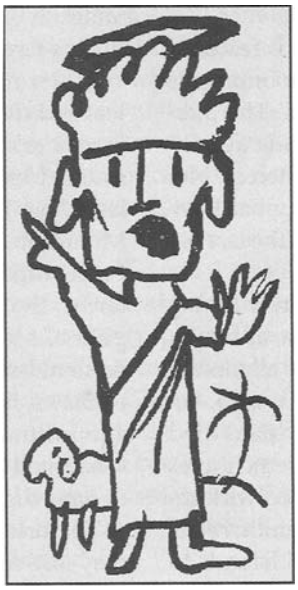
A CLOAK OF MANY COLORS

The end of beige Catholicism

Andrew M. Greeley

Catholics are different. We belong to a sacramental church and hence are a sacramental people, distinct from those who are less sacramental than we are. Since Vatican II, however, a type of false prophecy—based on an illegitimate reading of the council—has suggested that Catholics abandon these differences and become "just like everyone else." Such a mélange would not be Catholicism.

Any cultural heritage is a tool kit, a set of paradigms that suggests attitudes and responses to the problems and opportunities of life. Usually, such a heritage is subconscious and unreflective, which makes the problem of defining and describing it complex. Here I will try to examine contemporary Catholic attitudes and responses, especially toward what we have traditionally called the sacramentals.



Priest and theologian Robert Baron, born in 1960, says that he was raised and educated in what he calls "beige Catholicism," a Catholicism stripped of much of its beauty, its rainforest of metaphors, denuded in an effort to be "just like everyone else." Beige Catholicism is somehow trapped between the solemn but empty rituals of the past and a bare-bones, low-church Protestantism—not quite Catholic but not really Protestant either.

The issue is not restoration. The Catholicism of the forties and fifties cannot and should not be restored. Rather, the issue is whether the church, in its haste to adjust to the postconciliar world, jettisoned much of what was distinctive and precious in the Catholic sacramental heritage. Consider four examples of the church's discarded heritage: plain song, statues, the rosary, and meatless Fridays.

• **Gregorian chant** Plain song flourished for fifteen centuries. It has recently been celebrated in best-selling CDs. Yet liturgists have virtually banished it from Catholic worship on the ground that it has no place in the postconciliar liturgy. But to suggest that occasionally a congregation might sing the Kyrie, the Sanctus, and the Agnus Dei, perhaps in antiphonal mode with a skilled *schola cantorum*, does not imply membership in the Society of Pius X or rejection of the liturgical reforms of Vatican II. Rather, it is to advocate the recovery of a tradition of great beauty that has been part of the Catholic heritage for ages.

True, plain song is not of the essence of the Catholic heritage. It could disappear and Catholicism would remain Catholicism, albeit marginally the poorer. But if something is beautiful and hints of God's loving presence in the world, why abandon it? Why not sing the *Pange Lingua* on Holy Thursday?

• **Statues** My pastor in Tucson presided over the construction of a new church in which there were niches for only two saints, Mary and Joseph. In a lecture I gave there, I remarked that the pastor ought to have a storeroom full of saints, so he could trot out one or two to be saint-of-the-month. That way parents could bring their kids and tell them the stories of the saints, our stories of God's love. Catholicism is a religion awash in great and wonderful stories.

My monsignor, in giving his vote of thanks for my remarks, said, well, now, if Father Greeley wants to donate some statues, sure wouldn't we be glad to have them. So now when you enter Our Mother of Sorrows Church in Tucson, you'll find two life-size wood carvings of Saints Brigid and Brendan by Robert McGovern. More than that, there are Byzantine icons flanking the altar and statues everywhere, inside and outside of the church, and even a garden of saints in front of the rectory.

It might be said that all this "stuff" that used to litter our churches is not essential to Catholicism, not even really part of Catholic doctrine. They are accidentals, derivatives that have been added to the heritage over the centuries and are not important. God, Trinity, incarnation, church, pope—these are the essentials of our faith. However, such an argument confuses the way we first encounter our religious heritage and its stories with the way the doctrines are systematically arranged by theologians and catechism writers. Stories come first, then theological and catechetical systematization, which in turn enable us to critique the stories. But then, in what Paul Ricoeur calls the second naiveté, we return to the stories. Religion begins and ends with them.

• **The rosary** The monsignor in Tucson had so many

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people seeking instruction that he divided them into those who were already baptized and those who were not, an appropriate decision since the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults is technically only for the nonbaptized. (The baptized had their own ten-week course, "Faith Affirmation.") He discovered that many of the nonbaptized could hardly wait to get a rosary, because this was proof that they were really going to be Catholics. So he made distribution of rosaries an integral part of their preparation.

The Rosary! Hasn't that been banned by the liturgists? Isn't it a holdover from medieval superstition? Shouldn't we give up the nervous fingering of the beads of the grandmas and the babushkas? One of the great arenas for the study of comparative religion is the taxi cabs in American cities. One sees every variety of prayer beads under heaven. Why should we give up ours?

- **Fridays** We did give up fish on Friday, one of the great definitions of Catholic identity, and for no good reason of which I am aware. Most likely we were contemptuous of it as preconcilar. Despite the fact that some bishops think all you have to do to recreate a metaphor like this is to make a new rule, it won't work. A mentality has to emerge among Catholics that we do some things not because they are a rule but because, as Catholics, we like to do them.

Chant, statues, the rosary, Friday abstinence—none is essential, but until we find better metaphors for the presence of God's personal love in the world, we would do well to conserve what we have rather than toss them into the ashcan of history.

Perhaps the most powerful of all our metaphors is that of the Madonna. It would be difficult to find in the conciliar documents a hint that Mary was no longer fashionable, but, in sad truth, we hear little about her these days. This may be for fear that Marian devotion might offend our separated brothers and sisters. English historian Eamon Duffy has lamented that, in the last thirty years, theologians have written little about Mary. They ignore her the way Victorian novelists ignored sex. But why? Does she embarrass us? And why leave her to those who wish to multiply her titles or to those fixated on gnostic interpretations of private revelations?

And then there is purgatory. It has been swept away. In his wonderful novel *The White Hotel*, D. M. Thomas suggests that purgatory is a place where our task is to straighten out the messes we have made of our human relationships. This seems like a legitimate exegesis of the purgatory story, and a reassuring, encouraging explanation of its pain—which is also a joy. We can wisely pray for such souls—that they work through their problems. And we can ask their help in anticipating the pains and the joys of purgatory ourselves by striving for reconciliation in this life.

I offer this interpretation as one possibility. My point is that any attempt to take seriously the Catholic heritage that does not take into account purgatory (even if the name harkens back only to thirteenth-century Ireland) is gravely

Walter Jones's Orchard

To pick your orchard, you should have three things:
First, a good ladder; second, a bag that hangs
Around your neck, its bottom a trap door
Latched by a cord that when unhooked lets pour
The apples bruiseless into third, your boxes.

That fall, however, surprised by the expected
(For hadn't I in May admired the airy
Smother of blossoms, sensed everywhere
The tingle of bees after pollen, in August propped
Branches too weak to carry the promised crop?),

Out of boxes with half the apples to pick
I drove two hours north to load a truck
With the unused Eastern Standards of Mrs. Jones
(Little, quick, 70 maybe, living alone).
Walter, she told me, nailed together three hundred

From rough pine boards one year, and then he died,
Leaving them stacked in the barn. Where, I wondered,
As I wrote the check, was Walter Jones's orchard?
The farm was small; I saw no apple trees,
Though plenty of pines. A clever way to use

The trees he did have? Was Walter Jones surprised
Like me by the expected—or simply wise
Enough to consider boxes the prudent way
To start an orchard? Maybe his secret aim
Was to leave his soul in wood. For his widow to sell.

Walter Jones had built his boxes well.
No nail pulled, no side or bottom burst
To dump its load of Fancies in the dirt.
And now each fall when all the orchard's picked
My cooler's packed with Walter Jones's boxes.

Charles W. Pratt

deficient. For whom are we to offer our pains, whether suffering terminal cancer or a toothache? For whom are we to pray if the dead really cannot profit from our prayers? Do we even realize that a heritage which recommends and reinforces praying for the dead is a heritage which is both rich and benign?

A sacramental religion, one that believes in the presence of a loving God in God's creation, will inevitably become a heritage in which sacramentals abound. You may wipe them out as thoroughly as they have been cleansed from our churches on the ill-advised notion that only the altar, the ambo, and the font should remain. But once they have been eliminated, our people will invent new ones because we are a sacramental people. Our problem, therefore, is how to reinterpret and rearticulate our stories so that they represent the substance of our faith. Nine first Fridays on the record will not guarantee the presence of a priest when we need one. But celebrating the liturgy on those days will reinforce our conviction that God watches over us as beloved children in life and at the moment of death.

If we are to begin to retrieve the Catholic heritage, I suggest there are four dimensions we must consider.

- **The sacramental imagination** It has not completely disappeared from the lives of the faithful, no matter how little the church has tended it in the last third of the century. The task will be to raise it again for their formal consideration. This will involve becoming more conscious and explicit about what it means to be Catholic. For example, we make the sign of the cross with holy water when we enter a church to recall the graces of our baptism, to understand that God's love for us lurks in life-giving water, and to remind ourselves that we are entering a place where God is present in a special way. Most people know that or knew it once. But they need to hear it often. It is the task of our teachers in this time of transition to remind us that we are different because we are sacramental, and that we are sacramental *because* we believe grace is everywhere.
- **Discernment** We must discern what elements of the heritage may require more emphasis than others. Not every private devotion or pious custom of the past should be revived. Most novenas had run out before the council because there were too many of them, the prayers were too odd, the promises too automatic. But visits to the Blessed Sacrament disappeared because priests began locking up the churches, despite the fact that there are now adequate security devices which would permit the church to remain open for those who want to "drop in and say a prayer."
- **Explication** We must learn how to explicate our stories so that the risks of superstition, folk religion, and idolatry are minimized. Sacramentals are not instruments of magic by which we try to manipulate or control God. Lourdes water cannot compel God to cure someone, but it can be seen as a means of invoking God's maternal love. A votive candle reminds us of our ongoing prayer.

Recovering and rearticulating our symbols, therefore, is part of the task of religious maturation, of the journey from the "first" to the "second naiveté." It constitutes the phase of "criticism" when we unpack our symbols and then put them back together again, when we progress from the simple understanding of the child to the sophisticated faith of an adult. Perhaps one can say that today American Catholicism is collectively struggling toward the second naiveté.

- **Beauty** We must represent our sacramentality in ways that emphasize and celebrate its beauty. Of the three transcendentals—the good, the true, and the beautiful—the last is the first we encounter. It is, as John Paul II has said, the portal of God. It attracts us; we examine it and see that it is good. Yet in contemporary American Catholicism, the beautiful is not only the last of the transcendentals, it has become an appendage.

Whatever might be said of past practices—the Irish built schools and used the school hall for Mass—there is no longer

an excuse for omitting beauty from our sacramental life. We need to elevate the functional with the kind of transcendent beauty that tears a hole in the fabric of ordinary life and allows grace to pour in. The minimalism of beige Catholicism desires only the commonplace.

In research on the persistence of religion in Europe, I discovered that religion survived most effectively where it was linked with a pervasive religious culture, a culture that had been shaped by it and continued to be supported by it. In my early days, a plague of French "religious sociologists" and their American acolytes dismissed American Catholic devotionalism as mere "cultural Catholicism." The implication was that to be authentic, religion had to forsake the support of a religious culture or subculture. For all their certainty, these sociologists misunderstood that religion is part of culture, and that the relationship between religion and the rest of a country's cultural system is never neutral.

My late colleague James Coleman developed his theory of social capital—the resources which inhere in overlapping networks—from observation of the overlap of neighborhood, school, and parish networks in Catholic parishes. He noted that there are more resources available to the community when there is such overlap. Somehow that never occurred to most parish priests and still doesn't. They may have heard of social capital, but they're just not interested.

Like all human institutions, the neighborhood parish has its built-in imperfections. Still, when properly led by a personally secure, sensitive, and open pastor, parishes generate levels of enthusiasm and commitment seldom matched in human community. The neighborhood/parish/school ought to be celebrated rather than be taken for granted, ignored, or worse, deplored.

In the euphoria of the postconciliar years, a spirit of "anything goes" became a spirit of "everything goes." The leaders of the church—and here I mean the hierarchy—provided little direction. In its absence, the instant experts—people who had read a book or attended a summer workshop—filled the vacuum. To this day, the architects of beige Catholicism and their successors seem to be in charge. The only opposition comes from those who want to turn back the clock completely, spin the altar around, put the Mass back in Latin, enshrine the tabernacle on the altar, and reimpose the law of Friday abstinence. Neither seems to understand what it means to be a sacramental people.

I would like to be able to report that there exists a program for the recovery of the sacramental heritage in American Catholicism, one that includes a pedagogical literature on how to achieve it, syllabi for classroom instruction, national conferences at which ideas and projects are shared. But nothing of the sort exists today. Instead, the inertial energy of beige Catholicism continues to plod unabated. At this writing I have to content myself with a modest plea that someone get to work to do something about it. □