

SACRAMENTAL IDENTIFICATION

STEVE CORTRIGHT
St. Mary's College of California

Members of the Seminar:

In the course of our telephonic discussion of *The Dying of the Light*, Fr. Burtchaell's unremittingly gloomy, culminating assessment of Catholic colleges' and universities' relation to the Church prompted the question whether a positive sense of Catholic identity could be educed for institutions of higher learning. I proposed the root of Catholic identity, and the root sense of "Catholic," to be, now as ever, sacramental identification with the Person and Action of Christ Jesus.¹ This essay, occasioned by that conversation, is charged to occasion, in turn, further conversational inquiry into that proposal. This means, I take it, that I am charged to raise questions I cannot answer, and that I ought not to omit any question solely because it is not mine.

I "proposed" sacramental identification (for shorthand) rather in the sense of "showing forth" Catholicity than in the sense of "putting forth" a model of analysis or a plan of action in aid of Catholic identity. If memory serves, this distinction was noted by (I think) Fr. Haughey, when he wondered whether the proposal and the conversation's immediate purpose were congruent (apologies, if I have mistaken source or sense). My sense of the objection takes shape as an analogy: a point founds a line (say, a vectored line), but it does not share the character it founds; so, perhaps, sacramental identification founds Catholicity, but it need not thereby characterize all things that, as a result of their founding, must be, in their own way, Catholic. Cognizant of the force of this objection (if not of the original objection), I nevertheless intend to return to the proposal, by way of a fuller statement, which follows.

But what is Catholic identity? I would propose that for a person and for a community—and, derivatively, for an institution—it is a state of being before it is a state of reflective knowledge or of affection or of action. Person and community are formed as Catholic through the sacramental identification with the Person and Action of Christ, Son of Man and Son of God, to the Father in the unity of the Holy Spirit. An institution would seem, then, to be Catholic, in a fundamental sense, insofar as the community to which it belongs, in which it is incorporated (I mean "enfleshed," not "constituted as a legal person"), is so formed and, thus formed, reflects and loves and acts.

¹ It had not come to my attention when I invoked the phrase, that Pope John Paul II had used "sacramental identification," as early as the Apostolic Letter *Dominicae Caenae* (1980) to enlarge on the doctrine of II Vatican, *Lumen Gentium*, 10 and 28, that the ministerial priest brings about the Eucharistic sacrifice by acting "in the person of Christ." At *Dominicae Cenae* 8, and again in *Ecclesiae de Eucharistia* 29, John Paul writes that "in the person of Christ" means "in specific sacramental identification [*peculiari et sacramentali idem*]" with Christ. His reference appears to be to the character and graces conferred by Holy Orders. It seems, therefore, that John Paul's usage and the usage employed here can exist in happy parallel.

Catholic identity, if I understand aright, is not a matter of sentiment or attitude. Nor is it a sort of technique for achieving exalted states of consciousness or of unconsciousness. Nor is it a matter of a confession (I mean in the sense of the Confessions of Augsburg and Dort and Westminster and the Thirty-nine Articles): that is, a sort of system of dogmas to which members subscribe and confess, and a code of moral commands to be observed or at least accorded recognition. What is radically Catholic is not a code of morals or even a credal statement, but an action: the Passover of the Lord. What is proposed for faith is not proposition, but event.²

These paragraphs (hereafter, “the reflection”) were composed some years ago by my teacher, then teacher and colleague, Joseph Lanigan, for presentation at a symposium of intent similar to that which gathers us. They have loomed large in my thinking about Catholicity and my own College since. I must admit that, in our earlier conversation, I reached for these words as one reaches for a telling quotation from a favorite author.

I propose the reflection, then, as a further and more adequate showing of Catholicity or Catholic identity, and therefore also as a further and more adequate basis on which to raise questions.

First Questioning

The question is posed “What is Catholic identity?” and the reflection answers, but between question and answer, as it appears to me, a further question intervenes. A great deal must depend on how we take the question *as* a question. A question is the expressed desire for an answer. This means that the interrogative mood is rooted in another, desirous, mood, and that the question is as its prompting desire. In a lecture which stands as a classic—perhaps the classic—of its kind, “The Student’s Problem,” Dean Eva Brann of St. John’s College has written:

[A] genuine question is the desire for an answer, and it does not dissolve when an answer is gained any more than love necessarily disappears because its object is won. A genuine question does not demand an answer on its own terms or on its own level, but seeks its desire wherever it may hope to find it, remaining open to any intimation its object might give.

I take her, first, to mean that as genuine desire—longing pursuit—of an answer and nothing else, a question is something we dwell, inseparably, with and in and on. Second, I take her to imply that desire cannot be for one answer—for a singular proposition or argument or thought, even if the proposition, argument, or thought be the completion of many. If desire is not to dissolve, “completion” must mean to “the pursuit of a question”

² Joseph Lanigan, “Catholicity and Saint Mary’s College,” in *Faculty Symposia: The Essential Character of the College*, ed. Michael Carey, OP (Saint Mary’s College of California: Office of the President, 1988), 69 – 77.

what it means to “the pursuit of a life.” I think these readings are confirmed when she adds: “[Q]uestions are the serious and final human business.”³

There is also an interrogative form to which a singular proposition, thought, or argument must stand as a complete—terminating—answer. This is the interrogative as the “challenging question,” shading off into the imperative: “Why is the *latus rectum* of a parabola always a length $4a$?” → “Show analytically that the *latus rectum* of a parabola is a length $4a$.” We know this interrogative as “problem” and as the desire for *an* answer. We also know it as a dominant form of the interrogative in university and college discourse: “Whether God exists?” → “the problem of God” “What is freedom of the will?” → “the problem of freedom” “How should agency costs be controlled?” → “the problem of agency costs.”

“Problem” transliterates the Greek *próblema*, “something thrown out before” us—anything, from the defensive wall surrounding a city to the twelve labors standing between Hercules and his reward. Nevertheless, by no accident does it spring to mind especially in connection with mathematics. From the Greeks, Vieta and Descartes inherited, at the dawn of the modern university, a “challenge question” in the form of a budget of unsolved locus problems; these they abolished at a stroke, by redefining—compacting them—into instances of a new, general analytic method, the algebra. Their achievement is the paradigm of “problem”:

It is, first of all, a challenge, a publicly enunciated task requiring a solution in its own terms; secondly, its solution usually has the nature of a construction which may be a theoretical construct; and finally and fundamentally, a problem is characteristically that which requires a solution, that is to say it requires its own abolition; a solved problem is no longer a problem . . .⁴

These three aspects—in particular the last-named, crucial aspect of any problem—appear in their type, the set-piece problem of the schools.

An interrogative is posed: If $(y - 3x) = -1$ and $y = (x + 3)$, then what are x and y ? If the respondent knows the algebra—the analytic method—he recognizes immediately that it is to be treated as a problem. First, re-define—compact—the terms into a mathematical proposition that requires no question mark: $(x + 3) - 3x = -1$. Then re-define: $4 = 2x$, and read off $x = 2$, $y = 5$. Restated in terms of the original interrogative, the solution yields two identities, two useless tautologies: $5 - 6 = -1$, $5 = 2 + 3$. That amounts to the abolition of the problem: that, and the further result that the unknowns appear wholly in terms of the original problem; the problem has been solved in its own terms, so that the desired answer points in no way beyond it. Dean Brann observes (let me emphasize: I have been abbreviating her argument, but only partly in her terms):

³Eva T. H. Brann, “The Student’s Problem,” a lecture delivered at St. John’s College, Annapolis, Maryland, 12 September, 1967: 13.

⁴Brann, *op. cit.*: 12.

[T]his procedure, although most nakedly apparent in mathematics, may be used in any [*sc.* liberal] art, and, as some think, even in those human enterprises which go beyond the arts, if only their terms have been compacted into recognized obstacles, outworks inviting attack, that is, into problems. This is in fact our predominant way.⁵

What to call the intellectual desire that feeds on the abolition of its object, Dean Brann does not consider. She calls its problematic expression “a sham question” for the reason also adduced in the quotation from “The Students’ Problem” with which I began:

[T]he desire in a true question is not for a pre-conceived *x*, hidden, but present and entangled with all the terms at hand, but for something beyond. If, for instance, I seriously ask “what learning might be” I do not want my question transformed into the problem of describing learning “systematically” or of “measuring it methodically” . . . or even of “constructing an effective theory” of learning . . . I want something beyond these, namely the reason why the thing is what it is, and I want this reason to be freely communicable.

And for that same reason, she calls problems and problem-setting “exercises and mere means” in comparison to the “serious and final human business,” the unswerving desire of an answer pursued by “inquiry.”⁶

The question is posed “What is Catholic identity?” and the reflection answers, but how we receive that answer must depend largely on how we take the question. Does it set for us the problem, or a problem, of Catholic identity? Does it open inquiry into Catholic identity, or re-open and renew an inquiry in and on and with which we have long dwelt? To put these questions in a way that would constrain affirmation or denial—Is or is not to pose Catholic identity to pose a question for inquiry? Is or is not to pose Catholic identity to pose a problem?—would be to pose them in the manner Aristotle calls, in his *Topics*, “problematic.”

Second Questioning

The question is posed, “What is Catholic identity?” and the reflection answers: I would propose that for a person and for a community—and, derivatively, for an institution—it is a state of being before it is a state of reflective knowledge or of affection or of action. Person and community are formed as Catholic through the sacramental identification with the Person and Action of Christ, Son of Man and Son of God, to the Father in the unity of the Holy Spirit.

If the question expresses the desire for an answer in the form of criteria sufficient to justify identifying “person and community” as “Catholic,” the reflection does not appear to meet it. Any such criterion would have to settle on one or more of those “states”—

⁵ Brann, *op. cit.*: 13.

⁶ *Ibid.*: 14.

knowing, feeling, doing—that are usually taken to testify to one’s state of being as such. But states of knowing, feeling, and doing, the reflection explicitly holds, are ontologically posterior—for person *and* community—to the state of being that is, identically, the state of being Catholic. Now a person might be conceived, in the way the reflection suggests, as the subject of all possible states of knowing, feeling, and action; then, a person could be said to be qualified *as* subject—prior to personal states of knowing, *etc.*—by that promised abiding in the Person of Christ, by the Action of Christ (cf. John vi 56, I John iv 16), that is “sacramental identification.” Yet, the reflection does not stop here: the reflection attributes what we have called “qualification *as* a subject of all possible states of knowledge, affection, and action” inseparably to “person *and* community.” The question remains, then, how “community” can be conceived as such a subject, since “community” designates either a group of subjects or the reason these subjects “count together” as a single group.

But no *question* remains. To demand that the reflection yield a formal definition is to set a problem. What remains is to solve it, and the solution is at hand in the terms set out problematically.

So far as “community” means “multitude,” the reflection suggests that a community identically “Catholic” in the first possible multitude—two—comes to be as a communion of person with Person: sacramental identification with Christ is the form of Catholic community, its *primal* form. Person *and* community *are* thus formed, and are formed as Catholic—as the reflection insists—at once.

So far as community means a singular gathering of persons, it follows that “Catholic community” in its first multitude and primal form differs from “Catholic community” in its last multitude—all, or Church—only as many differs from fewer. Each person among many or few “counts” identically as Catholic since each partakes—*as* a subject in the relevant sense—sacramental Action in Christ’s Person, who is one for all; and each such partaking *is* primal community. “Catholic community” must be discerned in, and must be said identically of, each such multitude, however gathered—identically of the multitude gathered by “resident in Helsinki,” identically of the multitude gathered by “blue-eyed blonds.” If this seems a trivial truth, consider: it is not always trivial to say, “The Catholic community in Baghdad is Catholic exactly as is the Catholic community in Rome” and to mean by it “Those in Baghdad are subjects of Christ’s Person and Action exactly as are those in Rome.”

The question is posed “What is Catholic identity?” and the reflection, compacted into a problem, answers with a recursive definition of “Catholic identity”: recursion of the unique property “qualified as a subject by the Person and Action of Christ” forms “person and community” as identically Catholic in all relevant senses of “community” and “person.” Of course, the solution is, so far, a sketch; a great deal remains to be said: an appendix, at least, on recursive definition. But if the solution holds, all that may or must be said will come by way of elaboration, not extension. And if it has sufficient merit, it will be destined to a minor place in the “literature about . . .,” which is “external and

insufficient” for inquiry seeking “in the common language of human beings, what makes the thing what it is.”⁷

Nevertheless, the question may still be taken as a question, as the expressed desire in common human language for an answer rendered in the same coin. It must, then, also express some common apprehension, however vague, of its object. Wholly undirected desire cannot be expressed. Accordingly, the question must suppose at least a “dictionary-sense” of identity as a thing’s power of maintaining itself by being itself. And it must jibe with the ordinary uses of “Catholic”—primarily to characterize persons, communities, and institutions and, secondarily, to characterize their epiphenomena.

The question is posed, “What is it to be Catholic—to be a Catholic person, community, institution? Like anything else that can claim identity, ‘Catholic’ must be as ‘Catholic’ does: so what does ‘Catholic’ do, and why?” And the reflection answers: “For a person and for a community—and, derivatively, for an institution—it [to be Catholic] is a state of being before it is a state of reflective knowledge or of affection or of action.” This seems as much as to say: “‘Catholic’—Catholic person, community, institution—is, and is not, as ‘Catholic’ does—or, for that matter, thinks or feels. And a caution is in order: ‘person and community’ are not called ‘Catholic’ because they amount to, embody, something that is otherwise seen to be Catholic; what they embody, institutions, are seen to be Catholic because person and community are—otherwise, antecedently—seen to be Catholic.”

The equivocation is striking since states of reflective knowledge and affection, expressed in speech, and states of action, are usually taken as good, albeit not altogether reliable, signs of the speaker/doer’s person, or identity. The reflection seems to throw more than the usual doubt on these as signs of Catholic identity. The caution is striking in a similar way: institutions might seem to be to “community identity” what patterns of affection or action are to personal identity.

The reflection offers a single reason for the equivocation and the caution: “Person and community are formed as Catholic through the sacramental identification with the Person and Action of Christ . . .”

Commonly, a sign is understood as a thing, knowable in itself, that in being known communicates something else to the knower. Personal states of knowledge, affection, and action can signify identity because the inner or core person is thought to be distinct from, and prior in being to, them. The notion of “sacramental identification” contravenes each of the foregoing, usual senses of “sign” and “sign of personal identity.”

The usual sense of sign/signifying is contravened by the notion of a sign that, in being known, makes the knower to be in his person—not in his conception or imagination—what the sign signifies to him, and the more so when there is added: the sign *is* what it signifies to the knower, and knowing this is what makes the knower capable of becoming in his person what the sign signifies and is. The common senses given the notions “sign”

⁷ Brann, *op. cit.*, 14.

and “person” are staggered when there is added: the sign signifies and is a Person, whose being known makes the knower capable of becoming in his person a true likeness, an image and sign, of that same Person. Finally, common sense of the terms is overthrown when it is added: the sign signifies and is the Christ, Son of Man and Son of God, whose Person and Action are, inseparably, the Passover Event—the coming to be of the Life of God in man—and who gives himself as he is, Event in Person, in and by the Action of the sign, to those who know him in the sign, so as to en-sign their persons with his Person.

No pursuit of the question “What are sign and signification?” could reach such notions. Like the sign, knowing Christ in the sign is the gift of Christ, faith.

What is radically Catholic is not a code of morals nor even a credal statement, but an action: the Passover of the Lord. What is proposed for faith is not proposition, but event.

“Sacramental identification” means to be formed in the likeness of Christ through receiving—suffering by faith—the Action of Christ bestowed through the sign that is the Event of his whole Person in his Person, the Holy Eucharist.⁸ According to the sense of the reflection, then, “Catholic identity” in a person and a community means that person and community stand in some relation to the likeness of Christ, through the Eucharist. The most straightforward way of conceiving an educational community “thus formed,” and disposed to common reflection and action, might go somewhat as follows:

A Catholic liberal arts college is first, a community of students and scholars shaped about the mystery made present in the liturgy and its first teaching is this presence and the reading and homily upon it. This is the office of the chaplain who represents the bishop and this first theologizing is the theology of the shepherd or pastor. The Mass (*Ite, Missa est*) sends the faithful community forth to carry on a second theologizing: a theologizing principal to, but not limited to, professors of theology. This is the office of the faculty and students, aided by the administration: sent forth out of the cult and mystery and in the spirit of the cult and mystery to penetrate with the liberal arts the whole mystery of creation and of that new and deeper creation which is Redemption. It is in this sense that the bishop and his representatives are participants in the life of the College: the theology of the pastor and the theology of the scholar and student interact in the service of the Body of Christ.

⁸ Cf. John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, §§11 – 15.