

How to Be One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Part Three - How to Be Catholic

With planes, trains and automobiles to take us everywhere in the world as fast as we can, and with modern communications that make everyone available to everyone else at any time, you would guess that more and more people would have a global or universal outlook to their lives. The opposite seems to be the case. As we are able to communicate globally and travel wherever we want, we seem to be drawing in to ourselves and our own little communities more and more.

In the first two articles in this series I explored six poisonous “ism’s”--non Catholic foundational beliefs which undergird the secular society in which we live. Each set of three “ism’s” are countered by one of the marks of the Church. So, individualism, sentimentalism and syncretism divide us, but being “One” with the whole church brings us into unity. The secular beliefs of materialism, utilitarianism and scientism spring from the assumption that the physical world is all there is. Being aware of the “Holy” or the supernatural realm corrects the error of these three “ism’s” and establishes a greater dimension in our life.

The third set of “ism’s” that undergird our secular society is our assumption that one particular group of people or way of thinking is superior or more correct than anyone else. This assumption that “my group” is right and others are wrong leads to division in our lives, our society and our church.

The first of these three “ism’s” is nationalism. This is the assumption that my ethnic group, my tribe, my clan or my country is superior. Nationalism can take a positive form in patriotism, or it can manifest itself negatively in racism, militarism or extreme patriotism (my country right or wrong!) Nationalism can lead us to condone military might so that we invade other countries, convinced that we are in the right. Nationalism can blind us to our faults and to the strengths of other ethnic or national groups. Nationalism limits us to our own little clan. It not only keeps us from growing and broadening our experience, but it may also lead us to attack others in ‘defense’ of our own tribe.

Sectarianism is like nationalism, but in the field of religion. The sectarian first withdraws into his own comfortable little religious group. Snug in the rightness of his beliefs, he builds a fortress around himself and his religious sect. However, before long the false sense of security wanes and the self-righteous sectarians start pointing the finger at others. The sectarian mentality is, by its very nature, exclusive. The sectarian believes he is right and everyone else is wrong. It is easy for Catholics to blame Protestants for being sectarian, but Catholics are also prone to withdraw into special interest groups or communities within the church.

If these “ism’s” are sisters, then Sister Nationalism waves a flag and wears a uniform and stands up to defend her country “right or wrong” Sister Sectarian is a purse lipped and sour old spinster who is suspicious of everyone. Both nationalism and sectarianism

spring from elitism. Elitism is the unquestioned assumption that me and my group of people are better than everybody else. Elitism can be fostered by any structure that isolates and elevates a particular group of people. The elitist group might be club, whose members have inside knowledge, or the elite could be wealthier than other people or the special group might be driven by a particular ideology or political ambition.

All of these “ism’s” display characteristics of what C.S. Lewis called The Inner Ring. This is the human tendency to identify a circle of people who are “on the inside.” It is part of human ambition to be part of that “inner ring” and some people will do anything to get there. Lewis observed the insidious and perfidious nature of the “inner ring” because once one is invited to join it turns out that within that “inner ring” of influence and power there is another “inner ring” which is even more exclusive.

The tendency to nationalism, sectarianism and elitism is present in our secular society, but it has crept into the Catholic Church as well. We divide into subgroups, identifying ourselves as ‘liberal’ or ‘conservative’. We divide among ethnic lines, or we associate ourselves with a particular movement in the church or the kind of liturgy or worship that we like. There is nothing wrong with diversity of style, different forms of spirituality and different apostolates, but when they become elitist, nationalistic or sectarian diversity becomes division. The answer is to be more “Catholic”.

One of the things I love about being a Catholic parish priest is the universality of the church. In our very ordinary American parish, we have people from every continent and ethnic group. In the congregation each Sunday we have the young and the old, the poor and the rich, the educated and uneducated. The Catholic Church embraces all, and in this universality our ethnic, sectarian and elitist divisions vanish.

Catholicism is bigger and older than all our little groups. To be Catholic is to be Universal. The Catholic faith transcends all of our religious opinions, ethnic histories, and national cultures. We strive to be Catholic because “Catholic” transcends not just these divisions, but it also transcends time and space. It’s bigger and older than all of us.

The way to treasure and live the “Catholic” aspect of our faith is to break out of our own little holy huddles, our ethnic groups and elitist mentality. We need to develop true tolerance and curiosity about others. We need to learn how to see the truth in all its different guises.

A convert friend of mine was asked why he became a Catholic and he said, “Because I wanted to belong to the Big, Holy, Old One.” That was his way of saying he wanted not just to affirm his faith in the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church, but he wanted to live that faith in a practical way day by day.