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ADVANCING THE  
CHRISTIAN TRADITION  
IN THE THIRD MILLENNIUM

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While our society becomes more certain and knowledgeable about technological matters, clarity on our religious, intellectual, and moral moorings wanes ominously. We seem to be developing a huge, muscular body, but one without an adequate central nervous system. We seem uncertain about our purposes, the ends to which all our technological capacities might be applied. This confusion at the social level is both a cause and an effect of confusion at the personal level. It is particularly descriptive of the life of the young, as exposure to life on American college campuses will attest. It is not that virtue is not present. There are many young people with noble inclinations. It is just that those inclinations are not shored up by a firm and confident moral consensus among peers or among the adult members of the community. They are challenged by all sorts of alternative notions of intellectual, moral, and religious ends, some of them not so noble. An uneasy sense of chaos pervades our campuses, a reflection of a broader cultural confusion.

Robert Benne

## THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING CATHOLIC



P. ANDREW SANDLIN

I am a devout, faithful Protestant; therefore, I am a devout, faithful catholic. And if we Protestants expect to succeed in our faith, we all had better be—or become—good catholics. Let me explain.

- The Protestant Reformation created an incendiary schism in the Western church, but this division was an *unintended* consequence of the reforming actions of Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, and their colleagues. When Luther nailed his ninety-five theses to the door in Wittenberg, he was calling for reform, not revolution; sanctification, not schism. The intensity of the perceived abuses by Rome was so great, however, and the intransigence of the papacy to the call for reform was so inflexible, that schism was virtually inevitable. While we cannot dismiss the cultural, political, and economic factors contributing to the Protestant schism, neither can we deny the central role that theology and church life played in this history-altering episode.

### A TRAGIC NECESSITY

It was, in the words of Orthodox historian Jaroslav Pelikan, a "tragic necessity," and we must never mitigate the force of either of these terms. Schism in the Western church constituted a fatal loss not only of ecclesiastical and theological unity. In addition, it sundered an accumulated Christian civilization and, on a trajectory begun by the separation of the Eastern church from the Western church (the Great Schism, 1054), assured the eventual loss of Christian civilization. It was not the paganizing European Enlightenment alone that is to blame for today's secular culture. It was aided and abetted, as the Roman Catholic historian Christopher Dawson has observed, by severe hostility between Wittenberg, Geneva, and Canterbury on the one side, and Rome on the other. The Enlightenment hostility to the faith was perhaps inevitable, but its rapid, rapacious gains would have been impossible had it confronted a unified Western Christendom.

The Reformation "tragic"? Yes, indeed. The diversity and heterogeneity that historians now recognize in the late medieval church were accompanied by traditional accretions that lay far from both the letter and spirit of the New Testament. Salvation through extraordinary human effort, the sale of indulgences, and the secularization and politicization of the church itself warranted a deep-furrowed reformation. The church desperately needed reform governed by the sacred Scriptures.

### THE CATHOLICITY OF THE REFORMERS

The original Reformers, nonetheless, were not governed by a spirit of primitivism—the attempt to reprimatinate pure, unalloyed "New Testament Christianity" without reference to the ecclesiastical developments of the intervening thirteen centuries. For one thing, they were steeped in the church fathers and employed them (though often selectively) to counter the claims of Rome. For another thing, the Reformers were committed to ancient catholic orthodoxy, including the

traditional formulations of the Trinity, the two natures in Jesus Christ, and the entire dogmatic structure of the early ecumenical councils. They were not trying to reinvent the ecclesiastical wheel, only to repair a wheel that (in their view) had been broken badly over time.

While it would be incorrect to assert that the Reformation was in no sense innovative (Protestant Alister McGrath has argued that Luther's exclusively forensic definition of justification finds no precedent anywhere in the patristic church or until 1517), the Reformation was principally a call to greater fidelity to the Word of God and to the ancient faith. Like all healthy reactions, it developed an unhealthy overreaction, as did the Counter-Reformation, Rome's reaction (and overreaction) to the Protestant Reformation.

### THE INTERVENING DEVELOPMENT

In the last four centuries, both Rome and the Reformation churches have changed considerably—and sometimes for the worse. The Enlightenment enthronement of reason choked the faith-enriched life of the original Protestants who later succumbed to Unitarianism, Transcendentalism, and, more significantly, the non-dogmatic liberalism at the fountainhead of Friedrich Schleiermacher. Rome's recent scandals in the American priesthood have been a blotch on the faith. Today, the ecclesiastical and theological landscape discloses a bewildering diversity of ancient, modern, and postmodern; traditional and innovating; conservative and liberal; globalization and localization; and catholic and sectarian. If the church's only unity is in diversity, the church is more unified than at any time in her history.

### THE PRESSING NEED FOR CATHOLICITY TODAY

If organizational unity at this stage of church history is a chimera, an organic unity need not be. At any rate, it is essential. The burning question of 1517 was, "What form should the church take?" The formidable issue today is: "How will

the church survive rampaging secularism and virulent Islamic fundamentalism, the two great external threats to the faith in the postmodern world?" The dispute that occasioned the sixteenth-century schism in the West pales before these enemies that threaten to exterminate the flame of living Christianity. Ironically perhaps, sixteenth-century Europe afforded the luxury of a Protestant revolt and Roman Catholic Counter-Reformation precisely because it was suffused with Christian culture. A division over relatively narrow points of belief and practice was possible just because of wide ecclesiastical consensus. Today's burgeoning hegemony of both a secular and an Islamic fundamentalism does not afford the church such luxury. We must work tirelessly to recreate an ecclesiastical consensus that, if not institutional and organizational, is at least organic and strategic.

Today, the importance of being catholic is perhaps more vital than ever. We must stand with all who truthfully declare "Jesus is Lord," vocally affirm the Apostles' Creed, and visibly work toward Christian culture. This is not a politically oriented or enforced culture, nor is it one identified with some political party or ideology. Rather, it is a culture that respects the claims of the Triune God as it comes to the fore in the lordship of the crucified, risen, and reigning King, Jesus Christ. It is a culture that respects human life as fashioned in God's image. It is a culture that fosters the divine order of the family: a self-sacrificing monogamy, a patriarchy that loves and cherishes wife and children, and motherhood that pours out its life for a family. It is a culture that eschews state socialism and respects private property but equally disdains a form of secular capitalism interested only in materialistic creature comforts. It supports the acquisition of wealth but demands that wealth be used compassionately. This Christian culture is one of political liberty without license, Christian unity without religious persecution, and democratic processes without a relativistic pluralism. Christian culture is not a utopia, and it does not enforce morality by the sword (as secular utopias of the twentieth century routinely did). It is, rather, the reflection of catholicity, the belief that not merely the church but all of culture should reflect a respect for

Jesus Christ the Savior and Lord.

This is the importance of being catholic in today's world.

#### AUTHOR

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