

What Makes Us Catholic: Eight Gifts For Life

By Thomas Groome

Notes for Reading Circles

In Preparation for the Marianist Universities Meetings

June 7-10, 2004

Chaminade University

St. Mary's University

University of Dayton

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Thomas Groome

Chapter One: “What Stories to Tell?” – Interpreting Christian Faith

There are multiple faiths that believe in one God. And the lived expressions of them take many forms. One way of interpreting these different faith experiences is from a narrative perspective: what stories give them their character? Eight of them will be named in the book, stories that give “Catholic” its distinctive character:

1. We know that we human beings are a mixed bag, but we have a basically positive assessment of human nature.
2. We have a similar assessment of the world. It too is a mixed bag, but we are world-affirming, and find God disclosed in the world.
3. We are big on community! Discipleship is radically communal.
4. We have a deep respect for the past, for scripture and for tradition.
5. Yet we do live forward, and collaborate in building a new world.
6. Social concern runs deep. The common good is the moral horizon. Social justice towers.
7. In its Greek roots, *catholic* means “according to the whole.” Inclusivity at all levels.
8. The traditions of spirituality and asceticism are planted deep in the heart of the Catholic story.

Two important dynamics are *retrieval interpretation*—pulling things out of the marvelous storehouse of tradition, and *creative interpretation*, going where we’ve never been before (which will some day, in turn, become tradition). We will never exhaust the potentiality of Christian faith.

Note: when creative interpretation adds something truly new or subtracts some feature, it’s not just a numerical addition or subtraction. It’s more like adding and subtracting ingredients from a recipe: the whole production takes a different character.

Discussion

Name a feature of the Catholic deep story that you experience and value in your University’s life. Or one that you think has outlived its time and needs to be rethought and/or replaced.

Name a newer “something” that you’d like to see become a more palpable part of the Catholic deep story in your University.

Pose the same two challenges concerning the Marianist deep story.

What Makes Us Catholic

Thomas Groome

Chapter Two: “Who Do We Think We Are?” — Living as a Graceful People

How one interprets “being human” is an anthropology. Are people inherently a mess and doomed without the intervention of God’s grace? Are people inherently good, and we just have to give ourselves a chance? Or are we a mixture of the two? If a mixture, is the tilt towards the good or toward evil?

If human life is created by God, and is made in God’s image, we have to start sounding positive. After each day of creation God said, “It is good.” But on the day God created human life God said, “It is very good!” Yet the serpent appealed to the baser instincts of the two people made in God’s image, and they/we sinned. So we are evidently a mixture. Paul said that if sin abounds (and it does), grace still superabounds. Grace makes the difference; but it doesn’t do an end-run around human nature. It works, as Thomas Aquinas said, *through* nature. We are grace-susceptible. Bernard Lonergan calls it “a realistic optimism.” It is one of the stories that Catholics tell.

Catholic culture has affirmed a natural law: God has made us with a sense of what is right and what is wrong. For a Protestant, murder is wrong because the Bible says so. For a Catholic, murder is wrong (natural law), and that is why the Bible condemns it.

Part of this natural law is that we are relational/social by nature, and love is the only thing that redeems our relationality.

Some of the dynamics of putting life together include memory (past), assessment of the present, and imagination (possible futures). Which elements of tradition do we want to make sure come with us into the future? What real possibilities lie before us that we can activate? How will Catholicism’s positive anthropology show us functionally?

Another anthropological take is the connection between action and reflection. We interpret the world we live in. Every understanding affects how we see the world. How we see the world affects how we behave in the world. If we want to know what something means, we have to play it out. Knowing how action is shaped by interpretation is key. The consequences of anything we understand belong to the meaning of what we understand. Not after-effects, but internal to meaning.

Discussion

What are some ways that Catholicism’s positive anthropology might deliberately shape policy in human resources? How might it shape a core curriculum? How is conflict understood and addressed?

A Marianist dictum is that the Brothers always have “a prudent inclination to leniency.” How does this realistic optimism shape approaches to discipline?

What Makes Us Catholic

Thomas Groome

Chapter Three: “What’s It All About?” – Taking a Sacramental View

In this chapter, Groome tackles the relationship between the faith of Catholic Christians and their worldview. He contends that the basis of the Catholic worldview is the human-divine covenant. Based on this covenant, a Catholic worldview recognizes that life in the world is *good* and *gracious* as well as *meaningful* and *worthwhile*. All life created by God is essentially good; the world, therefore, is essentially good. Life is also essentially gracious because God’s grace takes the initiative in the world. Catholic Christians contend that life is rooted in Ultimate Meaning, not random mishap, and that each life is worthwhile, not because of what an individual might possess or do, but simply because life is worthy *per se*. With this as a foundation, Groome emphasizes the centrality of the sacramental in the Catholic imagination. A Catholic imagination cultivates an awareness of the extraordinary experiences of the ordinary, an awareness of the ‘more’ in the hustle and bustle of daily life, in which we risk recognizing the divine in the human and the human in the divine. Groome suggests three practices for encouraging a sacramental outlook: developing the habit of sacramental imagination through practices such as meditation and contemplation; acting as a good steward of the earth through an appreciation of the divine in nature and; and celebrating life through the Eucharist. Through the cultivation and activation of such a sacramental imagination, where we risk exploring possibilities and their potential consequences, we can best live out the human-divine covenant.

Discussion

Reflect on a moment in your life at the University when you recognized the extraordinary in the ordinary. What possibilities does the experience offer to the cultivation of your imagination?

What are some practices in your area at the University which encourage a sacramental imagination? What are some practices which do not? Can you imagine changes to those practices to make them more life-giving?

What Makes Us Catholic

Thomas Groome

Chapter Four: “Are We Made For Each Other?” – Getting Together for Good

In this chapter Groome explores the dilemma that to be a person is to be in relationship with other persons. He discusses the sociology of Catholic living based upon the idea that “We are social beings by divine design.” Society and community are not accidental add-ons, but integral components of human development. As persons, we are simultaneously individual and communal at any given moment in our lives. Catholic thought, unlike social contract thought, does not value the individual over the communal, but values each equally. By valuing each equally, Catholic thought recognizes that the promotion of the common good is integrally linked with the promotion of the good of each person. Because of the emphasis on this human duality, the phrase ‘private Christian’ is a contradiction, particularly as community often serves as a primary medium for grace. Keeping this in mind then, a Catholic sociology encourages not just the work of person-to-person charity, but also the work of justice in society for the promotion of the common good. For the early Christians, this meant striving to create: a welcoming community (*koinonia*); a word of God community (*kerygma*); a worshipping community (*leitourgia*), a community of good neighbors (*diakonia*); and a witnessing community (*marturia*). To create such communities in our modern world in which we integrate the Catholic sociology of a community-of-persons with Christian spirituality, Groome suggests that: (1) good citizenship is integral to spirituality; (2) participation in a faith community offers opportunities for the growth of social spirituality; (3) prayer to the saints and for the souls serve as opportunities to seek and accept assistance in our journey toward the common good.

Discussion

Do you think of yourself first as an individual or first as a member of a community, such as your family? Why? What implications are there for your sociology rooted in this view?

How do you see your University community striving to live out this Catholic sociology which values the individual and the communal equally? In what ways would you like to see your University promote the growth of the person through your community?

What Makes Us Catholic

Thomas Groome

Chapter Five: “What Time Do We Have?” — Mining the Treasury of Scripture and Tradition

In Chapter Five, Groome presents us with the doubled edged gift of Scripture and Tradition for Catholic life.

In the first part of his presentation he involves us in an exploration of a how we use our view of time as a lens through which we perceive what is happening now, what we have experienced and critically what has gone before us (tradition). He contends that if our lens focuses our view too narrowly on the future or on the past, we tend to miss out on the here and now and on the “real value” of tradition. He argues that “the image of time and tradition” in Catholicism is one that calls us to “embrace the time we have and be agents within it...[to] reflectively inherit the past and its legacy... [to] be responsible in the present toward the future.”

The second part of the Chapter takes up Groome’s core argument. He contends that for Scripture and Tradition to be vital to Catholic life they need to be interpreted, understood and held in a “holistic” manner and seen as a “both and” not an “either or:” “A deep Catholic conviction is that God’s revelation did not end with the Apostolic era and is not limited to the Bible’s pages. Rather, by the presence of God’s Spirit, tradition continues to unfold throughout human experience.”

Equally, Groome cautions that when Scripture and Tradition are narrowly held misinterpreted or estranged from one another or from human experience, they could become sources of discouragement, disconnectedness, and “deadening to Christian Faith.”

In the final two sections of the Chapter, Groome suggests three proactive stances of interpreting the “Christian Story” and three suggestions for “Practicing a Spirituality of Time and Tradition.”

Christian Story	Spirituality of Time and Tradition
Honor Scripture and Tradition as symbiotic sources of God’s revelation.	Sanctify your whole time.
Approach the Christian Story with critical appreciation and creative appropriation.	Steep in the Wisdom of Christian Story.
Interpret Scripture and Tradition within the whole Christian community and in dialogue with life in the world.	Practice <i>Lectio Divina</i> .

Discussion

1. What could be characterized as a Marianist sense of time, Tradition and Scripture?
2. How do we engage and hold other faith traditions [Christian and non-Christian] in the Catholic conception Scripture and Tradition?

Paraphrased from Groome:

3. What practices might help a [Marianist] University community understand and live a holistic sense of time? To draw new life from Christian Scripture and Tradition?

What Makes Us Catholic

Thomas Groome

Chapter Six: “In What Will We Invest?” – Risking the Leap of Faith

Four key paragraphs will summarize Groome’s presentation of the gift of faith and the challenge it brings to Catholic life:

“The word creed, from the Latin *credere*, means to *invest one’s heart*. How fitting! From the question of faith comes down to life investments...and much is riding on if and how we take the risk. Our faith is the defining *apriori* of our lives...shaping who we become and how we live.”

“Faith is a human universal, a phenomenon common to all. To be human is to invest in more than ourselves, to believe that there is meaning and purpose beyond our own making...”

“The heart of Christian faith is not the bible, not the creed, not the sacraments, not a code of ethics, but a person, Jesus of Nazareth, whom Christians believe to be the Christ and Messiah— the Anointed One of God.”

“...the reign of God was the defining passion of Jesus’ life. For Jesus, God’s reign symbolized God’s involvement in history for the wellbeing of humankind and the integrity of creation.”

Groome goes on to describe the essential elements of living our faith—the way of life modeled by Jesus to the disciples: the way of the head, the heart and the hand.

Ways of the Hands

“by good works, faith comes alive”

- Love
- Justice
- Peace and Reconciliation
- Simplicity
- Integrity
- Compassion
- Repentance
- Healing

Ways of the Heart

- Love
- Trusting in God
- Reverencing God through Worship and Prayer
- Becoming Community

Ways of the Head

“our capacity for knowing and becoming wise...faith-knowing...as reflective...engaging all capacities of the mind—reason, memory and imagination.”

- Wisdom-people knowing and living their faith
- “Traditioning”-handing on traditions in vital, life giving ways
- Evangelizing-sharing the Good News

Discussion

In addition or as a compliment to Groome’s elements, what would be some Marianist ways of living the faith?

By their nature, Universities are by and large characterized by efforts of the head, how might we better balance and integrate all of the three areas in University life?

How do we make our investment in our faith an act of inclusion rather than a source of exclusion?

What Makes Us Catholic

Thomas Groome

Chapter Seven: “What Are Our Politics?” – Working for Justice for All

Politics: Dirty or Dignified

“What are my politics?” Everyone should ask and decide this question, so crucial to our human vocation. Our dignity as human beings requires us to be politically responsible...Politics arises from how God made us. Denying people their rights and responsibilities in the public realm violates God-given human dignity. (211)

...the defining political commitment for disciples of Jesus as justice for all – justice that builds on compassion and promotes peace. An old and sensible definition of justice is “everyone their due.” This begs the question, however, what is a person’s “due.” (212)

- pure equality? “each citizen receiving from society exactly in proportion to what each contributes”
- weighted responsibility? “the strong and wealthy have responsibilities in justice to the weak and poor”
- “Christian faith likewise goes beyond ‘everyone their due’ to justice with compassion. It calls for generous favor toward those most in need.” (213)

Justice to a Christian Imagination: A Gift for Life

“In the past, Christianity tended to limit divine justice to punishment for personal sins; God’s justice was sinners getting their comeuppance...From a biblical perspective, God’s concern is not to wreak vengeance on individual sinners but to bring about the reign of justice in the world.” (215)

“A contemporary Catholic imagination regarding justice has biblical and theological foundations, and it reflects a philosophical tradition of natural-law ethics.” (215)

What God Asks of Us: The Bible on Justice

God hears the cry of the poor and oppressed (Exodus 22:22) and comes to their aid (Psalm 113:7). (217)

In the messianic age, people “shall beat their swords into plowshares...nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more” (Isaiah 2:4). Then “God will make justice and praise spring up from all the nations” (Isaiah 61:11); the “kindness and truth shall meet, justice and peace shall kiss” (Psalm 85:11). (217)

Theology Old and New

- 1) Basic justice has three aspects:
 - a) Commutative - demands honesty and fairness in all exchanges between persons and private groups;

- b) Distributive - requires society to ensure that its social goods are fairly distributed; and
- c) Social - is the responsibility of society to create structures that protect the dignity of all.
 - 2) Justice requires both subsidiarity and government intervention
 - 3) Justice and Peace are Symbiotic
 - 4) The Church must practice the justice it preaches

Practices to “Keep On” in a Faith that Does Justice

- 1) Ask the Spirit for the Grace of Justice
- 2) Invest Time and Energy in a Favorite Social Cause
- 3) Sharpen Your Social Consciousness in Personal Life
- 4) Redefine Success and See Every Effort as Worthwhile
- 5) Avoid Elitism and Debilitating Guilt

Discussion

- 1) What is your own understanding of justice? (214)
- 2) Groome states that many do not embrace “Pope John Paul II’s entire body of social teachings: his opposition to communism *and* his scathing critique of free-market capitalism, his condemnation of abortion *and* all instances of the death penalty. Very few – left or right – are consistent in our commitment to justice in society and Church, all across the board.” (214) Do you agree with Groome’s conclusion that very few are consistent? Should we embrace all aspects of social justice, or work on one?

What Makes Us Catholic

Thomas Groome

Chapter Eight: “Who is Our Neighbor?” – Loving Beyond Borders

Traces of Catholicity

“I visited [Rome] on the Feast of the Epiphany, January 6, 2000...I was present for the papal mass on that Epiphany morning, and the liturgy reflected the same exclusivity – no women or people of color in the sanctuary, only white men and none of them looked poor. Now I found myself wondering if Jesus, who founded a radically inclusive community of disciples – *catholic* at its best – would recognize any of this as his legacy. But as often happens with Catholicism and its contradictions, a sign of hope emerged to offset the temptation to lose heart. I found the simple bronze relief of the big-hearted and saintly Pope John XXIII (1881-1963). He is depicted with prison bars separating him from a group of prisoners, though which side is incarcerated is ambiguous...So, though he might have to search a bit, the Carpenter of Nazareth could find some traces here of what he intended. For the hope endures and springs eternal: this church may yet become *catholic*.” (239-240)

Becoming Catholic – And Miles to Travel

“To ask ‘What makes us *catholic*?’ – with a small *c* – really come down to ‘Who is our neighbor?’” (241)

“In other words, how open are our hearts, how wide our concern, whom will we welcome and include? The opposite of sectarianism, *catholicity* invites me and my community of faith into solidarity with all humankind. At its best, *catholicity* means to welcome and love every ‘other.’” (241)

“The Catholic church often sins egregiously against *catholicity*. Both insiders and outsiders can experience it as a hierarchical club, marked by inhospitable signs of sexism, racism, classism, and homophobia... For all its claims to catholicity, Catholicism is struggling to become an inclusive church...Happily, the Holy Spirit is not finished with the Catholic church yet.” (241-242)

“I’m convinced that *catholicity* is an aspiration of humanity at its best...” (243)

The Church as “Catholic”: Historical Notes

Vatican II was a watershed for the catholicity of the Church. It revived the dual emphases that the Church is both universal and particular, worldwide and local...The late, great Karl Rahner recognized Vatican II as pushing Catholicism out of Western “confinement” to become a truly “world church”... Second, Vatican II renewed emphasis on the local church, that it also is whole within itself and in its communion with other churches... Vatican II reclaimed that “the Church of Christ is truly present in all legitimate local congregations of the faithful”; in every local

diocese...in other words, local dioceses are not administrative units of Rome but whole and living churches, each charged to reflect the distinctive character of its culture and to unite with diversity as Church universal.” (248-249)

“From these historical roots, let us summarize the catholicity to which the whole Christian Church should aspire. I discern three overlapping features. Christian communities are called to be catholic in that they (1) welcome and extend their care to all people; (2) affirm the integrity of each local church and the communion of all particular churches into a universal whole; and (3) maintain unity as reconciled diversity – not through uniformity.” (249)

Spiritual Practices for Catholicity

“To close, I suggest some specific practices to nurture *catholic* consciousness and commitment.” (261)

- Make friends among people who are very different
- Promote justice and compassion for people who are “far away”
- Place no borders on your concern and prayers
- recognize faith as an Ultimate Mystery; Be ever ready to say “I Don’t Know”

Discussion

- 1) What are some ways in which your faith community is already *catholic*? In what ways is it not – yet?
- 2) What might *catholicity* presently demand of you? Of your community of faith?
- 3) What spiritual practices might help nurture *catholicity* in yourself? In your faith community?