, by festivals that differ from place to place. Catholicism is a universalizing religion, yet in these practices it gives ample scope to the human desire to particularize spiritual realities. It is thus the perfect synthesis of Clear and Thick.

In the Incarnation God himself becomes present in a place. He is born, he travels about, he dies, he rises again, he returns to Heaven. All these mysteries, of course, are part of the Rosary, and in meditating on the Rosary mysteries we can get to the heart of our Faith: the universal God, the Second Person of the Eternal Trinity becoming a particular man, the perfect mixing of the Thick and the Clear. And in the rest of the joyful mysteries we see more of this in action, with the sanctification of John the Baptist during the Visitation, with the beautiful events of the Nativity and the Presentation, with God himself sitting in his own Temple and asking questions of his own creatures.

Then in the sorrowful mysteries we see the humanity of God, weak enough to be tormented by sinful men. These are decidedly not mysteries in which "nothing gets soiled, or rots, or dies," but rather the opposite, an embrace of the most sordid conditions under

which mankind can be forced to exist, mental agony, thirst, hunger, bloody beatings, crucifixion. Yet the one who embraced this was God himself, the universal Prime Mover, First Cause and Necessary Being.

And even in the glorious mysteries we still do not have the desire "to ascend to the elevated realm of pure spirit and utter transcendence where nothing gets soiled, or rots, or dies." Rather we have the affirmation that human bodies, bodies, as in the case of our Lady, begotten by their human parents, bodies fed upon the plants and animals of this world, that these bodies can actually dwell in the realm of the Most High God. The very wounds of our Lord are carried into Heaven and are part of his triumph. Here is no ethereal escape from real life, but rather the bringing of earthly life into Heaven. Here again that joining of the Divine and the human that is the glory of our religion.

Though an orthodox Catholic will take all this for granted, yet perhaps most of the time we are not fully alive to its implications. In our justified opposition to the New Age and to all forms of paganism, we need to emphasize that whatever of real value their adherents are looking for can be found in their fullness and proper context in the Faith. For example, those who engage in the blood rites I spoke of above should be assured that blood really is vivifying and that the shedding of blood did bring forgiveness to the whole world.⁷ Moreover even their instinctive desire to drink blood does not need to be suppressed but fulfilled in the Sacrifice of the Mass. The modern secularized world has no interest in blood except as a medical fact. We Catholics know that we must be washed in the blood of Jesus Christ to attain salvation. If some of the more extreme of the New Agers likewise look upon blood as valuable, let us look on them as misguided, but at least as having recognized that reality is richer than the dreary world of atheistic secularism or Deism.

Above I said that the liturgy since the Council has overemphasized the Clear factor in Catholicism. And in general one can say the same for all aspects of Catholic life. Renew 2000 is Clear; weekly Miraculous Medal devotions were Thick. If we are to have a widespread revival of Catholic life, it must be a revival of the traditional elements that made for the perfect balance of Thick and Clear in our religion. Of course this is not to say that everything before the Council was fine. In fact, by failing to take seriously the need to really create a Catholic culture, we allowed Catholic spirituality, Catholic intellectual life, and ultimately Catholic life as a whole, to be corrupted by the Clearness that prevailed in the culture of the first part of the twentieth century. We thus prepared the way for the debacle that followed the Council. If we revive, we must revive on a much deeper level. Not only our beliefs and our thoughts, but (as much as possible) we must try to make the

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substance of our lives and environments reflect the Catholic faith. Then we will exemplify the Thick and the Clear in correct proportions, though doubtless we will seem Thick to a Clear age and Clear to a Thick one. But this is the only way for the Mystical Body to participate in the work for the salvation of mankind that is the desire of the Sacred Heart of Jesus Christ, "who desires all men"—both the Thick and the Clear—"to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim. 2:4, RSV CE). ■

¹ "Christian Apologetics" in *God in the Dock* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1970) pp. 102-103.

² Calvinism is definitely a Clear religion, as also are all forms of modern liberal Protestantism. Those religions that historically retained some of their Catholic ceremonial heritage, such as the Lutheran and Anglican, also retained some of Catholicism's Thick features. On the other hand, Evangelical Protestantism suffers from some of that same split that Lewis notes in Hinduism. Its highly emotional forms, of which snake-handlers would be the most extreme, are certainly Thick,

but they do not attract rational and highly-educated people. And to the extent that Evangelical religion steers away from such excesses it tends to become merely Clear, highly rational.

³ Although the leading elements of our culture incline toward the Thick, the framework of our culture, our political and legal systems, most of our educational system, and especially our technology, are extreme examples of the Clear. Perhaps, without too much distortion, one can say that modernism inclined toward the Clear, while post-modernism inclines toward the Thick.

⁴ The recent decision by the U.S. bishops to allow the feast of our Lord's Ascension to be moved to the following Sunday helps to desacralize time, one of the chief elements of human life, thus making the Clear element in our Faith even more disproportionate. There are unfortunately many other examples that could be cited in the ecclesiastical policy of the present day.

⁵ Elizabeth Dodson Gray, quoted in Cynthia Eller, *Living in the Lap of the Goddess* (New York: Crossroad, 1993) p. 136.

⁶ All quotes concerning these blood rites come from *SF Weekly*, October 29, 1997.

⁷ They seem to sense in a confused way the truth enunciated in Hebrews 9:22, "... without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins" RSV CE.



Mr. Thomas Storck is the author of Foundations of a Catholic Political Order (1998) and The Catholic Milieu (1987). His articles have appeared in Faith & Reason, Catholic Faith, New Oxford Review and elsewhere. He holds an M.L.S. from Louisiana State University and an M.A. from St. John's College, Santa Fe, N. M. He is currently employed as a librarian in Washington, D.C. Mr. Storck is a regular contributor to HPR.