

On Being Catholic

2nd Sunday Ordinary Time

John 1:29-34

Muldoon lived alone in the Irish countryside with only a pet dog for company. One day the dog died, and Muldoon went to the parish priest and asked, “Father, my dog is dead. Could ya be sayin a Mass for the poor creature?”

Father Patrick replied, “I’m afraid not; we cannot have service for an animal in the church. But there are some Baptists down the lane, and there’s no tellin what they believe. Maybe they’ll do something for the creature.”

Muldoon said, “I’ll go right away Father. Do ya think \$5000 is enough to donate to them for the service?”

Father Patrick exclaimed, “Sweet Mary, Mother of Jesus! Why didn’t ya tell me the dog was Catholic?” (1)

In our Gospel today we have a profound identity issue and as well as a powerful witnessing issue that are linked. But to know how they are linked we need to understand the nature of the culture of the day.

John, despite being Jesus’ kinsman, did not recognize him, yet he witnessed to him as “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world”. For us in our western culture this is at odds with conventional thought. How can someone witness to a person he does not even recognize? This is where our culture clashes with that of the Mediterranean culture.

In our culture, especially at trials, we demand proof and evidence before we can believe. We relish eyewitness testimony and the “just the facts” mentality. In Jesus’ culture decisions by judges were made based on the reputation of the witness whether speaking for or against the person on trial. The person who was able to line up the most reputable witnesses usually won; quite a stark contrast to our thinking.

John the Baptist did not have the kind of powerful witness reputation with the leaders of the Jewish faith as we see in other Gospels where priests and other leaders were sent out to him to challenge his credentials. More important, though, he had the powerful reputation with the people. This is what makes John so important to the development of our Church and of our very own faith lives. He is called on to baptize Jesus; and why did Jesus need baptism? After all he did not have original sin and was fully connected to the Holy Spirit – so why? This is a very important segment in the Gospel that sometimes is overlooked. John says “The reason why I came baptizing with water was that he might be made known to Israel”. A powerful witness who did not really recognize Jesus proclaimed to all of Israel that Jesus was the Savior. That was enough for the people and they believed.

Now looking at our corner of the world, we should ask ourselves, “could someone who does not know or recognize us, witness to the world that we are a good and faithful Catholic?” The

answer to that question involves the ability of the person who is witnessing, something we are not in control of; and our own identity as Catholic, something we are in control of.

Like Jesus, the waters of baptism came over us and the same dove, the Holy Spirit, descended on us at Baptism and then again at Confirmation. It gave us the identity as Catholic as a child of God. But unlike Jesus, the sanctifying grace we receive at these sacraments needs to be used to develop the proper faith and identity for ourselves and to others.

I believe the development of our faith has four stages: stage one is learning, stage two is accepting what is learned, stage three is living what is learned and stage four is sharing with others what is lived. For many who proclaim to be Catholic, I believe, many times, the problem is with stage one – knowledge and its close cousin stage two – accepting what is taught. When the faith is not learned, or accepted, it cannot be lived as God wants, instead being lived as the world wants or at a minimum, lived in ignorance.

How often do you hear in person, or on TV or through the internet of someone proclaiming to be Catholic and then espousing non-Catholic positions especially on social and moral issues? We see these polls all the time that note Catholics are for many of these positions contrary to our Church's teachings. I don't know about you, but I have never been asked by a pollster on any issue; so I am not sure where they are finding these folks.

When one publically professes to be Catholic and publically proclaims positions contrary to our Church, they are bearing false witness, harming their own identity and possibly the identity of our church. Does this mean we can never have doubts on a Church teaching or position – no. We all struggle to find truth, but in doing so we suffer in silence publically while we ask the Holy Spirit for guidance and in doing so we honor our belief in one, holy, catholic and apostolic church. Discussions amongst ourselves is one thing and a very healthy discourse, public proclamation is not the same.

None of this is not about personal judgment, it's about identity. There are many ways to find God, but we believe from this Gospel and others that Jesus, through His church, gives us the BEST way to find God here and in the world to come. It is a lifelong process of learning, accepting, living and sharing. Being Catholic doesn't make us better than anyone else, just gives us different identity and way of witnessing.

At the end of this life do we want someone to witness on our behalf that we were a good and faithful servant; always learning, always accepting, always living and always sharing the faith?... a true Catholic identity. We hope so since the alternative is likely "Sweet Mary, Mother of Jesus! Why didn't you tell me you were Catholic?"

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Other sources: The Cultural World of Jesus Cycle A. John J. Pilch