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Richard M. Liddy

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FORUM

The Catholic Intel

Tradition

Where is it today?

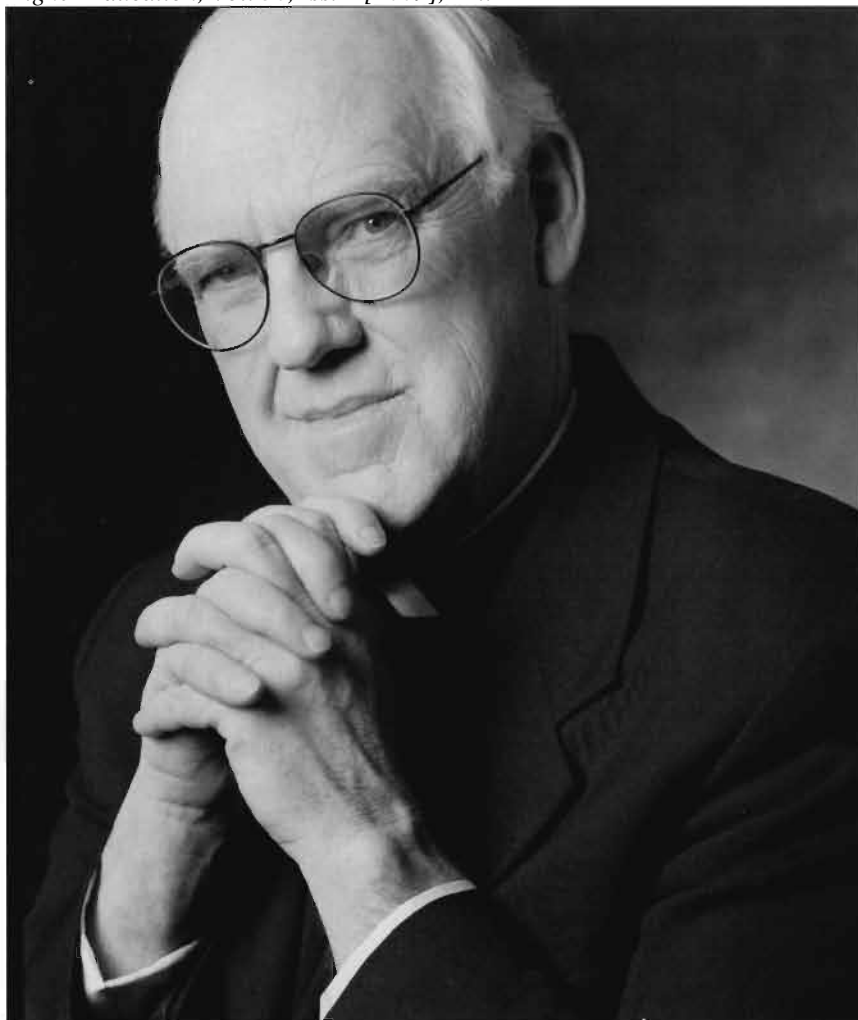
By Richard M. Liddy

When I was a young student in the 1950s I came across a book entitled *The Wisdom of Catholicism*. I liked it very much and bought a copy as a present for my parents. It was edited by Anton Pegis of the Medieval Institute in Toronto and contained selections from “the Catholic classics:” from Augustine’s *Confessions* and the *City of God* as well as from Thomas Aquinas’ *Summae*, Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, the *Imitation of Christ*, Theresa of Avila’s *Interior Castle*, John of the Cross’ *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Blaise Pascal’s *Pensées* and John Henry Newman’s *Apologia pro vita sua*. There were also more recent selections: papal encyclicals on Christian philosophy and on the reconstruction of the social order as well as literary pieces, such as Charles Péguy’s *Vision of Prayer*, Paul Claudel’s *The Satin Slipper*, and selections from Hilaire Belloc, G.K. Chesterton, Christopher Dawson, Sigrid Undset, Etienne Gilson, and Jacques Maritain. At the time it provided evidence for me of the superior wisdom of Catholicism. It was a wisdom achieved in the past and ours was basically the job of appropriating it and passing it on.

In recent years there has again been much talk about “the Catholic intellectual tradition” — often in relation to Catholic Studies programs — and I ask myself what difference there is between “the wisdom of Catholicism” as I conceived of it in the 1950s and as I look on it today. In this article I would like to: 1) focus on the problem of an inadequate, often classicist, conception of the Catholic intellectual tradition and contrast it with a more dynamic, historically conscious, understanding; 2) link the Catholic intellectual tradition to the person of Christ, the incarnate carrier of meaning; 3) trace the trajectory of the carriers of the meaning of Christ from symbols — such as the bread and wine of the Eucharist — to the doctrines taught in the councils of the Church and the theologies that help us understand God’s Word; and 4) highlight the present orientation of the Catholic intellectual tradition to be communicated to all peoples and all areas of culture.

Msgr. Richard M. Liddy is the university professor of Catholic thought and culture at Seton Hall University.

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Msgr. Richard M. Liddy

1. HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

The historian, Eric Voegelin, wrote of “the hardening of the symbols,” that is, the cultural process whereby an authentic tradition becomes disconnected from its roots in authentic living. Bernard Lonergan has referred to one version of this as “classicism,” that is, an a-historical mode of thinking in which “all the answers are in the book,” that is, somewhere in Thomas Aquinas or the Code of Canon Law or books and manuals that summarize all of the above. Somewhere you can find all the answers, a well-defined “block” of knowledge.

On the other hand, there is a more contemporary view of the Catholic intellectual tradition, not merely as an achievement completed in the past, but rather as a living tradition affecting diverse cultures and challenging persons to do in our day what that tradition at its best accomplished in cultures gone by. For the Catholic intellectual tradition is not a pile of books or writings “out there” – it is not some “thing;” it is rather a living meaning, very alive to some, less alive, perhaps even dead, to others.

In his *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, John Henry Newman wrote that the authentic-

ity of a tradition – he called it “a living idea” – bore fruit in its “power of assimilation:” that is, its power to enter into various cultures and to assimilate the best elements of those cultures into its own self-expression. Such “inculturation” is the ability of Christianity to be truly and authentically Christianity while being at the same time truly and authentically Japanese, African, American, or whatever. The Catholic intellectual tradition is not a closed “canon” of Western works only. For many, Shusaku Endo’s *The Silence* has become a classic of the Catholic intellectual tradition from the world of Japanese Catholicism. And Vincent Donovan’s *Christianity Rediscovered* appeals for respect for the native patterns of East African cultural life – in terms of which alone the Gospel message can there be proclaimed.

Consequently, if the Christian message is to be communicated to all nations, preachers and teachers need to enlarge their horizons to include an accurate understanding of the culture and language of the people they address.

They must grasp the resources of that culture and that language, and they must use those resources creatively so that the Christian message becomes,



Statue of St. Ignatius, St. Joseph's University.

not disruptive of the culture, not an alien patch superimposed upon it, but a line of development within the culture. (Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 362)

2. CHRIST AS INCARNATE MEANING

Cardinal André Vingt-Trois, the Archbishop of Paris, recently remarked to a journalist: "Just because Christianity is two thousand doesn't mean it's old." And then he added:

Becoming Christian means adhering to Someone who is not a cultural object. Christ has certainly

been carried by the culture called Christian, but it's not about that, it's about the person of Jesus. (*Commonweal*, Nov, 7, 2008, 14)

But what does this mean: that the person of Jesus is the meaning of the Christian tradition? One way to think about this is to reflect on the way a tradition is carried – from one person to another, from one generation to another. Lonergan in his *Method in Theology* writes of various "carriers of meaning:" intersubjectivity, art, symbols, language and, finally "incarnate meaning." For meaning passes from one person to another through our very *intersubjectivity*, our very presence to each other. We communicate with one another by every gesture, frown, facial movement, smile. Certainly, Christ communicated through his very presence: there was "something" about him: he spoke "with authority."

Art is another very concrete carrier of meaning: the patterns in musical sounds communicate deep feelings; so also do the forms and colors of a painting. Christ encouraged people to pay attention to their experience: "Look at the birds of the air and the lilies of the fields!" So also do *symbols*

communicate meaning: they are images that concretely evoke feelings or are evoked by feelings. A young man gives a ring to his beloved; the ring means everything to her. Jesus took bread and broke it and gave it to his disciples to eat. He physically touched those who were ill. The symbols he left us "speak."

But by far the most obvious carrier of meaning is *language*. These seemingly inconsequential sounds or marks on paper have meaning. They have the meanings constituted by the understanding, judgments and decisions of people in very concrete situations. So Jesus told

stories and parables, and he said, "Do this in memory of me." Though rooted in the here and now, words can also transcend the moment and strain toward a more universal perspective: a distant past and a future beyond us. Jesus' words strained the limits of ordinary speech to open people to deeper meaning.

But besides intersubjectivity, art, symbol and language, Lonergan names one further carrier of meaning and that is *incarnate meaning*. Quoting John Henry Newman's motto, *Cor ad cor loquitur* – heart speaks to heart – he lays out the meaning of incarnate meaning:

Incarnate meaning combines all or at least many of the other carriers of meaning. It can be at once intersubjective, artistic, symbolic, linguistic. It is the meaning of a person, of his words, or of his deeds. It may be his meaning for just one other person, or whole national, or social, or cultural, or religious tradition...

For good or for evil certain personages carry meaning for large groups of people. Think of Abraham Lincoln for Americans, for example. The incarnate meaning of Jesus is central to Christians: the meaning of his life, death and resurrection: the meaning of his person. That meaning found particular expression in the Eucharist where the Scriptures were read and reflected on, songs were sung, the bread was broken and chalice passed; and all expressed the ongoing incarnate meaning of Jesus of Nazareth. At this "breaking of the bread" there were acclamations acknowledging "Jesus as Lord," confessions that God had raised him from the dead, as well as gradually developing and expanding formulas of belief. It was to provide a context for such acclamations, confessions and formulas, to clarify their meaning and preclude misinterpretation that memories of Jesus' earthly ministry were recalled and the classics that we call "the gospels" were written.

3. FROM SYMBOLS TO THEORY

A curious aspect about the phrase "the Catholic intellectual tradition" is the possible implication that there could be any other kind of genuine Christian or Catholic tradition than an intellectual one. For if we agree with Thomas Aquinas that the human person is especially the human spirit or the human "mind" – *homo maxime est mens hominis [the human person is especially the human mind]* – then any genuinely human tradition is an intellectual tradition. Of course, a tradition may fade, become watered-down and lifeless, but it will revive only to the extent that people begin again to use their heads. Such intellectual activity need not be limited to theorizing – to theology, philosophy and science – but it can also find expression in art and music, symbol and dance, architecture and poetry, myth and ritual.

Dostoyevsky caught this "ground level" intellectual activity in the songs of the Russian peasants as even during persecution they kept alive the image of Christ.

The people acquired their knowledge in churches where, for centuries, they have been listening to prayers and hymns which are better than sermons. They have been repeating and singing these prayers in forests, fleeing from their enemies, as far back as the time of Batzi's invasion; they have been singing: *Almighty Lord, be with us!* It may have been then that they memorized this hymn, because at that time nothing but Christ was left to them; yet in this hymn alone is Christ's whole truth. (Quoted in Denis Dirschel, *Dostoyevsky and the Catholic Church*, Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1986, 63)

The Catholic intellectual tradition finds expression, then, not just in philosophical and theological works, but also in poetry (*The Divine Comedy*, the poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins) and art (frescoes, mosaics, icons, medieval, Renaissance and Baroque painting); architecture (Romanesque, Gothic, Baroque, "modern,") and music (Gregorian chant and polyphony), as well as in medieval mystery plays and the modern fables of J. R. Tolkien.

In addition, the Catholic intellectual tradition has found literary expression in works of practical spirituality that at least for some communities within the Church have attained the status of classics: for example, *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, *The Imitation of Christ*, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius*, Theresa of Avila's *Interior Castle* and John of the Cross' *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Francis de Sales' *Introduction to the Devout Life*, etc...

Now what all these works of art and literary expressions of Catholicism have in common is that they invite us to change; in fact, they aim at mediating an experience of the Spirit of Christ that changes and converts us. Christ changed people; he brought them to a deeper spot. Through his word of forgiveness he brought them out of the darkness within themselves and enabled them to envision a new reality, a new world, "the kingdom coming." In such a world people were "graced" to be and to do what previously they were not at all interested in being or doing. Through the gift of the Spirit of Christ the Catholic intellectual tradition at its best, even in its symbolic expressions, has aimed at doing the same thing.

All such expressions of the Catholic intellectual tradition are expressions of what Lonergan calls "symbolic consciousness."

It will revive only to the extent that people begin again to use their heads.

The universal style is symbolic. Its language is instinct with feeling. At its liveliest it is poetry. At its profoundest it is rhetoric. It lacks neither attention to detail nor keen insight nor balanced judgment nor responsible decision. But it has all these, not stripped of feeling, but permeated with feeling. The calm, the detachment, the clarity, the coherence, the rigor of the logician, the mathematician, the scientist - these are just beyond its horizon. Such by and large is the language of the New Testament...Such also in the main was the language of the Church Fathers, and down the ages it has remained the straightforward simple language of mainstream Christianity. (Volume 17 of the *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan*, 363)

But the universal style of consciousness is not the only style. There is also evident in the history of Christianity a move to a more explicitly intellectual and theoretical consciousness, a type of consciousness that found expression in Thomas Aquinas' great *Summa contra gentiles* and *Summa theologiae*. Such a consciousness is honed by disputes that push presuppositions back until philosophical and theoretical categories become necessary.

Thus early on the Christian tradition was faced with Arius' question: "In what sense can it be said that Jesus is the Son of God?" Is this just a metaphor in the sense that all humans are "children of God?" Or, as St. Athanasius held, is Jesus truly the Son of God in the sense that "what is said of him is also said of the Father except that he is the Son and not the Father?" To express this truth Athanasius and those gathered at the Council of Nicaea in 325 adopted the non-scriptural term, *homoousios* - "consubstantial" - to express and protect what they considered to be Scriptural truth. It was the beginning of Christianity's sophisticated and even systematic articulation of its teaching about Christ and the Trinity.

Eventually, this concern for clarity found expression in Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologica* with its very systematic way of treating God's creation of the world, the human person, sin and the return to God through Christ and the sacraments of the Church. This general pattern of all things proceeding from God and eventually returning to God was taken from neo-platonic philosophy but the most prominent set of categories which Aquinas uses to deal with these questions are the philosophical categories of Aristotle. He molded Aristotle's categories into a Christian context and that framework provided the background for much Catholic thought down to modern times.

Today the most prominent sets of categories used in Catholic theology spring from the modern scientific, historical and philosophical revolutions. Thus, Cardinal Newman, a beacon of the Catholic intellectual tradition

in the nineteenth century, introduced historical scholarship into the articulation of the Catholic tradition. He was followed in the early twentieth century by Marie Joseph LaGrange (1855-1938) and other scholars who employed historical methods to shed light on the Scriptures. Similarly, such twentieth century luminaries as Henri de Lubac (1896-1991) and Yves Congar (1904-1995) wrote detailed historical analyses of the vicissitudes and triumphs of the early church to prepare the way for the Second Vatican Council of the 1960s.

Catholic writers have also employed modern philosophical categories to articulate the meaning of the Catholic intellectual tradition. Thus, the German theologian, Karl Rahner (1904-1984), asked, "What must we be as humans if God can "speak" to us and we can "hear the Word?" And the Swiss, Hans Urs Von Balthasar (1905-1988), asked, "Can we see 'the form of Christ' in our study of human cultures and literature?" And my own teacher, the Canadian Bernard Lonergan (1904-1984), asked "What is the structure of our very questioning? The very 'method' of our seeking and searching for meaning, truth, reality, goodness?" And he discerned that method both in the contours of modern scientific thought and in other areas of contemporary culture.

These questions about meaning, insight, value and love pertain to every human being of every religion and of no religion. They are questions we can address together, Catholics and all others. They are questions that can be answered by everyone autobiographically - When did "the call" for meaning, truth and goodness emerge in my life? And where is it leading? What is "the whole" that my story is aiming at? My profession? My research field? Can we work together on this?

These are "catholic" elements that the Catholic intellectual tradition aims at - but they are also concerns of all humanity. Which, come to think of it, seems to have been Jesus' own basic concern.

4. THE TRADITION AND THE PRESENT

So - to return to my original question - there was a lot of "the wisdom of Catholicism" in the books I read as a young man. A lot has happened to me in the intervening years and what I have learned is that that the wisdom of Catholicism is not static. It aims at "catholicity" - wholeness. It is not confined to the truths defined in the past; rather, it invites creativity in the present and the formation of cultures healed of the blinders in the present. I have especially seen that word and that creativity operative where people from different cultures and disciplines open themselves in honesty to each other and work together for the common good. Then a common understanding is born and new life emerges. ■