

“How We Are Catholic”:
A Reflection on Goal Four of the Sacred Heart Goals and Criteria

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Our topic is “How We Are Catholic” or, as someone on our planning team queried, “How Catholic *are* we?” I want to reflect on this theme through the lens of Goal Four: “Schools of the Sacred Heart commit themselves to educate to the building of community as a Christian value.” Thus, we need to ask, “What kind of community is in harmony with a Sacred Heart Catholic school?” For instance, does there need to be a certain percentage of Catholics in the school? Or, do those who are not Catholic need to espouse the teachings of the Catholic faith? Or, we might ask, how does a Sacred Heart Catholic school relate to those who don’t share its faith tradition, or the dominant ethnic or socioeconomic group, for that matter?

Our reality is clear: Sacred Heart communities are more diverse and more fluid than ever before. Not until 1990 was the word “Catholic” included in the Goals and Criteria simply because Catholic identity, its reality and meaning, was assumed by all. But now, even Catholic identity is less homogeneous. It might be more accurate for us to speak of Catholic *identities* when we review the wide spectrum of Catholic expressions today ranging from Opus Dei to Call to Action. In addition, there is the growing phenomenon of “multiple belongings”, that is, people who move freely among worship communities of different denominations in search of spiritual sustenance. Our communities are more diverse along ethnic, racial, economic, and sexual orientation lines. Our world wide web opens the door to countless ways of interpreting life such that the attempt to claim one way as the only way will likely be challenged from every side. What effect does citizenship in such a multivalent world have on our identity, in this case, Catholic? Is everything relative? Is our goal peaceful co-existence? Does our relationship with those who are different than we are lead to attitudes of superiority, defensiveness, and a silo mentality or does it lead to self-transcendence and expansion and the development of communal identity? As a Sacred Heart community, how will we be with one another? How will we be Catholic?

I want to frame my reflections on this topic by asking several questions which are prompted, in part, by John Haughey’s excellent book, *Where Is Knowing Going?: The Horizons of the Knowing Subject*. And so we ask,

- Is our exploration of how we are Catholic a new question?
- Can the very centerpiece of the Catholic Christian tradition offer us an insight into how we can be Catholic?
- What will help our way of proceeding?

- What is the catalyst for addressing the question of “How are we Catholic?” one that is operative and alive in a concrete and problematic way as you go about your ministry? What new insights do you have about how to address the challenge? Or is this a question that comes to you from the perceptions others have about what Sacred Heart Catholic education should be like? In other words, how will you give an explanation, an account of the hope that is in you, that you are indeed living the Catholic educational mission?

First, *is the question “How are we Catholic?” a new question?*

The etymology of “catholicity” (*Dictionary.com*) means “openness, broadmindedness or liberality, universality, general inclusiveness. Its Greek adverbial form means “wholly.” In English, it connotes “a movement towards universality or wholeness.” Is anyone experiencing a disconnection?! Yes, I am indeed talking about catholicity but you might be quick to notice a chasm between the meaning and your experience of it!

The term was first applied to the Catholic Church by Ignatius of Antioch in 110 AD. Then along came Justin Martyr, one of the earliest defenders of the faith who died in 165. He believed that the power of the Logos, the Word of God, was at the root of all the truth the pre-Christian philosophers proclaimed. For him, the early Church had much to learn from the intellectual treasures of Athens, treasures that were akin to their own search for truth. For Justin, there was no discontinuity between the Catholic Church and what had gone before among truth seekers.

On the contrary, Tertullian, another father of the Church who died 57 years later in 222 AD, saw a complete or nearly complete discontinuity between “two cities,” that is, the Church and the secular world.

The great thirteenth century theologian and doctor of the Church Thomas Aquinas saw catholicity as one of the marks of the Church: one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. For him, this founding impulse of the Church was operative from the beginnings of time and he believed it would live into the future and that it embraced all.

And then the Reformation volleyed its proclamation that only the Catholic Church is the one true Church. The well known dictum, “outside the church there is no salvation,” obliterated the inclusive spirit of catholicity. The tensions and multiple views about what is catholic and who is in and who is out have been alive and well almost from the beginning. The question is not new.

Can a cursory exploration of our own Sacred Heart roots shed light on our understanding of our Catholic identity? Sophie and Philippine mirror in a powerful way the inherent tension in the understanding of catholicity, that is, the tug and pull between the free and expansive interpretation of “catholic” and the restrictive and narrow views that exist side by side.

In the rue de Varenne in Paris, one of the community members, Russian aristocrat Adele Davidoff, was for many years in charge of a regular program for converts in the school. Once, so

reports Phil Kilroy, RSCJ, when two Muslim children came to the rue de Varenne boarding school, Sophie made sure they were allowed to observe Ramadan and to eat after sundown.

Philippine, too, was committed to serving those in need no matter their background. After the Civil War, for example, there weren't as many schools in the South, so the Society took in Protestants. In fact, one third of the students at St. Michael's in the 1870's were Protestant. Cultural pressures also influenced an understanding of "catholicity." Philippine embraced it in her determination to teach the African Americans in Louisiana, even though it was frowned upon by the white neighbors. Although enrolling them in the schools could have had a deleterious effect on enrollment, Philippine found another way to be true to her convictions by holding special classes after Mass, boys included.

Such examples of liberality and inclusion stood side by side with a different view offered by the Church and by the Society itself. In countries of mixed denominations, there were many Protestant and even Jewish students in Sacred Heart schools. When the question was raised about whether they had to attend Mass and keep abstinence on Fridays, the answer was usually yes. The General Council of the Society in 1890 decreed that Protestants could not become the majority in a school "lest they propagate their religious ideas." They had to attend Mass on Sunday and could not be taken to their own churches or temples. The idea was that good example would make them convert.

Sophie's instinct for inclusion and her respect for the dignity and uniqueness of each child were actually raised during the canonization process. The Vatican's Devil's Advocate leveled the criticism that Sophie had allowed non-Catholic and non-Christian students to attend the schools and that she had not worked hard enough for their conversion. Of course, this was after 1870 when papal infallibility was established and the Church's anti-modern sentiment was strong. The question and the tension are not new.

Times change and we must change with them and, gratefully, the Spirit seems to think so as well! Vatican II sowed the seeds of a very different mentality as it shifted from a focus on the Catholic Church as institution to the Catholic Church in the service of, as midwife of, the Reign of God. John XXIII saw the Council's purpose "as preparing and consolidating the path toward the unity of humanity itself...in order that the earthly city may be brought to the resemblance of that heavenly city where truth reigns, charity is the law, and whose extent is eternity" (Opening Address to the Council, Abbott, *Documents of Vatican II*, 718).

The council addressed itself for the first time ever to all people of good will. And the great document on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, stretches the flaps of its tent to include all. The Council saw the Church as a sign and sacrament of union with God. It saw itself connected to the Jews, "the people to whom the covenants and promises were given; this people remains most dear to God for God neither repents of the gifts God makes nor the calls God issues." The Church is linked to "those who acknowledge the Creator...in the first place the Muslims." Further, it signals a relationship with those who do not yet believe in God: "Nor is God far distant from those who in shadows and images seek the unknown God." Also included are those righteous people who "sincerely seek God and, moved by grace, strive by their deeds to do God's will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience." Finally, the Council is

confident that “divine Providence supplies the help necessary for salvation to those who, without blame on their part, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God, but who strive to live a good life, thanks to God’s grace.”

This is catholicity restored, at least as an aspiration, for we all know that the reality continues to fall short as its unfolding follows the slow, painful process of human growth. How do we navigate the liberal, inclusive, openness of catholicity with the “on the ground reality” of being a community of the Sacred Heart and also being a community within the larger community of the Church that continues to struggle, as we do, with a consistent, forward moving vision.

Let’s turn now to the second question: *Can the very centerpiece of the Catholic Christian tradition offer us an insight into how we can be Catholic in a way that is thoroughly faithful to the tradition as well as thoroughly open and inclusive?*

The centerpiece, the litmus test, of the integrity and authenticity of the Catholic Christian faith is Jesus the Christ. But I am not Christian, some might say! Where do I fit in this Catholic Sacred Heart School community? The question is necessary for it demands that we probe deeply into the mystery of the Christ on its own terms and test whether our own view of Christ is in fact broad and deep enough.

First, what can we learn from Jesus’ attitudes and outlook about catholicity in Scripture? Familiar to all of us, I think, is Jesus’ propensity to spend time with questionable characters, with people who were clearly “other” than he was. One such person was the Syro-phenician woman of Mark’s gospel. This desperate mom begged Jesus to drive out the demon in her daughter. Jesus’ first response was to dismiss her request since she wasn’t an Israelite, one of Jesus’ people. But she persisted and Jesus’ seemingly changed his mind. Whatever the reason – her courage, her desperate need, his compassion – Jesus’ encounter with an “other,” someone unfamiliar to his world, stretched his boundaries. He seemed to have the experience each of us has from time to time: when we encounter the “other,” the different, we must both clarify who we are and stretch beyond to something more.

Think, too, of the centurion, a member of the Roman army in Jesus’ time. No favorite drinking buddies of the Jews were they. Yet, Jesus said of him when the centurion expressed utter faith and trust in Jesus to work a cure: “In no one in Israel have I found such faith.” (Mtt.8:10) Gerard Manley Hopkins captures Jesus’ openness and vigilance to see God, wherever and in whomever: “I greet God when I meet God and I bless when I understand.” Jesus learned of God’s love from those outside of Israel, from those other than his own community.

We see from these stories that Jesus straddled two perspectives or orientations. First, as a human, he was thoroughly immersed in the concrete particularities of life – people and places and ways of thinking and action - even if they were not his own. He somehow knew that rubbing elbows with all people, those like him and those different from him, actually served as grist for the mill of his own self awareness and self-growth or self-transcendence. Second, even though change and being stretched may have been hard for him sometimes, too, Jesus was grounded in and oriented toward the Holy Mystery of God, his Abba, the One who is always More. Never is

the understanding of God exhausted and so being pulled into other worlds, other perspectives, were graced moments of his entering into the Heart of his Beloved.

What then is the Church's crystallization of Jesus, based on these and many other stories in Scripture and from the experience of a growing Church? It is that Jesus is fully human and fully divine at one and the same time! This doctrine of the hypostatic union offers us more help in our search for "how we are Catholic" than might meet the eye! For this doctrine posits that exploring, mining, questioning, and embracing the human in all its multiple dimensions is the work of God. Our community life as Sacred Heart educators, administrators, staff, teachers, children, parents, alums all, is the entrance into the depth and richness of God *if* we can see it this way! Teaching and learning in science and the arts, in probing Catholic and other religious traditions, in relishing music and literature and languages and the earth itself...all of this is the place where God is revealed if we can see!! As Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote:

Earth's crammed with heaven
And every common bush afire with God;
But only (those) who see, take off their shoes-
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries,
And daub their natural faces unaware
More and more from the first similitude

This doctrine of the Christ, fully human and fully divine, posits that as sophisticated as our learning is, as clear as we might be about truth and goodness and beauty, there is always More because the Creator of it all is always More! We are in the realm of Mystery now. Our concepts and doctrines, our definitions and convictions, those clearly chiseled truths we grasp, are never the final word because God is always more. Yes, we need to identify the principles and the guidelines, the values and the traditions that time has proven to be wise. But never can we be deceived into thinking that we have the best and the only way, that our work is done, that we have arrived. This attitude of humility is beautifully expressed in a poem by Mary Oliver: "Mysteries, Yes"

Mysteries, Yes

Truly, we live with mysteries too marvelous
to be understood.

How grass can be nourishing in the
mouths of the lambs.

How rivers and stones are forever
in allegiance with gravity
while we ourselves dream of rising.

How two hands touch and the bonds
will never be broken.

How people come, from delight or the

scars of damage,
to the comfort of a poem.

Let me keep my distance, always, from those
who think they have the answers.

Let me keep company always with those who say
"Look!" and laugh in astonishment,
and bow their heads.

~ Mary Oliver ~

(Evidence)

How are we Catholic? We are Catholic when we proclaim Jesus the Christ as the revelation of God's Heart. We are Catholic when we embrace Jesus' utter respect for the laws of the human, when we look deeply into the human in all its variety and uniqueness, its glory and its greatness, its vulnerability and limits. We are Catholic when we believe that we find the Holy as we explore the human and dignify it in our actions for justice and peace. We are Catholic when we profess the wideness, the universality, of God's mercy and love. We are Catholic when we realize that God is God and there is no other - not a Church, not a philosophy, not a robot, not a political platform. God is always inexhaustible Mystery and until we meet God face to face, we simply do our best to stay on the search for God. We are Catholic when we realize in whose image we are made, where our true home lies, and where all our loves and learnings, our labors and our desires, are intended to head.

And that leads me to my final question: *What Will Help Our Way of Proceeding?*

There is no easy formula, no magic, to coming to a resolution about this but I believe two approaches will help us find our way into being Catholic with integrity and authenticity: a spirit of hospitality and a commitment to dialogue.

A Spirit of Hospitality

Hospitality is the capacity for openness and welcome. It is not merely allowing the presence of otherness, the token whatever. Nor is it an attitude of welcoming in order to convert. Have you ever been in a conversation where you feel the other is not really listening but simply waiting to tell you that their way is best? No, hospitality is a desire to actively engage with, and learn from, the other. It is shaped by a quality that makes people willing to find out what they need to know or want to know from whatever source their knowledge may come. Some might ask, but how open is too open? John Haughey points out that for those who think they have the truth, openness is a dangerous thing.

And so we touch base with our core, the Catholic culture rooted in Jesus the Christ. The early Church had to negotiate what it meant to be faithful to the Christ again and again as it developed. The Christian Scriptures are filled with evidence of their growth in understanding. Consider:

...The outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost made it possible for devout Jews “from every nation under heaven” living in Jerusalem to understand the Good news of Jesus each in his or her own tongue (Acts 2:8)

...Great stories of conversion and self-transcendence pepper the Acts of the Apostles. Peter came to realize that nothing that God purifies is unclean and that the Holy Spirit desired to inspire the Gentiles as well as the Jews. And Peter’s powerful words tell the tale: “I begin to see how true it is that God shows no partiality. Rather, the person of any nation who fears God and acts uprightly is acceptable to God.”

(Acts 10:1-11:18)

...And the great apostle Paul would stop at little to let people know of the Good news, respecting the context and culture of each: “To the Jews I became as a Jew...To those outside the law I became as one outside the law...To the weak I have become weak...I have become all things to all people for the sake of the gospel...(1 Cor. 9:20-22)

Our own Janet Stuart says it beautifully: “It is not so much what we do or say that educates; what really educates is who we are.” Are we welcoming and respectful? Are we appreciative of others’ viewpoints and traditions, such that they are comfortable in sharing them in abundance? And so we become more “catholic”...

A Commitment to Dialogue

Jesus, once again, models a way of proceeding. Remember the astonishing fact of his dialogue with the great teachers in the temple? Was he being disrespectful by questioning the law or was he uncompromising in his search for what the Reign of God means in the flesh even if it meant challenging the law? From Jesus’ witness, we learn that the law is a starting point rather than the arrival point, for the Mystery of God always beckons forward and deeper.

In language more familiar to us, dialogue is always in search of wholeness, the very meaning of catholicity. In the Catholic tradition, wholeness ends in God and so forward and deeper we must go. This is an attitude quite different from the kind of specialization that can lead to the silo mentality somewhat prevalent in our institutions of learning. For us, anyone and everyone who is willing to engage in our common search for wholeness and truth is a valued member of our community.

Fruitful dialogue is a process, encompassing multiple dimensions of life in our search for wholeness. It is outlined in a document from the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples (1991). The authors cite several elements in the process:

- a. dialogue of life: We engage in the shared act of telling stories from all traditions about how we live and how we have come to understand what is precious and important to us;
- b. dialogue of action: The Reign of God, played out in the lives of human beings struggling for a just world, is common ground for many. For example, how do the

students talk about the meaning of their community service projects or their volunteer activities or the random acts of kindness that they do or witness?

- c. dialogue of religious experience: Our prayer, any moments when our desire for God meets God's desires for us, becomes our common ground when we share the ways we have met God as simple as they may be. The life penetrating power of prayer is reflected in another of Mary Oliver's poems, "The Veil":

There are moments when the veil seems
almost to lift, and we understand what
the earth is meant to mean to us—the
trees in their docility, the hills in
their patience, the flowers and the
vines in their wild, sweet vitality.

Then the Word is within us, and the
Book is put away.

- d. dialogue of theological exchange (interestingly, the last element mentioned!): Only now can we share our doctrines and articulations of faith born of life, action and religious experience.

This is not relativism. Always in interreligious dialogue, all parties examine their beliefs and practices, correcting them when necessary. A key to discerning their move towards wholeness/catholicity is to discern where they lead, so that ultimately all might deepen their commitment to their own beliefs and live them more fully.

Dialogue and hospitality constitute the hard work of building community as a Christian value. We are Catholic as we embrace the values and vision of Jesus the Christ who remained thoroughly rooted in the fullness of humanity and always and everywhere kept his heart focused on the fullness of the Mystery of God whose Reign is still unfolding. We would do well to keep as our motto John XXIII's maxim: "Unity in what is necessary; freedom in others; charity in all." The call for each one of us is to be ready to give an account of the hope that is in us. Our hope is the full scope of Jesus the Christ, fully human and fully God.