

On Being Catholic Today: An Opinion

By Gerald Morton

The Catholic world I grew up in 50 years ago has largely disappeared - only memories remain. In my mind's eye it stands like an abandoned home left in haste. I lament the loss of that time and culture. It remains an intrinsic part of me.

I feel certain there is no return to that golden era. Little remains of those early and enduring times: the deep roots of the blue collar, Irish - Scots Catholic tradition - so narrow, provincial and formative - our customs, community and history - so rich in colour and texture, so intricately braided. But as to that culture, it's gone - no doubt swept aside by the effect of a post-modern, post-Christian world in the throes of change and change again, a secular antagonistic liberal mentality, and a pluralistic society with its encroaching culture of individualism for which we as Catholics seem ill-prepared.

On the other hand, since the day we Catholics made our first faltering steps out of the upper room, some things don't change. Being Catholic in its plainest, simplest, most unvarnished terms has been a little like being part of a family – a large and robust, dysfunctional and extended family, engaged in a continuous, noisy, and occasionally contentious and disputative debate around the supper table in the family home. Take for example our current table-debate. It relates to the mission of the handing on of the faith. What does it mean to be a Catholic today? Is it critical to the time, vital to the faith, essential to the future?

Who we are as Catholics today is a difficult and complex question which I believe is being asked of us not only by the church but by secular society itself. The question relates to our authenticity as Catholics. The question has merit and is not an idle one. We must ask it of ourselves and it must be asked with purpose. It must be given an authentic hearing and answered with resolve. Its answer must be resolute, unique and personal, avoiding the traps of the obvious and orthodox, the typical and predictable, the ritualised formula with its easy rote and familiarity, the safe catechetical rebuttal found in books. Its answer is seldom easy or cheap. The question of the meaning of being Catholic today remains difficult, perhaps in the extreme. No doubt it was designed so. If it were possible to apply a wide-angled perspective to what being Catholic today implies, it would be clear that our mandate begins in its primary sense in a call to relationship with Jesus Christ, a constant call to holiness. Our discipleship is broader and deeper than before, the mission more complex than yesterday. With this in mind, we must consider this call to holiness as part of a three-fold challenge, a means of re-building, re-tooling and re-aligning the Catholic community. In keeping with a society hungry for God's word, we need to keep our ear attuned to God's constant call, our eye open to the challenges and potential growth in ministries and outreach of the Church for the future. The cost, responsibilities and scope of discipleship become increasingly evident. The alternative is to remain safe and warm where we are and to stay with the well-worn, tried, tested and true practices and ideas of yesterday's church, from a place where we can reside with the neutrality and privilege of the spectator. I have come to understand that the challenge of change is a constant factor within Catholicism, a journey complete with challenges, conversions and constant dialogue, for we are not served

well by silence. Perhaps the next family table-debate – “Changing Times, Greater Needs” – might incorporate the recognition of our need to accept and to adapt to the inevitability and predictability of change. My challenge of change came as a Canadian immigrant, called, in some ways like Abraham, to drop everything and come. This is akin to early man’s dilemma in leaving the safety of the known and the security of the high places. It is as dramatic as exiting the caves and migrating to the plains. It means rethinking, hunting, making tools, figuring out how people co-exist. The point here is that if we remain in the caves we won’t need a wheel . . . which is exactly the risk of change. I fear that by not moving forward we may risk burying not just our heads but our talent in the sand. It is better to face the challenge of unity than the threat of division. Perhaps a first step out of the cave is migrating to a new dialogue by the beginning of an open and broad discussion amongst all of us defining what is meant by the fundamental issue of being Catholic today. This must be a journey which takes us forward into the broader, deeper, higher – the formation of a renewed people.

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