

What's In A Name?

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Once A Catholic ...

A recent newsletter of the Catholic Women's Network discussed whether or not the organisation - a feminist group opposing various Church teachings - should change its name. Should the word "Catholic" be kept? Overwhelmingly, the members said yes. It had meaning and resonance for them. Some stressed that it was only through the Catholic link that the Network had any value. All of this set me pondering. For many of us, it has been a source of irritation for some years that people who do not frequent the Sacraments, do not accept many basic teachings of the Church, and spend a great deal of time celebrating all this, should keep announcing that they are Catholics. Why, we ask, don't they just do the honourable thing and say that they aren't Catholics, and don't want to be, because they don't wish to accept the requirements for Church membership?

The question is a significant one, because labels matter. I have friends who are devout and prayerful Christians but who sincerely do not accept certain doctrines of the Catholic Church, and so continue within one of the various other Christian denominations. Some are, I regret to say, ex-Catholics who have deliberately chosen to join a non-Catholic denomination because they don't understand, or can't accept, or really disagree with, some aspect of Catholic teaching. In our talks and discussions, these matters come up, and we can examine and debate them. There is a possibility of genuine dialogue, because we each have some idea of where the other stands.

But the person who insists she is a Catholic, but finds the Trinity "patriarchal and oppressive", Christ's Sacrifice on the Cross "just so bloodthirsty", lesbian and homosexual relationships "a lifestyle to be celebrated", and the Pope "a ridiculous figure".....such a person's contribution to dialogue lacks integrity and meaning

Pro's And Con's Of The Ghetto Culture

Of course, the reasons for wanting to emphasise one's Catholicism are pretty obvious: it gives status, enlarges one's importance, and is, at present, very fashionable. At almost any social gathering, if the question of Church allegiance comes up, you can guarantee to hear a voice raised emphasising that the speaker is "absolutely a Catholic - I mean, it's totally part of me....but I just can't accept the Church's view on sex/condoms/homosexuality ['it usually seems to be something to do with sex!]and I went to a convent school, and there was so much crushing of my personality, and the nuns were so repressed....." etc etc.

But there is more. Often, the people who want to emphasise their Catholicism in this belong to the older generation. They were brought up to value the label

“Catholic” and to wear it with pride. Perhaps too much pride – in my researches into parish histories (I have written several, and enjoy doing them) I have delved a good deal into Catholic parish life of the 1930s,40s,and 50s, and although there is much that is awe-inspiring and impressive, there are weaknesses. The most obvious is that, while certain issues were bubbling away beneath the surface during those years, many Catholics were not well instructed about them. One is birth control. It was already an issue in the 1930s – when the Lambeth Conference of the Church of England accepted it for the first time – but for Catholics it was something of a no-no topic. The Church opposes contraception, and the approach at the time seems to have simply to stress the duty of Catholics was to obey this – a position which was, of course, entirely right, but which emphasised obedience and tribal loyalty rather than an understanding of the issues and a sense of involvement in standing up for what is right.

A Long Legacy Of Poor Catechesis

The reasons for this were not stupid – the clear moral teaching on this subject has to be presented carefully and appropriately, and it is not the ideal subject for any and every youth group or parish sodality. But one result was that there was a serious gulf emerging between those who fully understood the Church’s teaching, and those who simply accepted it. At a time when sermons at Mass were unusual – most teaching was done by way of comments when giving out the notices, or separate evening meetings, or through the innumerable and thriving Catholic organisations around the parish – this was a topic that could get neglected. (In any case, it was not then - and is not now - the ideal topic for a Sunday morning with children present).

But people were encouraged to feel pride in being Catholics, and to show that they believed membership of the Church to be crucially important. There was a positive sense of commitment about going to Mass on a Holyday of Obligation, abstaining from meat on a Friday, wearing a hat in church. And Catholic language was important – I remember, as a child in the late 1950s, being gently chided at school for referring to “going to church” on Sundays: “It isn’t just church, dear: it’s Mass.”

Catholicism - More Than A Club

Sister Lavinia Byrne, now an ex-nun, describes in her autobiography this very definite sense of pride and identity. She loved being a Catholic and she loved the family tradition of Catholicism of which she was a part. It was central to her childhood and growing up. But did this tribal feeling actually convey the idea that – pride and identity aside – what really matters is the truth? As an adult, she insisted on claiming her Catholicism while openly opposing a central truth of the Catholic Faith – the nature of the priesthood and Christ’s specific call to men (not women) to be the successors of His Apostles. When she was asked about this she said that her parents had had a little Catholic child, and that this was absolutely part of her, and that she wasn’t now going to give up that identity. What she failed to understand was that she had already given it up – she wanted a label that didn’t describe her any more.

Catholicism is not a small private club into which we are initiated through family sponsorship: it is God's truth for all people, everywhere. We are not "born Catholic" – we are baptised into the Faith, and it is our duty to study it and follow it, and bring others to do the same. The Church is missionary: the Gospel is to be spread to every corner of the globe.

Hope For The Young

Christ Himself spoke about people who, invited to the wedding feast, made excuses and kept away. He urged that the beggars and the lame and the outcasts be invited instead. He doesn't want us just to announce that we were born into a "Catholic family" and can stick a Catholic label on ourselves and then imagine we can do just as we like. He calls us to daily conversion and a real relationship with Him and with His Church.

The call to renewal in the Church is about this – accepting the full implications of our baptism, and not pretending that the Church is like a golf club to which we've been given a membership card. One sign of hope is that today's teenagers – born into a Britain where real adherence to difficult Church teachings is going to require considerable courage – do recognise that the issues at stake are large ones. "The Pope says he's calling us all to be saints" one said, after attending a big international rally. Quite so.