

Sacrifice, Law and the Catholic Faith: is secularity really the enemy?

James Alison

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I would like to start by thanking you, Catherine, and with you the board of Directors of the Tablet, for having invited me to give this lecture, and for having given me a free hand as to choice of subject. I was more surprised than I can say, more honoured than you can imagine, and even a little frightened as I'll explain in a moment, when it dawned on me what kind of gift you have offered me.

Our Faith requires that over our lifetimes we leave many different homes and families, many an Ur of the Chaldees, many a household of the Pharaoh. And I have had the privilege of experiencing this “leaving home” in order to become a Catholic in the first place; then in embracing the thought of René Girard as something inspiring life-changing attention; then as I try to fulfil the charge given me at my priestly ordination; then, and much more precariously, in daring to think it might be part of my vocation to have a shot at becoming a truthful gay man within a mendacious environment. Where your invitation frightened me is because it beckoned to me as a certain sort of homecoming, a “welcome back” into an English Catholic world in which I had not expected to be asked to belong. And with that, there comes the need to learn how to speak not with the freedom and insouciance of the foreigner, for I mostly work abroad, and speak to those in cultures not my own, but with the delicacy of one who is learning how to greet long lost relatives, one who is a little nervous of what they will show him of his roots, of who he really is, but who is deeply warmed that they should be curious to have him among them at all. For all the rest, as they say, there is Mastercard, but an invitation like this, priceless.

When we met, Catherine and I, in August, to talk over possible subjects, I suggested that I would like to talk about something which seemed to be missing in current public discourse. This is the way in which, contrary to easy talk about “rampant secularism” and “shoring up our religious identity”, it is and always has been a proper part of the Catholic faith, and

the life of the Church, that it tends to generate a relatively benign secularity; that far from the “secular” being our “enemy” it is in fact our “baby”. And a fragile baby, one whose birth and development is well worth protecting. Nowadays our contemporaries are inclined to use the word “religious” as though it were synonymous with the word “sacred”, and the word “secular” as though it were synonymous with “common”, “normal” or “profane”. Nevertheless to regard those definitions as fixed is, I’m afraid, the result of a mixture of historical ignorance, cultural tone-deafness and the fact that thinking in dichotomies is a great deal easier than anything more subtle.

In fact the concept of the “secular” as it comes to us from St Augustine was born as a new form of historical time and culture brought into being by Christian faith in which there is no longer anything or any people who are properly “sacred” or anything or any people who are properly “profane”¹. Instead there is a time when the patterns of desire leading to holiness and patterns of desire leading to destruction are to be found side by side, intertwined, and not to be uprooted by human agencies. They are present both in apparently “ecclesiastical” and in apparently “civil” spheres. The Church, which, with regard to its varying organisational structures, is as much part of the secular as is the civil, political, imperial, or democratic realm in which it lives, would, at its best, be the regime and discipline of signs, made alive by God. Signs pointing towards and actually being, God’s bringing about of his Kingdom by reconciling all humans together. Signs which are aimed at summoning forth certain shapes of human desire, interpretation, and living together, rather than coercing people into sacred structures. The driving force behind this is the Spirit breathed forth by Jesus in his dying. This alone, this breath of a crucified criminal, unjustly put to death by the breathing together, the conspiratio, of the sacred and the profane authorities of the time, this breath which cannot be tied down, is the holy power which turns apparent dregs of failed humanity into astounding witnesses of the holiness of God.

Well, since Catherine and I met in August, I’m very glad to say that at last these issues have been raised publicly, forcefully, and to varying degrees of incomprehension, by none other than, in short order, both the successor of Peter and the head of the Church of England. For those who like alliteration, that’s Ratzki in Regensburg, and Rowan in Rome. In the case of the Archbishop of Canterbury, I’m referring to his lecture to the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences. Both leaders are reminding

¹ For further reading on this see R.A. Markus’ *Saeculum* or his more recent *Christianity and the secular*.

people, in Rowan's words, that "A certain kind of secularism has direct Christian and theological roots"² or in Pope Benedict's, that "The West has long been endangered by this aversion to the questions which underlie its rationality, and can only suffer great harm thereby."³ They say this as though it were obvious that our scientific rationality has long been recognised as originating in and not against our Faith. And for those of us privileged to have had graduate-level Catholic theological education, so it should be.

However, I fear that for many of our contemporaries, the notion that the Catholic faith engenders a relatively benign secularity, not by accident, but as its proper offspring; and that our "enlightened" world, in its aversion to recognising and examining what it is that gave birth to it, is constantly in danger of cutting off the branch upon which it sits, seems so counterintuitive that I would like to use this space to fill in, as it were, the gaps which my elders and betters could take for granted. I would like, in short, to give a quick trot through why it is that Catholicism is not really a religion in the ordinary sense of the word, and how it is that it holds in tension the various elements of what normally passes as "religion" with a view to generating something quite, quite different. I will do so, as will surprise no one who has ever heard or read me before, by applying the thought of René Girard, since it is his thought which seems to me to offer the possibility of recovering for twenty-first century Catholicism both the advances of the enlightenment, and the pre-modern patterns of thought which sustain them and can alone make them lasting.

Happening

I would like to start in the least promising of places to begin an approach to secularity: by claiming that the centrepiece of the Catholic Faith is a divine happening breaking through into our scheme of things in the form of a very particular sort of Priest performing a very particular sort of Sacrifice and thus opening up a New Creation. This does not at all sound like secular language. So, in order to envisage with you where our perception of this happening leads us, I would ask you to imagine a crime scene in an American Cop show. And while scenarios of this sort are common to many such shows, I myself am thinking of a particular episode of the series called "*CSI: Las Vegas*". In this episode, our

² Rowan Williams, *Secularism, Faith and Freedom*, http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/sermons_speeches/061123a.htm [23.11.2006].

³ Benedict XVI, *Faith, Reason and the University: Memories and Reflections*, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060912_university-regensburg_en.html, [12.09.2006].

investigators are called to a large, almost empty barn, riddled with bullet holes from high up on all four walls right down to floor level. On the floor there is the body of a teenager, very recently dead. Our investigators' job is to piece together what happened so as to hold somebody accountable. They do the classic thing, tracing back from the bullet holes in the walls so as to pinpoint where the gun was fired from, using a mixture of rods and laser beams. The first problem they discover is that the bullet which went through the standing teenager and then hit the barn wall was clearly coming at a steep downward angle passing through him, and then hitting the wall somewhere below his standing height. In other words, the bullet had to have been fired from above the boy, from considerably higher, in fact than any other human could have fired, unless they were standing on some structure in the middle of the floor. But there is no forensic evidence of any such structure having stood in the middle of the floor. At this stage, a trigger-happy Tyrannosaurus Rex would just about fit the crime scene, but little else.

It then becomes clear that, though there is no structure standing in the middle, the bullets were all fired from different heights, some downwards, and some upwards, but all from roughly the middle of the barn. However there is no platform, let alone a moving platform, upon which someone might have stood to fire the bullets, nor was there time to remove such a platform between the boy's death and the arrival of the investigators.

Finally, the investigators find some evidence that friends of the boy were at the barn with him. Through tracing them, questioning them, and breaking through their lies and cover up, the investigators are able to work out and envisage exactly what happened. The kids were playing a game of "dare". The dare consisted of one of them climbing up onto the roof of the barn, and then lowering down a twisted rope from a hole in the ceiling. This youth then allowed a machine gun, with its trigger jammed into firing mode to spin down the rope, jerking slightly as it moved, and spraying the walls all the way round as it moved down. The other kids, so as to avoid being "chicken", had to stand, or dance around, on the floor of the barn, "dodging" the random bullets. Amazingly, only one of them was killed. In other words, the investigators are able to determine that the "happening" which they are investigating was not a murder, but an accident in the midst of a crazily dangerous form of "extreme adolescent dares".

Now the reason I tell you this story is because of the analogy which it offers. What we have, at the root of our Faith is the claim that something

happened in the midst of a group of humans. Something huge, scarcely able to be put into words, something breaking through normal schemes of description, and something seen as opening up an entirely new perspective on being human. Such a happening is too mobile and subtle to be seen in itself, it can only be detected in the various bits of evidence it left behind. In our Cop Show scenario it was impossible for the Crime Scene Investigators to see “the happening which had happened” in itself, they had to use a mixture of the forensic evidence and the effects on the emotional lives of the friends of the dead boy to posit as the most rational, and ultimately the true, explanation, a highly complex, evolving, and mobile “happening”, which they could then repeat if they wished, to see whether it did in fact have the effects which, according to their reconstruction it should have. Just so, the “happening” itself which is the root of our Faith cannot be seen in itself. It can be glimpsed and posited through a mixture of the patterns of bullet holes peppered on the walls, which we have in the words of the Apostolic Witness-put-into-writing which we call the New Testament, and the effects in the lives of the witnesses themselves about which we know something from other sources.

Now I ask you to hold onto this analogy because it is very important indeed in order to understand the generative function of Catholic Faith that we be able to distinguish between the “happening” and what one might call the “crime scene”. It is important for us that once we have distinguished the happening, we be able to imagine it as something which can in principle be detached from that particular barn, that particular gun, those particular bullets, and those particular teenagers. In fact the “happening” can be reproduced wherever, and the original barn and evidence will be a normative pointer to whether we are right in detecting the happening at work again. This is what we mean when we talk about Christ giving the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit turning us into other Christs, summoning us into living the same happening in a wide variety of “pock marked barns”. If the dynamic of the happening in the new circumstances is such as to produce an analogous trail of evidence, we will know that we are indeed talking about the same happening. And if not, we will know that something else is going on, a different sort of happening not organically the same as our original happening, and not to be confused with it.

Sacrifice

As far as I can tell it is the Catholic understanding that the best shorthand to describe the “happening” is to call it a sacrifice. The “happening”

consisted in the complex, and mobile event of God himself coming into our world as an act of communication with us which was designed to show that the Creator of all things likes us and wants to prove to us that He can be trusted as wanting our good, wanting us to be free and to share his life. He set about proving his goodness, his “not out to get you” nature by offering himself to us, in what looked like something entirely familiar to us, a sacrifice. However, this sacrifice was curiously subverted: instead of it being us offering something to God, it was God offering himself to us. What God was doing was in fact showing us what we do when we sacrifice: ultimately we kill another human being as a way of keeping ourselves feeling safe, secure and good, dressing up a murder as something holy. And the point of God’s act of communication was not to leave us feeling “accused” by this piece of knowledge of what we are like, but to show us instead that though we are inclined to behave like that, we aren’t really like that, needn’t be like that, and that if only we will let go of the world of false security and group self-congratulation at having “got” the bad guy, we can be moved into a much bigger world, one in which we can be free, not frightened of dying, not having to grasp at security, but able to trust in a benevolence that wishes to take us into something much more alive than we can imagine. As we allow ourselves so to be moved, so we will discover amazing new and liberating possibilities of life together –including new scientific possibilities – which we just couldn’t have imagined while “hunting for another victim to sacrifice” seemed to be the solution to our problems.

Now this is a very complex “Happening”. It involves a particular historical act by a particular historical protagonist –a going to be crucified, a dying, and then a being seen in an identifiable but mysterious form, an act both drawing from, and making newly available, an inherited network of texts and interpretations and a network of interpersonal relationships among those chosen to be witnesses. And the evidence we have of this hugely complex, dynamic, meaning-stretching happening, is the pock-marked barn wall of the texts of Scripture. These only make sense at all in as far as they enable us to begin to sense the parameters of the sheer richness, fullness and dynamic nature of the happening whose symptom they are, and then reimagine ourselves undergoing that same happening which is working itself out in our midst, in our culture, and in our language.

I have emphasized this because the Happening is, in principle, relatively free from the words which are the pattern of bullet holes it has produced. The texts of the Apostolic Witness are not the centre of the Happening itself, they are the evidence from which the shape and dynamic of the

happening can be scoped out and understood by us. But in principle, the same happening can happen anywhere where the same human dynamic of sacrifice is available to be subverted from within. In other words, the act of divine communication that is at the root of our Faith is a radical interruption of, and reinterpretation of, a key element of human culture which is present, as far as we know, wherever there are humans. That element is our tendency to create group unity, togetherness, and survival by resolving conflict through an all-against one which brings peace and unity to the group at the expense of someone, or some group, held to be evil. Every culture will partially hide, and partially describe what it is doing, and will use different words to justify its group unity over against another. So in every culture, the linguistic bullet marks of the Happening as it unfolds in the midst of that culture will be different, but the dynamic of the Happening will be the same, and we will know it by comparing the normative pattern of bullet holes seen in our New Testament barn with the pattern of bullet holes as they emerge in the cultures concerned.

In other words: the Catholic faith is of its nature syncretistic. Whatever culture it comes across, it will gradually subvert and change from within. This it does not by imposing a set of laws, texts, or norms, not by making a particular set of words, or a particular language sacred and thus normative. Rather it does this by making available the “happening” through preaching, liturgy and example in such a way that whatever is “sacred”, or taboo, or demanding of sacrifice in that culture ceases to have a hold on people as they come to lose their fear of death. This is when they start to be able to witness to the freedom that comes when one is no longer run by death and its fear, when one is able to make plans for people’s long term good lasting beyond one’s own lifespan, and when one is not afraid to stand up against sacred consensus in order to make truth available.

Please notice what this means: in any seriously “religious” culture, the Catholic faith will, quite properly, be regarded as “not religious enough”. Inevitably, as the Catholic faith permeates, various things will start to become unimportant: there will no longer be any good reasons for sacred rules concerning food, for particular sorts of food which may not be eaten, or for special cultic killing rites for meat, no religiously required forms of dress,⁴ no impurity or impropriety concerning women’s

⁴ It may, for instance, be perfectly reasonable to fight for the civil right to wear, or not to be forced to wear, a particular item of clothing or jewellery – a crucifix for example – in this or that public forum. But since Christian faith makes no demands concerning what we wear it would be misleading to claim that it is an infringement of the Christian faith that someone be prohibited from wearing a particular article of clothing or jewellery.

menstrual cycles. It is not that these things will suddenly be abolished, but that in every case the same realities will gradually come to be looked at differently: is such and such a food good for you, or for us; is such and such a form of dress appropriate? Might we not agree on such and such a communal fast for those strong enough to do so? In other words, it is the pattern of desire at work in us: whether we are seeking attention or acting modestly, whether we are deliberately scandalizing and provoking those of bound conscience, or trying to help them move beyond their fears, whether we are strengthening our desire for God through prayer or fasting but without seeking to impress anyone with our holiness. This pattern of desire becomes the central thing to which we attend. It may very well have outward forms, but it is the pattern of desire, and not the outward form in itself which matters.

Phrases like “‘everything is permitted’, – but not everything is convenient” or “to those who are pure, everything is pure” or “the letter kills, but the spirit gives life” could be quoted by anybody, and they sound the rankest of secularising remarks. And they are. They are all phrases by which Paul sought to make the oddity of the un-religion which he was preaching available to people (1 Cor 6,12; Tit 1,15; 2 Cor 3,6): the subversiveness of the pattern of desire unleashed by the sacrificial death of Christ proving God’s goodness to us when faced with any “sacred” religious observance.

As Catholics we carry around with us, as it were, a mobile crime scene, in the form of the Mass. Please remember that the structure of the Mass is suspended halfway between being an ancient sacrifice or murder, and a modern community meal. And taking advantage of that suspended state, the One who constantly wants to get through to us so that we can be free, makes the sign alive, empowers it to be both the remembrance and the actual living presence of “the Happening”. This is so that we can simultaneously undergo being set free from fear and death, and enabled to stretch out in a new set of interpersonal relationships. In other words, what we have as the source of holiness is the portable crime scene which encourages the happening to incarnate itself in us again, to keep us constantly undergoing that crime scene.

Now this centrality of a flexible form of worship which acts as a sign of the “happening-having-happened” happening again in our midst is as vital for what it is *not* as for what it is. It is not a text. It is not a law. We are not a people of the book. We are a people of Spirit and Sign. And the criterion we have for who God is and what God is like is given us by God *doing* something in our midst as human, something detectable at a purely

anthropological level, something in flexible imitation of which we are invited to be swept up.

Here is what is bizarre: any normal account of the “secular” would posit that the world of sacrifice is the direct opposite to the world of the secular. And that a religion based on a text or a law is much more likely to be secular than one based on a sacrifice. In fact, the reverse is true: unless you face up to the universality of the human tendency to scapegoat and sacrifice, text and law will merely create new forms of sacred as you impose them on others, and become much more tough, rigorous and likely to sacrifice those who fall foul of them. If you do face up to the universality of the human tendency to sacrifice, then any text and law you have will gradually come to be interpreted by your facing up to that tendency, and so will become comparatively toothless.

This is for the simple reason that the more you resist the tendency to sacrifice, the more the interpersonal relationships within your group will be de-sacralized, and the more it will become possible to learn who people really are. If you simply replace sacrifice with a book, you will recreate the same dynamics of sacrifice within your group, sanctifying those dynamics with the words of your text, while hiding from yourself that you are involved in sacrifice. If we have Jesus giving himself to us as sacrificed out of love constantly before our eyes, then there is a goodish chance that we will remember how prone we are to participating in such things. If instead of that, we say “that’s over – now I’ll go by the book”, then we may fall into the terrible trap of seeing ourselves as the righteous, and others who don’t go by the book as outsiders, sinners, and so on. In other words, we will participate in the creation of a new sacred instead of allowing the Holy One to make us ordinarily holy. This ordinary holiness is found in the changing of our pattern of desire in the midst of the new time that has been brought about by the gradual undoing of the violent sacred.

So please remember this: the Catholic faith is not a rival sacrificial system among many. It is the undoing from within of all sacrificial systems wherever they may be.

Law

Another way of looking at the same dynamic is to look at Law. One of the first pieces of evidence that the Happening had happened was that it became possible to detect that systems of goodness are terribly dangerous things. This was Paul’s great insight concerning the Law. He wasn’t

being anti-semitic. The space created by his own relationship to Torah was merely the particular barn within which the bullet marks of the Happening had happened. He had perceived something about all sacred systems of goodness. And this is that they are traps. A system of goodness works by having rules which determine who is in and who is out. If some of the rules are hard to keep so much the better, since that gives the impression that what is in fact a tragically easy form of goodness is, rather, heroically difficult. Paul's insight is that systems of goodness do not counteract people's desires which are run according to the familiar mechanism of gathering people into unanimity against an evil one to be expelled. On the contrary, systems of goodness depend on that mechanism, and tragically easily they fall prey to it, so that the most "virtuous" within systems of goodness become those clearest about who is in and who is out.

What Paul understood from this is that in practice systems of goodness which give the impression of being chosen voluntarily do not really work that way. Their adherents are driven by them and become functions of the crystallized group violence which underlies them. So you get people who want to be good, and know that goodness looks like loving your neighbour as yourself, but because they are trapped in a system of goodness, they become unable to see their neighbour as themselves, and end up in fact hating their neighbour and perceiving them as something unclean, or outside, or not quite human, so as to be able *not* to love them as themselves. This is how you end up with people who are convinced that their religion is a religion of peace, yet who are quite unaware of how completely the system of goodness of which they are part jerks them about. This system makes them, in fact, incapable of creating peace. Paul discovered this very clearly (Rom 7, 19):

For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.

Here he is talking quite specifically about how the system of goodness runs people, and also about how the only way out of it is the realisation that because God had occupied the place of one "cursed by the Law" by undergoing the death of a despised criminal, the system of goodness has been rendered moot for ever. From now on the shape of goodness is the slow learning how to live without being dependent on a system of goodness. It involves instead our becoming aware of how much we have been loved by someone who is our victim. Because of that we can become good as we are loved in our most vulnerable places, rather than by forcing ourselves to cover up our vulnerability and be good so as to be

loved. This means that the only sort of goodness we know is that of the penitent. It is only as undergoing being forgiven that we can possibly start to be good. And that means being daringly patient about forgiving others, not holding things against them, seeing them as the same as us before offering to put them right and so on.

This means that over time we can actually learn that some things that seemed to us to be good and holy and just are not so, and some things that seemed to us to be impure and evil and profane are not so. And this is because the question of whether we are allowing ourselves to be forgiven by our victim, and whether, in the light of that forgiveness, we are learning to treat our neighbour as though we are the same as they are, *this* question gradually comes to supersede all other questions of morality which a system of goodness would impose on us.

Let me give you both an ancient and a modern example. It might surprise you to know that the first written records we have in European history of people standing out against, and questioning Witch trials came not from enlightened sceptics but from people whose religious understanding led them to be highly sceptical of the craziness of the systems of goodness which were leading people to the pyre. Of the first four voices, two (1549 and 1612) were Spanish Inquisitors who understood perfectly well that their job was to introduce the boring secularism of due process into areas which would otherwise have tended to exciting lynch deaths. These Inquisitors would have been considered “not sufficiently religious” by those at the time who were run by systems of goodness. Those for whom belief in the real evil of the witches was at that time what belief in the magical capacity of gay people to destroy the fabric of society is now: the dividing line between “true believers” and the advancing secularity offered by the due processes inspired by Catholic faith. The truth was that the Inquisitors knew, within all the limitations of their time, that goodness after Christ’s sacrifice looks like introducing boring intermediary forms of process and protection, and insisting on rules of evidence other than what is derived from torture, given how easy it is for us to ignore that Christ’s sacrifice has happened and instead to recreate it in a dangerous bid for goodness.

For a more modern example, look at the pictures recently published in the US media of José Padilla⁵. This man, a full US citizen who is a Muslim, has been arrested, held without proper charge or trial for several years in

⁵ Hose Padilla In Chains, *The Smoking Gun*,
<http://www.thesmokinggun.com/archive/1204061padilla6.html>, [04.12.2006].

a US prison, tortured, incarcerated, and treated as though he were toxic waste by the American legal system, at the instigation of that champion of a system of goodness John Ashcroft. All the evidence which was produced against him has been revealed to have been fabricated so as to give the Administration the electorally convenient weapon of “a Muslim manufacturing a dirty bomb”. So much has the balance of his mind been altered by the torture and deprivation that he has suffered that although it is clear that none of the evidence against him has stood up, it is not at all clear that he will ever be able to tell his own story or mount a defence. The reason I ask you to look at a picture of him, going back to websites in order to do so, is that of the pictures of him that have been released, one stands out. It shows him chained, handcuffed in an orange jumpsuit, with goggles on (apparently so that he can't blink some signal in code to his alleged Al Qaeda colleagues). It shows him being pushed around by some quite extraordinarily overdressed and overarmed military figures, who look as though they have just rushed into a scene of extreme danger. In fact they are about to escort a totally helpless, mentally unstable, rather small man towards a visit to the dentist in a prison in South Carolina. But what leaps out about the photograph is that it is exactly the same picture as a mediaeval representation of Christ being blindfolded, tortured, and beaten by the Roman soldiers in Pilate's palace.

Anyone who sees that, knows what is going on: a terrible system of goodness is torturing and destroying someone for whom Christ died, yet it is the cursed one to whom we must reach out. It doesn't matter whether he is a Muslim, or a Jew, a Hindu, a Christian, a Communist. He is the one who is our neighbour because he is ourself. It doesn't matter whether he would do the same to us if he had the chance. It matters terribly that we recognise that all systems of goodness have been interrupted by Christ, and that the apparent secularity, the boring due process, of the justice system seems to have been suspended by those who, thinking themselves good, are in fact being run by the evil of a sacred system of goodness to produce the usual, lethal, sacred results. And it matters not only for Mr Padilla, but it matters for all of us: for as long as we continue to find, torture and blame people like him, just so long will we remain in ignorance of what the real threats and dangers to any of our societies might be, and unable to take the small scale, rational, proper precautionary measures to protect ourselves and others.

So, please remember this, the Catholic faith is not a system of goodness. It is the introduction into the world of a constant undoing of all and any systems of goodness such that a genuine, difficult, tentative goodness can begin to be elaborated by those who are becoming aware of how terribly

dangerous “goodness” and our need for it is. But the perception that systems of goodness are terribly dangerous, and our very proper modern suspicion of them: these are not enlightened, sceptical positions. They are the working out, over the time in which we have learned to suspend easy sacred solutions, of a quite specific divinely-given tradition: the Catholic faith.

Faith

Again, it is difficult to imagine that it should be *faith* that is the gateway to a relatively benign secularity. Faith, surely, is the ultimate Sacred Ideology to be held to by those creating religious forms of togetherness and those who are in or out. But again, this is not so! The word “faith” has come to stand in for “religion” which is a blinding muddle. For most religions faith is not particularly important. It is some or other form of practise, or act of acceptance which is important. That the centrepiece of the Catholic Faith should be exactly that, *faith*, a habitual confidence given us by Another in whose hands we can relax, is something far too little commented on. It means that what causes us to belong is a pattern of desire produced in us by someone we cannot see who is giving us the strength to live in the midst of this world as though death were not. And the access to this faith is desire: that we should *want* the gift of eternal life. It is the giving to us of this desire which we normally celebrate with that inverted religious rite called Baptism. In this rite we agree to undergo death in advance so as to live thereafter with death behind us. It is an inverted religious rite since it is not the crowd which gathers to drown the victim, but the candidate, not frightened of becoming a victim, who walks through the waters of being drowned so as to emerge on the other side into the welcome of those who are already living with death behind them.

It is for this reason, being dead in advance, that with Baptism there comes a complete loss of identity given by any human forms of belonging: your parents are now your brother and sister in Christ; the only form of hierarchy which need matter to you is the hierarchy of service made available through signed members of the community you are joining (made available by us signed-ones more or less incompetently to be sure, and with greater or lesser admixtures of an ability to relativise the way the world does “power”). You have no King but Jesus, no Prophet but Jesus and no Priest but Jesus. And Jesus was a crucified criminal. Now you share that kingship, that gift of prophecy and that priesthood. Indeed you are charged to make it present in the world by yourself incarnating and recreating the “happening” which we looked at earlier.

But this means that no form of earthly belonging is sacred: your family, your tribe, your clan is not sacred, and you may have to stand up against it in order to live the truth; your homeland is not sacred, and you may have to be considered a criminal or a traitor by it in order to live the truth. Your only form of belonging is invisible except by sign. It is for this reason that there is no Christian Holy Land, only lands where the usual mixture of holiness and destruction is lived out, but where political frontiers can only be pragmatic matters, able to be negotiated over time, never sacred ones. There is no Christian Holy City, Rome's status being a purely historical and pragmatic one, and there being absolutely no sacred imperative that the Bishop of the Church in that city should also be a secular head of state. There are purely contingent and pragmatic considerations, always up for negotiation. It is genuinely indispensable to being a Catholic that we have a direct relationship to the successor of Peter. Yet that relationship is in principle entirely independent of whatever *secular* power structure adorns, or blackens, the Petrine office. And it is quite right that it should be secular affairs which give the context within which our relationship to Peter is lived out in each generation. The same reasoning lies behind the fact that there is no Christian Ummah – not because the West is somehow enlightened, decadent, and has lost its religious roots, meaning the remnants of Christendom, but because the whole point of Christianity is to bring down the sort of wall of protective sacredness which makes universality impossible by having a necessary “other” over against whom we make ourselves “good”.

The premise of the Catholic faith is that *there is no real other* in any meaningful religious sense, that is “another” who can be seen as so unlike us that they could not learn as we have learned, that we are victimizers and must learn not to be, and so belong to the same sign as we. There are only humans, who, starting from where they are can have desire reformed in such a way as to learn not to create identity over against anyone else at all. Whenever we come across an apparent “other” and start to get frightened and retrench into identity politics, we are not becoming *more* Catholic, but much *less* Catholic. My sorrow at Archbishop Nichols' recent sermon seeking to maintain a sacred right to discriminate against gay people was not because I am a gay man, but because I'm a Catholic. It is because I am a Catholic that I recognise that anyone playing identity politics with a victimary slant is functionally atheistic.

Is not identity politics a refusal to allow ourselves to undergo the Happening which might teach us who our neighbour is, and empower us to grow into being not-over-against-anyone at all? Doesn't such politics

tend to produce cheap togetherness and junk goodness? When I see this identity politics with a victimary slant from other groups in our society, – and Lord alone knows there are enough of them from throughout the spheres which we call “religious” and “secular”, both left and right -, I’m sorry for them, but how can I judge whether they know better? They are genuinely sheep without a shepherd. But when I see a Catholic authority doing this, I am really, really sorry, because we are without excuse. Catholics cannot complain about being treated victimarly, since at the centre of our Faith we have agreed to be treated victimarly in advance, without ever seeking it, so as to be able slowly and patiently to work towards the truth and wellbeing of all our sisters and brothers with all that victim stuff already behind us. We’ve agreed to lose our identity in advance so as to receive the much, much bigger, stronger identity of being contributed to by others who, whatever *they* may think, are not really over-against me at all. That’s what “love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” means!

Desire

Well, there is much, much more to say in this vein – I would love to have developed more fully the secularising effect in our midst of the doctrine of Creation as made full and complete by Christ, but time and space will not allow it. What I hope to have done is merely reminded you of something counterintuitive: that anything solid and lasting in what we call Enlightenment values of liberty, equality, fraternity and the birth of the scientific spirit comes from a quite specific set of circumstances, brought into being and kept fragilely alive, with many a betrayal and backwards step, by the Happening that is at the root of Catholic Faith. It is the keeping alive of the sacrifice having happened in our midst, the imperative not to do it again, and the realisation that it is only by creating social forms of togetherness such that we do not automatically resolve things by scapegoating, that we can have the space and freedom to discover and work out how our world really works. In other words, our ability to overcome scapegoating by having been empowered to live as if death were not, the realisation that this means one can stand up for the unpopular in order to make the truth shine, and our having started to forge a culture where this is a matter of common sense, this is a necessary precondition for science, for knowledge, and for the possibility of humans coming to live together universally.

Of course, the downside of all this is that the Happening is not our invention, and the power which has undone the roots of our scapegoating culture is not our own. The normal results of the undoing of a

scapegoating culture, or of a system of goodness, is wrath, anger, and violence out of control. Because the fragile bulwarks which held that society together have been undone, and there is less and less belief in the authentic “sacredness” of whatever might put them together again. In the midst of this, the slow, patient forging of holy desire, and of the intermediary, negotiable institutions which encourage peace and foment flourishing, is very difficult, and very fragile. We are quite extraordinarily lucky to find ourselves on the inside of the Happening. The Catholic Faith enables us to navigate the wrath which is produced as sacred structures and boundaries collapse from within and a new creation emerges. How we make available to others the uniqueness of this strangely un-religious gift without falling into the trap of allowing that uniqueness to seem like merely another rival form of exclusivity is one of the great challenges of living and preaching the faith in our time.

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