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How Catholic Are We? *Reflections on the Global Mission of the Church*

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As European Christianity has witnessed a dramatic decline in numbers and cultural influence, particularly over the second half of the twentieth century, Christianity has witnessed remarkable growth beyond the West. Consider John Allen's summary description of these shifts:



A Seismic Shift in Catholic Demographics

1900

- 459 million Catholics in the World
- 392 million Catholics in Western Europe and North America
- 2 million Catholics in Africa

2000

- 1.1 billion Catholics in the World
- 380 million Catholics in Western Europe and North America
- 130 million Catholics in Africa

“In 1900, there were 459 million Catholics in the world, 392 million of whom lived in Europe and North America. Christianity 100 years ago remained an overwhelmingly white, first world phenomenon. By 2000, there were 1.1 billion Catholics, with just 380 million in Europe and North America, and the rest, 720 million, in the global South. Africa alone went from 1.9 million Catholics in 1900 to 130 million in 2000, a growth rate of almost 7,000 percent. This is the most rapid and sweeping demographic transformation of Catholicism in its 2000 year history.¹ “

¹ See, “Ten Mega-Trends Shaping the Catholic Church,” *All Things Catholic* (December 22nd, 2006)
<http://ncrcafe.org/node/782>

What these numbers suggest is a rather unexpected development: Catholic Christianity is growing much more in non-Western contexts than in Western ones. The shape of the Church is changing dramatically, and we are struggling to keep up theologically. What is needed today is a deeper appreciation of the Church's catholicity, and it is that topic which I wish to explore with you today.

I. Catholicity of the Church's Mission: Acts of the Apostles

Although the term *katholikos* does not appear in the New Testament, there is no more profound exposition of its meaning and ecclesial logic than is found in the Acts of the Apostles. The central theme of Acts is the coming to be of the Church as a missionary community confident that the gospel is hospitable to all peoples and cultures. Consider Jesus' final words to his disciples prior to his ascension: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). The catholicity of the Church is revealed in and through the Church's missionary mandate.

A. Pentecost

In the story of Pentecost human language becomes itself a metaphor for how the catholicity of the Church unfolds in the Church's mission:

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs – in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." (Acts 2:1-11)

After Christ's death and resurrection the Holy Spirit came down upon the believers gathered in Jerusalem. As those who received the Holy Spirit gave testimony to God's deeds, Jewish foreigners from throughout the known world all heard and comprehended their testimonies. The differences in language were transcended by the Spirit, allowing each to understand the other. Yet note that those from other lands heard those giving witness *in their own language*. Cultural difference was not destroyed but became the very instrument for a realization of a more profound spiritual unity.

This biblical narrative of the origins of the Church suggests an essential ecclesiological principle: the Holy Spirit does not erase difference, but renders difference non-divisive.

The account suggests that the Church, born of the Spirit, is from its beginning open to diverse languages and cultures. Those gathered in Jerusalem were still Jews, even if from the culturally diverse Jewish Diaspora.

Acts tells the story of a new religious movement that began in Jerusalem and then moved outward, becoming progressively more inclusive in its reach.²

B. Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch

Chapter eight recounts the ministry of Philip who first preaches, quite successfully, to the despised Samaritans, and then to the Ethiopian eunuch. The former were considered, at best, half Jews, and the eunuch was a likely member of a group of people known as “Godfearers” who were uncircumcised yet sympathetic to Judaism.

C. The Conversion of Peter

The next stage is reflected in Acts 10-11’s narrative of “the conversion of Peter.”³ After receiving a disturbing vision in which he was instructed by God to eat unclean food, Peter was invited to the house of the Gentile centurion, Cornelius. There Peter perceived more fully the universal scope of the Christian mission: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears Him and does what is right is acceptable to Him.” (Acts 10:34-35) This insight was confirmed when he witnessed the Holy Spirit descending upon all who heard him preach, Jew and Gentile (Acts 10:44-48), in an echo of Pentecost.

D. The Council in Jerusalem

This expanding catholicity achieved a new phase in the momentous “council of Jerusalem.” It is difficult to exaggerate the significance of this meeting in early Christian leadership. Paul and Barnabas had already been successfully preaching the gospel to both Jews and Gentiles. Apparently this outreach to the Gentiles was not welcomed by all the followers in Antioch. Consequently, Paul and Barnabas were sent to Jerusalem to obtain the approval of the leadership there. After momentous debate, the missionaries received the approval of the Jerusalem leadership and with that Christianity underwent a shift that would have ramifications for centuries to come. There could no longer be a question of limiting the mission to share the gospel of Jesus Christ: the Good News of Christ was to be offered to all peoples.

II. Christianity as a “Translated Religion”

A. People of the Book, or of the Word?

In interreligious dialogue, particularly among the Abrahamic religions of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, many have embraced the Islamic characterization of all three religions as both “Abrahamic traditions” and “religions of the book.” Yet, at least as attributed to Christianity, this latter claim is only true in a secondary sense. Christians assert that the fullness of divine revelations came not in a text, but in a person. Although Christians commonly refer to Scripture as the “Word of God,” properly speaking, according to traditional Christian belief, it is Jesus of Nazareth who is the Word of God incarnate;

² What follows draws considerably from Bevens and Schroeder’s reading. See Stephen B. Bevens and Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2004), 14-30.

³ James D.G. Dunn. *Acts of the Apostles* (Peterborough, U.K.: The Epworth Press, 1996), 10.

Scripture represents the inspired and authoritative testimony to that divine Word. Jesus did not leave behind a text. He did not write any memoirs or leave behind a manual of instruction. Christianity was born out of the communal response to the life and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth. The first Christian texts that would eventually become Scripture were written decades after Jesus' death. Jesus left behind, not a sacred text, but a community of believers who kept alive His story through communal worship, storytelling and distinctive moral conduct.

The Catholic Christian understanding of their Scriptures is distinctive. The Scriptures are not sacred texts because of some miraculous origin; they are fundamentally human accounts of both Israel's interpretation of its encounter with its God and the first century encounter of both Jews and Gentiles with Jesus of Nazareth whom they believed to be risen from the dead. They are considered sacred because they are held to be Spirit-inspired communal accounts of the work God has accomplished in Jesus of Nazareth. They do not possess, *pace* many Christian fundamentalists, absolute priority inasmuch as there is a straightforward recognition that Christianity existed prior to its sacred canon. Indeed, all forms of Christianity readily admit that there are no extant copies of any of the so-called "autograph manuscripts" of the biblical texts. Christian scholars also freely admit that in the re-construction of a critical canonical text they must rely on textual traditions dated centuries after the autographs were authored.

B. The Ecclesiological Significance of a Greek rather than Aramaic New Testament

What is often overlooked regarding the significance of the New Testament is the fact that it provides a decisive testimony to the process of religious intercultural dialogue that lies at the heart of Christianity. The Christian canon testifies to the first effort at Christian intercultural dialogue, that between the Aramaic preaching of Jesus conducted in a Hebraic cultural world, and a Greek-speaking Hellenistic cultural milieu enshrined in the New Testament texts themselves. In short, the Christian Scriptures are the product of the process of human translation and intercultural dialogue. Sanneh draws out the significance of this:

Being the original Scripture of the Christian movement, the New Testament Gospels are a translated version of the message of Jesus, and that means Christianity is a translated religion without a revealed language. The issue is not whether Christians translated their scripture well or willingly, but that without translation there would be no Christianity or Christians. Translation is the Church's birthmark as well as its missionary benchmark: the Church would be unrecognizable or unsustainable without it.⁴

Translation becomes an apt metaphor for the achievement of Christianity's missionary mandate.

The fact of Christianity being a translated, and translating, religion places God at the center of the universe of cultures, implying free co-equality among cultures and a necessary relativizing of languages vis-à-vis the truth of God. No culture is so advanced and so superior that it can claim exclusive access or advantage to the truth of God, and none so marginal or inferior that it can be excluded.⁵

According to Christian teaching, the fullness of divine revelation was encountered in a first century Palestinian Jew who preached in Aramaic. The very cultural and historical particularity of Jesus demanded translation or, if you prefer, intercultural communication. This process of intercultural

⁴ Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion is Christianity? The Gospel Beyond the West* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 97.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 105-106

communication is often described in the language of “indigenization,” “inculturation” or “contextualization.” However one describes it, the process is not simply an accidental accommodation of a religion that possesses its own autonomous faith culture; rather it is the essential process fueling Christianity’s identity as a global religion.

The process of intercultural communication has always been present in the Church even when it was not acknowledged as such. This intercultural process is not simply an accidental accommodation of a religion that possesses its own autonomous faith culture; rather it is the essential process behind Christianity’s capacity to be a genuine global religion. As Stephan Bevens⁶ has eloquently put it:



Stephen Bevens:

Through us God must become Asian or African, black or brown, poor or sophisticated. Christians must be able to speak to inhabitants of twenty-first century secular suburban Lima, Peru, or to the Tondo slum dweller in Manila, or to the ill-gotten affluence of a Brazilian rancher. Christianity, if it is to be faithful to its deepest roots and to its most basic insight, must continue God’s incarnation in Jesus by becoming contextual.

The catholicity of the Church can only be sustained, particularly in our postmodern context, by careful, attentive intercultural dialogue.

III. Toward a New Catholicity

A. Catholicity is More than Tolerance: “Mass at a Black Church”

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B. Cultivating a Spirituality of Holy Conversation

To put the matter simply, catholicity demands a spirituality of dialogue, or what I have called, holy conversation. One of the most important features in an authentic spirituality of holy conversation is what we might speak of as an “eschatological humility.”

1. An Eschatological Humility

The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation reminds us that the Church is a pilgrim people and as such is progressing “towards the fullness of God’s truth” (DV #8). The truth revealed in Christ is not

⁶ Stephen B. Bevens, *Models of Contextual Theology* (revised and expanded edition, Maryknoll: Orbis, 2002), 12.

something that the Church can possess; rather it is the truth that possesses the Church. For this truth, given to the Church in Jesus Christ, transcends all attempts at human mastery. Although we affirm the truthfulness and revelatory character of Church teaching, we should never delude ourselves into thinking that through a diligent study of dogmatic theology we ever master divine revelation. While living in truth, the pilgrim Church continually progresses toward the “plenitude of truth” which it will acquire only in the eschaton.

This sense of the Church’s moving toward the fullness of truth rather than having it in its full possession was explored in an often overlooked Vatican document on inter-religious dialogue produced jointly in 1990 by two Vatican dicasteries, the Secretariat for Non-Christians and the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples. The document is titled *Dialogue and Proclamation*. The document responds to a very important question: if Christians believe that fullness of divine revelation has come to them in Christ, then what point can there be to inter-religious dialogue beyond mere courtesy. Is it possible that Christians might “learn” from other traditions? The document responds by asserting the necessity of the eschatological humility to which I have been referring. They write:



**1990 Vatican Statement,
*Dialogue and Proclamation:***

...the fullness of truth received in Jesus Christ does not give individual Christians the guarantee that they have grasped that truth fully. In the last analysis, truth is not a thing we possess, but a person by whom we must allow ourselves to be possessed (DP 49).

This document wonderfully exemplifies the spirit of eschatological humility that I have in mind. This humility ought to be motivated, however, not only by a recognition of the poverty of our own understanding but by a humble acknowledgement that God’s grace may be at work, even beyond the boundaries of the Church. Consider the words of the missiologist, M.A.C. Warren:



M.A.C. Warren:

When we approach [people] of another faith than our own it will be in a spirit of expectancy to find how God has been speaking to [them] and what new understandings of the grace and love of God we may ourselves discover in this encounter. Our first task in approaching another people, another culture, another religion, is to take off our shoes, for the place we are approaching is holy. Else we may find ourselves treading on people’s dreams. More serious still, we may forget that God was here before our arrival.

Without in any way compromising the Catholic commitment to Christ's unique and unsurpassable revelation, Pope John Paul II taught that it was important to acknowledge the Spirit's presence and work beyond the boundaries of the Church. It was on this basis that our dialogue with other peoples, religions and cultures was a demand placed upon us by our baptism.

2. A Readiness for Conversion

In the end, what the catholicity of the Church demands of us is nothing less than an openness to conversion. This point was stressed in the Vatican document I just quoted, *Dialogue and Proclamation*. In that document, the two Roman dicasteries make an important claim:



Dialogue and Proclamation:

This is an unending process. While keeping their identity intact, Christians must be prepared to learn and to receive from and through others the positive values of their traditions. Through dialogue, they may be moved to give up ingrained prejudices, to revise preconceived ideas, and even sometimes to allow the understanding of their faith to be purified (DP 49).

IV. Conclusion

As we consider the unprecedented demographic transformation of Christianity over the past century, we find that in many ways Christianity has come full circle. For in the Acts of the Apostles, we find an account of the fledgling community of disciples, who had not as yet even acquired the name Christian. As the story goes, the Spirit of God came down upon those followers and they began to speak in other languages. Those Jews visiting Jerusalem from all parts of the known world asked, "How is it that we hear these people, *each in our own language?*" According to Christian belief, in this ancient story of Pentecost, the Church came into being by way of a Spirit-filled event of translation. The challenge remains for us today. We are called by our baptism, with courage and humility, to bring our gospel to the world in which we live. We must allow it to grow in the soil of each culture trusting that, as the Venerable Bede reminded us centuries ago, "each day the Church gives birth to the Church."

The Venerable Bede:

"Every day the church gives birth to the church."