

"AFFIRMING TRADITION: LESSONS
FROM ROMAN CATHOLICISM"

Rev. Don Rollins

August 19, 2007

INTRODUCTION

By the way they're fussing at one another; you wouldn't suspect that they're the best of friends – married, maybe, but surely not *friends*.

She is a Jesuit nun and educator with a doctorate from Union Theological Seminary. In her late forties, she's plump, bright, bombastic and takes no prisoners when arguing with upstart Protestant colleagues. Her name is Sister: Sister Joanmarie Smith. Today she's making the case for Catholicism as the historical, tradition-rich, "One True Church."

He's tall, gentrified and wears tailored suits, cuff links and monogrammed shirts when he teaches. He's a new and rising star in the United Methodist Church: Ph.D., published author and has the eye of denominational mucky-mucks. But his face goes from fair to scarlet in two seconds once the topic turns to the Catholic-Protestant. His name is Dr. Paul Henshaw, and he's trying to fit some words in edgewise, something about Catholicism as the "*Once True Church*".

I begin this short two-sermon series with a couple of my seminary professors because intra-Christian war games – verbal and actual – have been going on for *centuries*. Indeed, Joanmarie's good-natured

defense of her One True Church, and Paul's equally good-natured shots about a church that once was true, were cast in the shadow of Luther and Tetzel (the papal representative sent to quell the gathering storm of the Protestant Reformation). Although the ongoing tiff between the nun and the rising star sometimes bordered on a verbal WWF rasslin' match (especially for those of us who figured they *both* had things wrong), it also helped first-year students connect the dots between their two traditions, so detailed were the arguments. What a wonderful and creative welcome to seminary.

This sermon is my attempt to remind religious liberals that Unitarian Universalism is more akin to the Catholic side of things than we usually recognize or admit. Furthermore, I hope to make the case that religion *practiced* can look very different from religion *professed*. (Does anyone here really subscribe to every jot and tittle of UUism?) It is this latter point that is so important to keep in mind as we take a whirlwind tour of Mother Church.

One more point before we begin. Discussion of either of the area's two majority traditions outside their respective ranks is a delicate matter. Religious divisions run deep in this part of Minnesota. The bridges between the various stripes of Lutherans and Catholics are shaky yet today, reflecting something of the historic chasm between Lutherans and Catholics in northern Europe. To go naming names,

even in the cautious way that I'm going about my discussion of our similarities to Catholicism and Lutheranism (next week's sermon), is to walk on thin ice. Hackles get raised. Good intentions get misinterpreted. And so it is that one rarely hears a sermon or homily that risks talking about such iffy stuff.

So why not let sleeping dogs lie? Why risk honking off the majority religious traditions by getting so darned specific about things? My answer to the first question is that the dog is not sleeping; where you go to church still matters around here. Big time. But religious tolerance is a work in progress the world over, and that progress is painstaking and fragile. By my lights, we're uniquely positioned to advance tolerance right here, in "our" parish.

Why not let sleeping dogs lie? Because this dog isn't sleeping.

The second question, the one about risking the ire of other folks for talking specifics, is a well-intentioned exercise in denial. Again, religion is mighty important around here; we, the Catholics, the Protestants and everybody else, *we live this stuff*. Why would we avoid talking about something so important to so many?

All, right. Keeping to my new goal of shorter sermons (insert Hallelujahs! here) let's get moving. I'm going to identify four distinct ways that Roman Catholicism has influenced liberal religion: style,

symbols, sacraments and spirit. Keeping in mind that it's impossible for us to give much detail to some two thousand years of church history, let's talk and think broadly about the Catholic influence in Unitarian Universalism.

STYLE

In religious practice, as just about everywhere else, style is important. In the religious realm, style refers to the way things are done. It's how a church embodies its theology. The theological question behind a given religion's style is How Shall We Worship?

Her name is Mary Jane, and if she ever thinks of me it's probably got to do with my first visit to a Catholic Church, her church, Midnight Mass, no less. Somewhere around 1980, my friend Mary Jane asked me to come check out her church (despite the thick, raised eyebrows of a thick, devoutly Catholic mother).

Bells, prayer candles and incense tipped me off that me that something other than my low church, evangelical style was in play. We read, in English, words from another millennia. We read a number of printed prayers, a sharp departure from the spontaneous and emotional petitions that were the norm when my little church worshipped. The priest wore a robe. We stood up, sat down, then stood up and sat down some more. And, not long of the theological

turnip truck, I was fascinated with the kneeling altars in every pew. Smart idea.

Although I couldn't appreciate its significance at the time, I was participating in a service that reflected the majesty and mystery that had accumulated over the course of multiple centuries. With hindsight, I was worshipping in something more similar than Protestantism to ancient Israel's temple worship, complete with the reading of sacred scrolls, the singing of the psalms and receiving contributions on behalf of the poor. Indeed for all the historical rancor between Judaism and its religious offspring, I can appreciate how the style of temple worship became the template for the style of church worship.

In other words, our dominant style of worship may bear the imprint of Judaism, but it was expressed, in its earliest Gentile form, in the Roman Catholic Church. We read. We sing. We pray and/or meditate. We employ silence. We lift an offering. We are more Catholic than we realize.

That many Unitarian Universalists don't recognize, or don't want to be bothered by Catholic tradition is to our common detriment, so woven into our style of worship is the Catholic influence. We parted theological paths centuries ago, but we did what children do when the time comes to leave their parents' home: we took with us a

goodly portion of what we were raised to think and do. And so it is that our style of worship is shot through with Catholic influences.

SYMBOLS

Symbols are vehicles for expressing values and beliefs. Back to my field trip to Mary Jane's church, saints were on every stained glass window and statues were on every flat surface. Holy water. A confessional booth. And, most jarring of all, there was Jesus, *still hanging on the cross*. Naïve (and not very respectful of others' traditions), I recall having strange, heretical thoughts about the choice of the cross – a murder weapon, it occurred to me – as the primary symbol of Christian faith. But if the Protestants expressed their faith with a murder weapon, the Catholics want one step further: they used a murder *scene*! I did my best to avoid insulting Mary Jane, but I was genuinely shaken by the power of the crucified Son of God, left on the cross to symbolize the depth of his compassion for lost sinners. How powerful, that symbol.

The painting behind me is a symbol; it speaks for the liberal Christian roots of Nora Church. The painting is that of the human and pastoral Jesus, not the sacrificial and suffering one.

Our Unitarian Universalist moniker is the flaming chalice; it draws

from the communion cup (the chalice) and the oldest of symbols for the Holy Spirit: fire. The chalice before me is intended to symbolize the universal bonds of all living things, and the flame indicates oneness, unity.

Similar symbols put to very different use. But we ignore historical accuracy and rich commonalities when we divorce them from their Catholic legacy. We owe a good deal more than we think to the Roman Catholic Church; that tradition still speaks through some of the most cherished symbols of our denomination.

SACRAMENTS

Back to young Mary Jane and my first mass, I was told ahead of time that I was not to come forward for communion – that, although it might feel a bit uncomfortable to remain seated as the congregation came forward – it would be an affront to God and the Church were a non-Catholic to receive the host. (And so it was that I missed my first opportunity to get wine rather grape juice during a communion service!) But what seemed exclusive from without had an important internal rationale.

Early Christians employed sacraments more or less as did the ancient Jews: as a means of connecting with the holy. Over time, the Church invoked God's presence at what might otherwise be secular and/or

merely physical phenomena through the sacraments: welcoming a child (baptism); human imperfection (confession); pubescence (confirmation); choosing a mate (matrimony); and death (Last Rites).

The sacrament of communion evolved in order to make Christian worship more uniform. Drawing again from its Jewish beginnings (specifically the Seder meal), the Church interpreted the Last Supper as critical to understanding the Crucifixion; it was more than Jesus' goodbye to his disciples, it was a metaphor for offering up, as with Israel's sacrificial lamb, a scapegoat for human sin. Such a sacred reading of the Last Supper eventually became the basis for the doctrine of transubstantiation – the belief that God is *literally* present in the elements, thus the “body and blood of Jesus Christ”. This is the internal rationale for the Catholic-only communion.

Communion is still observed in a handful of Unitarian Universalist congregations. Much more common is a variation on the elements (I've seen cookies and milk, pretzels and beer, wine and cheese to name a few) and a reinterpretation of the sacrament as a ritual of community and our dependence upon the earth for sustenance.

We welcome babies in our tradition. We recognize the strong power of forgiveness and being forgiven. We honor the maturation of the child becoming a young woman or young man. We consider marriage and holy unions to be profound and spiritual occasions. And we

consider it a sacred act to minister to the dying and their loved ones. Again, the fingerprint of the Roman tradition is seen in our development, this time in the sacramental practices we choose. Like any religion, Unitarian Universalists need to celebrate and grieve and remember together. And, no matter our adaptations, the roots of many of our sacraments lead to the Roman Catholic Church.

SPIRIT

The fourth broad category of Catholic influences on our tradition is that of spirit. Midnight Mass with Mary Jane and her folks was my introduction to mystery, Catholic style. Sure, some of the older worshippers snored here and there – and I can testify to the fact that Catholic babies can pitch an ear-piercing fit with the best of ‘em – but for most folks there was a palpable sense that something important was happening that Christmas Eve. By the lights of story and tradition, God had come to earth in the form of an innocent child. That child would grow up to steal the hearts of the poorest of the poor. And that child would die in an effort to save us from ourselves. This was the retelling of the *spirit-filled* story, the one in which strangers are guided by stars and barn stalls turn into manger scenes and angels rejoice. There was no apology for faith in what is unseen or beyond our powers of reason. There was no homily *about* mystery, just the *experience of* mystery. The underlying assumption of the Midnight Mass is that the things of the spirit were in play.

Carl Whittier, one of my mentors in ministry, often remarked that he didn't believe in God and didn't trust Jesus. Then he'd add, "But I believe in, and trust, the Holy Spirit".

One of the most precious artifacts that made the long journey from Catholicism to Unitarian Universalism is the vague but oh-so-real belief that not everything that is important in life can be measured, dissected and demystified. Sure, our liberal religious forebears stripped the Roman tradition of a God shaped by human insecurity, as well as a Jesus warped by centuries of idolatrous hero-worship. *But they left in place the concept of mystery without superstition;* they held out for the mind-boggling possibility that there is more to life than what the body can sense and the mind can imagine. They allowed for something called *spirit*. Breath. Wind. And, as in the case of Emerson and Fuller and the rest of that Transcendentalist crowd, their notion of spirituality had Catholic fingerprints all over it: awe; mystery; imagination; creativity; silence; beauty. Shame on us if we worship the mind to the neglect of the spirit, and shame on us for being so easily put-off from spirituality.

SUMMARY

Our style, symbols, sacraments and spirit are deeply embedded in Roman Catholicism. And, much as we generally prefer to trace our roots to those comparatively austere and straight laced Protestants,

to deny the influence of the Roman tradition on our own says more about UUism than Protestantism. At the risk of offending some, if we're serious about being practicing Universalists, we ought to get over our knee jerks every time somebody mentions the Catholic Church. Just get over it.

That said, it would be wrong to end this sermon without acknowledging the many profound points of difference between Unitarian Universalism and the teachings of the Vatican. (Again, religion *practiced* is often different from religion *written*. This is especially important when talking about American Catholicism.) My goal here was not whitewash those differences with some feel-good examples that discount our convictions.

Let's talk contraception in an overpopulated and poverty-ridden world. Let's talk divorce in the name of patriarchal and narrowly interpreted tradition. Let's talk abortion as single men make the rules for a woman's conscience and life. Let's talk celibacy, homosexuality, euthanasia and the role of women in religious leadership. Never mind a plethora of theological issues: papal authority and succession and ecumenism, to name but two.

Some of the doctrines that emanate from the Vatican contradict and threaten to eclipse the Church's innumerable ministries to some of

the world's poorest and most desperate people. And some of the official church pronouncements are flat-out Medieval. So please don't think I'm trying to make the case that the Roman Church's influence on liberal religion should give it a pass when it comes any number of issues. Not by a long shot.

But here's the deal. We risk becoming sanctimonious by our chosen ignorance or our bald-faced prejudice if we're not historically, theologically and spiritually mature enough to do with the Roman Catholic Church what alcoholics and addicts aspire to in AA: take what you need and leave the rest.

One true church? Once true church? Maybe both, maybe neither. But this much we can say with certainty: our way of religion owes a good deal more to the Catholic Church than either we or the average Catholic visitor would assume. Perhaps the latter will change once the former decides likewise.