

Culture and Catholicism

by Father Daniel Callam, C.S.B.

THE CHANGES IN QUÉBEC over the last forty years invite one to think deeply about culture and Catholicism. Perhaps, I should say “culture and anti-Catholicism,” for it looks as if the Church is everywhere perceived as *the* enemy: by the new Quebecois, radical feminists, a few Protestants, many liberationists, all pro-abortionists, and good old communists—a formidable list. Why should this be?

The trait common to all of these ideologies provides us with a good starting point. Each of them, in one way or another, is revolutionary; each has its plan for constructing an ideal society. The first step is to clear the ground, and the Church as an essential component of the old order is quickly bulldozed aside. This happens necessarily because of the Church’s way of entangling herself in any culture she finds herself in, even to the point, at her best, of informing it totally. The greatest, never equalled, example is the absorption of the Græco-Latin civilization into Christianity, a process that achieved remarkable success in the fourth century and continued as the vivifying principle of the cultures of Europe and Russia, however unacknowledged, to the present day. One instance among many would be the origins of the feast of Christmas in the pagan Roman festival of the unconquered sun. Similarly, its continuing vitality is revealed in the effect on a people of the various Marian shrines—Guadalupe, Lourdes, Czestochowa—or, I suppose, of the annual celebration of the patronal feast of every Italian village. It is the nature of the Church to seek the interpenetration of religion and culture. For a Catholic, his religion is all encompassing. Philosophy and science, art and folklore, are somehow to be honoured in religion. The retirement of the student, the bustle of the market place, the vicissitudes of life are understood in the light of the Gospel, which by revealing to man his destiny transforms every worthwhile and necessary work into a service.

The role of an ideology is to supply its adherents with a purpose. Quebec seems to be a textbook example of this. For more than 300 years it was a society structured by Catholicism, to be replaced in our time by a secularism that would liberate the people from a cultural and political corruption that the Church is accused of co-operating with if not actually causing. And sometimes, given the links between Church and state, there will be some truth to these accusations. But a deeper issue is at stake. Unlike

various forms of materialism, the Church knows that man cannot re-establish paradise on earth. The promise of a secularized Kingdom of God must be illusory. Saying this places the Church in direct opposition to most current liberation movements, as she opposed the chiliasts of an earlier age and the rigorists of every age: they all want the Garden of Eden, and they want it now.

The source of the conflict between utopian ideologies and the Church is our conviction that Jesus Christ alone reveals the full truth about the human condition. The result of this conviction should be to open the Church to every valid human experience. Those within the Church, therefore, who close doors, like those outside who slammed them shut as they left, contribute to modern man's search for a substitute religion. But ideologies, especially materialistic ones, are necessarily too limited to deliver the goods. At best they seek to right some wrong, a laudable reaction to injustices committed against the working classes, women, or the underprivileged; but a full solution to man's woe cannot come out of efforts to redress particular wrongs. What is needed is something to live for—which ultimately can be nothing other than God himself—and a means by which a man can recognize the service of his neighbour as the best way to achieve his glorious end. This noble vision only authentic religion can achieve.

At its deepest level, the world's suspicion of the Church is the fulfilment of Jesus' words, "If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you."¹ Therefore, to be hated is not in itself alarming, as long as one is hated for the right reasons. ❧

¹ Jn 15.18.