

# THE SCANDAL OF THE PARTICULAR

## DAVID VINCENT MECONI WHAT MAKES THE CATHOLIC MIND UNIQUE?

*"I wish I liked Catholics more."  
"They seem just like other people."  
"*

*"My dear Charles, that's exactly what they're not -particularly in this country, where they're so few. It's not just that they're a clique ... they've got an entirely different outlook on life; everything they think important is different from other people. They try and hide it as much as they can, but it comes out all the time."*

This snippet from *Brideshead Revisited*, the great Oxonian novel about friendship, the tensions of town and gown, and Christian transformation by Catholic convert Evelyn Waugh, reminds us that the Catholic "outlook on life" should be different. In fact, it should be unique, for the Catholic mind is called to see both Heaven and earth, divinity and humanity, differently, harmoniously. That's what makes such an outlook "Catholic" and not "Jewish," "Muslim," "secular," or even "Christian." Yet, like poor Charles in Waugh's novel, most people today do not see the uniqueness of the Catholic mind because most Catholics have ceased thinking - and, therefore, acting - as we have been called to do. Most Catholics think and act not

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much differently from the world we are missioned through the grace of baptism and confirmation to consecrate. Yet it need not be that way. As G.K. Chesterton said of the Church upon his conversion, "It is the only thing that frees a man from the degrading slavery of being a child of his age."

What makes Catholicism unique? We could give myriad answers, as Christ's Church is blessed in ways that no other group of humans could ever know. For the sake of brevity, I will highlight two of the most obvious answers. The first is Catholicism's sacramental worldview, and the second is that the Catholic Church is the visible body our Lord founded when He established an *ecclesia* upon St. Peter's apostolic acknowledgment (cf. Mt. 16:18).

It is important from the start to see that the Church is not a human invention; she is to be understood as a living body indistinguishable from Jesus Christ Himself. In fact, the Church is nothing other than the extension of Christ in every age and place until the end of time. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains:

Let us rejoice then and give thanks that we have become not only Christians. but Christ himself .... For if he is the head. we are the members; he and we together are the whole man .... The fullness of Christ then is the head and the members .... Head **and** members form as it were one and the same mystical person. A reply of st. Joan of Arc to her judges sums up the faith of the holy doctors and the good sense of

the believer: "About Jesus Christ and the Church, I simply know they're just one thing, and we shouldn't complicate the matter." (no. 795)

It is often said that a Catholic finds the Church and then Christ, whereas a non-Catholic Christian first surrenders to Jesus and then finds his church. If true, the above quote explains why: Catholics are to understand the Church as a Christic continuation, Jesus' own mystical body growing and extending throughout every century and continent, making

His sacrifice and salvation available to those who could not live in first-century Jerusalem. This is why a non-Catholic Christian can fulfill the Third Commandment by going to either a Methodist or a Presbyterian or a non-denominational "service," but a Catholic can do so only by attending the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.

I say this not out of a sense of superiority but the exact opposite: A Catholic's obedience to the Church shows radical humility. The Mass I must attend, for example, nourishes me; I do not add anything to it. The teachings I am asked to adhere to judge me; I do not judge them. Only in this way is the holiness of the Christian the holiness of Christ; only in this way are the truths the Church teaches guaranteed not to be from the mind of man but from Truth Himself.

If it is the Church that replicates and prolongs the Incarnation in this world, the first distinct characteristic of Catholicism is what is usually called the sacramental worldview. What does this mean? Just compare Catholic buildings to other places of worship. Our walls are covered - some- times gaudily so - with

evident, tangible images: there are fonts of holy water bolted to door frames and ambries filled with holy oils; statues of saints and Stations of the Cross adorn the walls; a crucifix, usually with a very bloodied and bruised body, is prominently displayed; there is a lingering smell of incense; and directly in the middle of it all is the Tabernacle, where the incarnate Son of God humbly waits for His people to visit.

Here Bethlehem continues; here the faithful from every class and race come to kneel before and worship our God. Who are those faithful? They come from every continent; they have hard wooden rosary beads between their fingers, scratchy scapulars around their shoulders, and most likely a Miraculous Medal dangling from their necks. The books they carry are stuffed with prayer cards, Mass cards; and maybe even small relics of hair or bone of the followers of Jesus they admire. Their world is an enchanted world, filled with theophanies of a God who longs to be our All in all (cf. 1 Cor. 15:28). He is not a God who absorbs into Himself what He brought forth; He is not a micromanager who demands that His vassals foster no other attachments than to Him. No, this is a God, says Gerard Manley Hopkins, S.J., whose "Christ plays in ten thousand places, / Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his / To the Father through the features of men's faces."

God's world, by its very nature, is a sacramental that lifts human minds to their Creator through the divine embeddedness of matter. For the truly Catholic mind, this world is awash with grace, a world in which, as Hopkins's poetry so beautifully depicts, the

incarnate Son continues His offering before the Father through our very lives.

While all Christians are committed to a lively faith in the Incarnation of the Second Person of the Divine Trinity, the Catholic vision allows that Incarnation to continue. The divine is still conveyed materially: The God who created all things good is also the God who assumed this created order to Himself. He is a God who has become visible thanks to the "yes" of a young Virgin who gave Him particularity. That is, in her "yes," Mary allowed God to be not just everywhere but somewhere specific. God Himself is now kicking in this womb, now asleep in this cradle, now teaching on this mountain, now dead on that cross. Here in this one woman, the New Eve, the Father fell in love once again with humanity, and He fell so hard that He sent His Son to take the created order personally and eternally to His own divine nature.

This is the event that changed human history forever. This event united Heaven and earth. And this event - this inbreaking of God into the human condition - continues today. In Christ the hallowedness of the created order is complete. We embodied beings are, therefore, able to find salvation nowhere else but in this world of fur and fleece, flora and fauna, food and friends. We who have been consecrated by the name *Christian* thus worship a God who has assumed corporality to Himself.

But how has that enfleshed divine presence continued to be available to us here and now?

The Catholic answer comes by way of the Last Supper. Knowing He would soon ascend back to the Father, our Lord translated Himself into the Most Holy

Eucharist: "This is now my Body, this is now my Blood." As such, Christ's real presence in the Eucharist is how the God-made-flesh keeps His promise never to leave us orphans (cf. In. 14:18). It is how the God-made-flesh can be with us always, even until the end of the age (cf. Mt. 28:20). Ask your non-Catholic Christian friends how the en-fleshed Messiah meets them, and how they come to touch and see and even taste Him. There is no other way in this world than the Most Holy Sacrament.

Only in the Eucharist does Christ speak in the present and not in the past; only in the Eucharist is Christianity a religion not of an arcane memory or a futuristic promise but a gathering of the faithful around the God who has become flesh for them. Hence Catholics' emphasis on the particularity of the Mass, the Host, and the Tabernacle: It is here that the enfleshed God dwells in a way that is different from His spiritual presence elsewhere. And this concreteness of the Real Presence ripples throughout the rest of Catholic spirituality. For it is here, in front of this Host, and nowhere else, that the scriptural mandate to bend one's knee (cf. Phil. 2:10) is fulfilled. This is what gives the Church the other-worldly ability to teach universal and timeless truths; this is what allows the Church to traverse the centuries, converting souls, surviving sinful representatives, and feeding billions in body and in spirit.

The Church's stressing of the concrete particular has its roots in what Franciscan friar Duns Scotus (d. 1308) called *haecceitas*, the thisness of all things (from the Latin *haec*, meaning "this"). Stressing the thisness of reality allows the Catholic mind to demarcate and name graces that are essential to our

growth in holiness. As we saw, the impact of this emphasis results from our understanding of the Third Commandment - fulfilled only by Sunday Mass and no other way - to how we understand more private matters like the sexual act, which is beautiful and virtuous only when ordered toward the ongoing unitive love between a married man and woman and naturally open to life. Stressing such particularities reminds us that there are no universals apart from the mind of God, and that we who are embodied in this world **must** never tire of finding the divine in **the mundane** of the everyday.

Take, for example, **John Calvin's** famous phrase about a sinner's state of **"total** depravity." If this were true, we would never need to ask forgiveness for any specific sin. There **would** be no particular act or thought to name, **and no real** sin to avoid in the future. Such a generality might serve as a convenient abstraction requiring **no** self-awareness, no actual cataloging of our ways, and no one thing for which we must ask forgiveness. There would be no need to grow in self-awareness, no need to specify the grace necessary to overcome that one vice. Ironically, if everything is a grave sin, then somehow nothing is a sin.

How different is the Catholic confessional!

How different it is to have to get up, get dressed, and travel to the place where a man ordained to continue God's merciful forgiveness *in persona Christi* sits and waits for the contrite. How different it is to have to survey your soul and speak your particular sins aloud with a certain specificity. How different it is to distinguish, as the Catholic mind does. (and as • Scripture insists),

between deadly and venial sins, between those grave acts of rebellion that sap grace from our souls and those everyday peccadillos that blemish the soul but allow God's intimate indwelling to remain. How illuminating is the Beloved Apostle's admonition that while all sin is an offense against the Almighty, not all sin is deadly (cf. 1 In. 5:16-17). It is an admonition that I, as a Catholic, find so helpful, as it allows me to survey and name my lapses before the Almighty, knowing that the more careful I am in calling out my infidelities, the more specific I can be in asking the Lord for this or that particular grace. How different it is and how comforting, then, to hear Jesus' words of absolution,

"I absolve you of all of your sins, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit." There is no substitute for hearing audibly and in a clear-cut moment that my sins have been loosed here on earth.

The second unique Catholic characteristic, the founding of the Church, is likewise biblical. For Catholics, the Church is a continuation of the theandric activity of Jesus Himself. The Church is not merely a set of rules or a conglomerate of campuses; she is a mystical person in whose authority the ancient creeds insist we must place our theological virtue of faith:

I believe in one God, the Father Almighty .... I believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God .... I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of Life .... I believe in one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church ....

Post-Reformation Christianity tends to focus on the smallness of that "c" in catholic, contending that the Church called upon at the Council of Nicaea (AD. 325) could not be *this* particular Church today. But as early as the next century, the great bishop of Hippo knew that the Catholic Church of the ancient creeds was nothing other than the mystical body into which he had been ordained to serve and nourish with Christ's own sacraments. That is, once St. Augustine's twisted fascination with the power of his own mind wore off, he could confidently turn back and warn the proud Manicheans that what distinguishes the Church is not intelligent preaching or flashy rituals. Rather, the true Church is known by antiquity, universality, apostolic succession, and the miraculous nature of her very existence. One of Augustine's first written works after his episcopal ordination gives us a glimpse into how the Church Fathers understood what it means to become and remain Catholic:

*To say nothing of the wisdom that ... exists in the Catholic Church, there are many other things that most rightfully hold me in her bosom. The agreement of peoples and nations holds me. The authority begun with miracles, nourished with hope, increased with love, and strengthened with age holds me in the Catholic Church. The succession of priests from the very see of the apostle Peter, to whom after his resurrection the Lord entrusted the feeding of his sheep, right up to the present episcopacy holds me in the Catholic Church. Finally, the name "Catholic" holds me in the Catholic*

*Church. It was not without reason that this Church alone, among so many heresies, obtained this name so that, though all heretics want to be called Catholic, no heretic would dare to point out his own basilica or house to some stranger who asked where the Catholic Church was to be found .... No one will move me from that faith which binds my mind to the Christian religion by such great bonds. (Answer to the Letter of Mani Known as The Foundation, no. 4.5)*

This is the Church of the early Fathers. It is a, Church to which one could point, a gathering of faithful Christians whose roots go back to Christ's commission to the Apostle Peter to feed His sheep, and whose teachings have combated any and all heresies. This is the Church of St. Ignatius of Antioch (d. 107), who warned that we Christians "must never act independently

All of you together, as though you were approaching the only existing temple of God and the only altar, speed to the one and only Jesus Christ." And of st. Cyprian of Carthage (d. 258), who declared, "You cannot have God for your Father if you have not the Church for your mother."

Such a belief might seem to border on the sin of pride, but in seeing the Church as divinely founded by Jesus Christ, Catholics show forth humble receptivity. For this divinely ordained, sustained, and oriented body, which has chosen to rely on sinful human endeavor and has helped both save and scandalize souls for 2,000 years, is not a human invention. Her name comes from no human founder (as does Lutheranism) or theological position (as does Methodism); she cannot be limited by

her physical address (as is, say, West Pines Baptist Church) or the number of corrections 'she has experienced (as is, for example, the Second Reformed Church). In fact, some of the worst preaching I have ever heard, some of the most heterodox teaching I have had to reject, and some of filthiest headlines I have ever had to read have come from members of this Church. But as disgraceful as such things can be, they remind us that only by God's grace does Christ's Church move through the millennia.

This insight is nothing new. In his 14th century collection of stories, the *Decameron*, Giovanni Boccaccio (d. 1375) recounts the story of a shrewd Parisian businessman named Abraham. Having watched Christians for decades, Abraham, a Jew, wishes to be received into Christ's Church. But he figures he should first go to Rome to see what this Church is really all about. One of Abraham's Catholic friends, Giannotto, pleads with him not to go, figuring that if Abraham encounters the filth and degradation in that supposed Eternal City, he would be so scandalized that there would be no way he would still want to be received into the Church. Of course, Abraham disregards Giannotto's counsel and goes to Rome.

Returning to Paris with stories only of drunken prelates and gluttonous laity lax in morals, Abraham is more excited for his baptism than he was before he left. Giannotto asks how this could be. Abraham responds, "I see that what these scoundrel clerics so zealously want never takes root. But the exact opposite happens: despite them, your Church grows continually and shines more and more brightly." Therefore, Abraham concludes, "it is quite clear to me that

your Church must have the Holy Spirit for its foundation and support," arguing that she would have collapsed centuries ago were it not for this divine foundation.

Recognizing this divine sustenance is essential to a Christian's growth in holiness. It is one thing to accept Jesus Christ as one's Lord and Savior, but the next move must be to realize that Christ is an embodied being whose teachings and ways are still being communicated surely - we might say *infallibly* - to a fallen world. Should we be surprised? This is the scandal of the particular, an accusation hurled against Christians since Bethlehem: that this man, and no one else, is God, and that He is the way, the life, and the truth (d. In. 14:6), not just *a* way or *a* truth. If this is true for the Head, should we then be so shocked that the same goes for the body, the Church?

Remember. The first Christians were persecuted *not* for worshiping Jesus: the Romans always had room in their pantheon for one more deity. No, they were martyred for not worshiping the gods of the Empire. It is this exclusivity and the consequent stressing of the particular that gave Christianity its earliest form.

The Catholic mind is unique; it is neither more faithful nor holier than other Christian minds. Yet it is graced to see God and His good creation differently. For the Catholic world is a sacramental that **enters the** material order as the divinely invented arena dripping with grace. Creatures are diaphanous windows, faint reflections, of a Triune Love that longs to be known in and through its first gift outward. This is why Catholic eyes are filled with crucifixes and statues, our nostrils filled

with incense, and our knees on the ground or our feet in a eucharistic procession. Such bodily devotions matter because the pilgrim soul is inextricably bound up with body. Further, such devotions matter because we trust that the Church that models such things is the Church that Christ not only founded 2,000 years ago but directs at this very moment.

It is not theology or fidelity, nor even the Bible, but the Church that emerges as "the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of truth" (1 Tim. 3:15). This Church is truly a household, a body, a gathering of stumbling saints who seek refuge from the dangerous currents of the world. This is the place of Christ's second kenosis, where He again empties Himself into our sinful flesh so as to redeem us as one of us. As such, the Catholic mind is invited and even empowered to meet the Incarnate Word in all that He has redeemed.

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