



Catholic Identity

By Kedda Keough

As a cradle Catholic I took my identity as "Catholic" for granted. I attended Catholic schools through college, and pursued my Master of Divinity in a Jesuit University. It seemed to me that I knew what it meant to be Catholic. Now I discover that putting words on what is "Catholic Identity", especially in light of moving from the Roman way of being Catholic to the Ecumenical Catholic Communion, has been very challenging. I have come up with some bullet points that are important to me and I offer them to you for your consideration. Much more could be written about each bullet point, but I wanted to keep this reflection as short as possible.

Catholic identity means being:

Eucharistic: All that Catholics do flows toward the "Breaking of the Bread", and all we will do flows out of Eucharist. Eucharist is at the very center of being Catholic. Being a Eucharistic people is the chief identifier of being Catholic. We bring ourselves, and all that we are and do, to the table. We come with thanksgiving. We recognize Christ and we recognize the Body of Christ in the Breaking of the Bread. We are sent out (*ita missa est*) to transform creation.

Incarnational: We Catholics use the stuff of creation to express mystery. We are earthy people and use the stuff of earth to speak to us about God and mystery. We know that the way IN to people is through their senses. Often this stuff is what people think of as showing their identity as Catholics. There is lots of "Catholic stuff": Holy water, oils, bread, wine, candles, bishops, priests, deacons, ashes, palms, holy cards, rosaries, pictures/icons/statues of saints, colors, altar, ambo, font, tabernacle, etc. Our symbols need to be "done large" so they speak well.

Sacramental: Catholics highlight the stages of life through ritual and celebration. These sacraments are transformative, celebrating change; celebrating new life. There are at least 7 sacraments, and I would not be opposed to having more.

Graced: Grace is the starting place for our theological understanding of the relationship between God and Creation. All that is created is good. We begin by seeing all humans as created in the image of God. People are basically good.

Charismatic: Church is based on the active presence of the Holy Spirit, and the gifts of the Spirit for the community. The Spirit of God acts in the Church. It is the Spirit of God that acts in sacraments, blessings, etc. (Epiklesis: "Come, Holy Spirit")

Communion of Saints: There is a continuum of relatedness of those who have gone before us, those who are alive today, and those who will come after us. We are one. We are on a common journey; we are a pilgrim people, streaming through time. Note, Catholics believe in the afterlife, and saints are very good at symbolizing that belief.

The Common Good: Our moral stance is communal. Preference is given to that which is best for the common good, not just to what is best for one individual. Even in individual choices we ask: if everyone did this, what would be the consequences on society as a whole? Social Justice - seeing that everyone gets their share of resources for a good life -- is a key ingredient in Catholic life.

Revelation: Our faith tradition is based on the fullness of revelation, past, present and future, not "Bible Only". Scripture is incarnational: God's revelation as given through very human means, conditioned by time, place and culture. Our understanding grows.

Inclusive: Catholics means "here comes everybody." Catholics have unity with diversity; we are the big umbrella. Not only are we inclusive of all people, we are inclusive of all prayer types and spiritualities, from contemplative to charismatic; from "rote" prayers to centering prayer; inclusive of liturgical expressions from chant to dance.

Absorbent: Catholicism takes in culture and transforms it, rather than rejects it. From Christmas trees to Easter eggs, to spiritual practices, to feast days themselves, we absorb culture and make it part of us. Nothing human is foreign to us.

Kedda Keough is a priest of the Ecumenical Catholic Communion and is a pastor of the Emmaus Ecumenical Catholic Community in downtown Olympia, WA.