

To be a People

Who are we as Catholics? If I could make just one statement, it would be this: Catholics are a people. Not a club, team, corporation, educational institute or welfare agency, but a people. This point is crucial. If we don't 'get' this, nothing else about Catholicism really makes sense. As a Church we could have perfect theology, stunning liturgies, mighty charitable works; but if as Catholics we didn't belong to one another and experience a common way of life, then we would have totally missed the point. We would be like a husband and wife who have excellent jobs, an immaculate home, admirable involvement in the community, but who are not intimate with one another. No matter how impressive they are as individuals, it doesn't make a great marriage. It's the ingredient of radical belonging, tangible intimacy, a life shared as one, which gives their marriage real credibility. And so it is with Catholics.

To be Catholic is to belong to other Catholics. This is not to advocate a ghetto mentality or to say that Catholics can't have special relationships with other people. It does mean that to follow Jesus is to be immersed in the way of life of the people of the Church. And we are most intimately 'churched' with those with whom we share the Eucharist. This might sound simplistic to some ears. Yet it has a profundity reaching all the

way to the Trinity: God revealed as persons-in-relationship. Our belonging to one another as Catholics can be compared to the relational depths of the Jewish people and the intimacy of a blood family, except that what binds us is not race or blood ties but a shared faith experience: life in the Spirit as one body of Christ.

The comparison of Catholics to the Jews is not trivial. The Christian Church evolved from the Jewish people and we need to go back to those Semitic roots in order to really understand our communal identity. The Jewish faith is experienced through immersion in the Jewish community and its unique way of life. Today's Church needs this communal sense as a corrective to centuries of preoccupation with 'doing the right thing'. This is not to downplay the importance of a moral code. However without a sense of peoplehood that code simply doesn't make sense. Morality becomes a set of rules rather than a liberating, relational way of life.

The comparison to family life is not trivial either. Everyone knows that a family is not defined by perfect behaviour or harmonious agreement. In fact, the genius of family life is most clearly revealed in the midst of great tensions as members work through their differences and still remain 'family' to each other. You can't just walk away from family like you can from a club. And it's the same with the Church. That is why so many 'non-

practicing' Catholics still identify themselves as Catholics. They intuitively grasp the fact that their baptism is not a temporary membership badge but rather signifies a mysteriously enduring relationship.

Since Vatican II there has been no shortage of scholarly commentary on this theme of the Church's communal depths. The real challenge lies in our lived experience. As Catholics are we focused on belief, or belonging? On Catholicism, or Catholics? Do we embrace a disembodied, 'spiritual' Jesus, or Jesus who promises to be with us always in the flesh and blood of his body, the people of the Church? •

