Catholic Identity and the Year of Faith

I. Introduction[1]

Even in a general overview of the question of Catholic identity, which is my task today, a choice of focus is necessary. The literature and material on the rather vague word "identity" in combination with the equally broad adjective "Catholic" are immense and concern more or less all aspects of Catholic religious life.[2]

The first restriction of the theme I intend to make is to situate this question in a particular context. As you all are very well aware of, we now enter the Year of Faith, an initiative of Benedict XVI, beginning October 11, 2012. The natural thing is thus to connect the notion of Catholic identity to the concerns of the special year lying before us.

However, in the same way, we must ask: faith in what meaning and why right now? It is not the year of the liturgy that is commencing, neither the year of ecumenism, nor that of tolerance or the Bible. Why is the question of faith so pressing in the second decade of the third millennium?

The foundational text for the Year of Faith is *Porta Fidei*, the apostolic letter establishing the year, to which a note of a more practical nature from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith is connected. A special website has also been launched for the year, which is hosted by the Pontifical Council for New Evangelization.[3] We thus have three main sources (*Porta Fidei*, the *Annusfidei* website and the Pontifical Council for New Evangelization) to mine for clues, connecting the theme of Catholic identity to the present concerns of the Church.

Furthermore, there is also the *instrumentis laboris* for the synod of bishops, "The New Evangelization for The Transmission of The Christian Faith," which is a more elaborate document. At the time of finalizing this article (October, 2012), the synod is still going on and each day new texts are published in the form of bulletins. My thoughts and comments collected in the article were in the main written before the synod, but have been reinforced by the texts so far published on the web. The synod seems to mark a new phase in the understanding and critique of modernity offered by the Catholic Church. However, for the final position we have to wait for the apostolic exhortation of Pope Benedict.

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[1] This paper was first presented at the Year of Faith Symposium on Catholic Identity held on October 11-12, 2012 at the Seminary of the Immaculate Conception in Huntington, NY.

[2] A search on Google (2012-10-22) gave 4,820,000 results.

[3] See www.annusfidei.va (accessed October 31, 2012).

II. *Porta Fidei*: The Return to Faith

Throughout *Porta Fidei*, there runs like a red thread an emphasis on the return to faith, highlighted by phrases such as: "rediscovering the journey of faith," "renewed enthusiasm," "renewal of the Church," "renewed conversion," "new evangelization" and "retracing the history of our faith." Such a return is obviously not a mere continuation, but is put forward in relation to a "profound crisis of faith" (*Porta Fidei* [*PF*] #2). The characterization of this crisis is important as it sets the parameters for the act of returning: is it merely that we once again should take up faith with missionary zeal, after a time of forgetfulness, or is the situation now so different, so new, that the return must be of another character; the roads once travelled upon are closed or radically rebuilt?

Benedict introduces the crisis of faith as linked to the loss of "a unitary cultural matrix" which was based both on the content and values of the Christian faith (*PF* 2). With other words, secularization is introduced without being mentioned by name. It basically means a separation between Church and state, which in itself is not problematic for the Catholic Church, but actually inherent in its teachings.

However, the crisis of faith arrives with force when this separation between state and church is intensified and united to a fracture also between culture and Church (see e.g. Arthur 2009). Citizenship and the public sphere are then constituted as non-religious, and due to the loss of the unitary cultural matrix they are also formed in sharp conflict with basic moral principles of the Catholic faith. This late modern situation is described as "a time of profound change" (*PF* 8), as "a change in mentality," (*PF* 12) which reserves rational certainty to science and technology. This self-limitation of reason is a basic feature of modernity and deprives faith of rationality and consequently a place in the public sphere—that is, as argued by Jürgen Habermas, if faith does not accept being translated into the language of secular reason, thereby not insisting on its basis in revelation.[4]

The return to faith thus has to take place within societies that increasingly constitute themselves in conflict with the content of faith. These are not, however, non-Christian, that is pagan, nor Christian nations merely religiously indolent, possibly to be roused by glowing sermons. The context is made up of societies that willfully have exchanged the Christian faith for

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[4] Jürgen Habermas, *Religion and Rationality: Essays on Reason, God, and Modernity* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2002). Jürgen Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion: Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2008). Jürgen Habermas and Joseph Ratzinger, *Dialektik der Säkularisierung: Über Vernunft und Religion* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2005); English translation: *The Dialectics of Secularization: On Reason and Religion* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2006).

another *Weltanschauung*, what can be called a basic 'modernism,' the ideological basis of modernity, underlying, for example, both socialist and liberal political positions. These societies are therefore post-Christian.[5] The collective and personal goal is increased material, social and psychological welfare. The utilitarian means are scientifically based technology, industrial production and the privatization of religion. The human person and society are perfected with the help of ever more sophisticated technology and social engineering. The notion of sin and reliance on divine grace are neglected or rejected. The ideal, the good society is fashioned without reference to God.

The context in which a return to faith has to take account is a society where faith is privatized in its traditional forms. Only forms of religion emptied of restrictions to the modern will are accepted in the public sphere—that is, what are usually called liberal or progressive forms of religion. The other more traditional variants are denigrated as instances of fundamentalism—that is, irrational and violent—or as conservative, hopelessly trying to reconstruct an older form of society which is less equal and free.

What we see presently in Europe are the final stages of the disappearance of Catholic nations; what remains are mostly cultural markers of a nostalgic or cultural heritage character, with some exceptions.[6] And simultaneously, for example, marriage is radically reformulated in conflict with the teachings of the Church. This new construction of the family is gradually imposed on the churches both in Europe and in North America. To express the teachings of the Catholic Church in public on these questions is not without risk for one's place in society, and the tendency is the introduction of new laws making this increasingly riskier. At the same time, the upholding of Church discipline is made more difficult.[7] This development is the natural result when the distance between the values and norms of the Church and the society becomes wider. The right to religious freedom is never absolute, but constrained by other legally enshrined rights and obligations. When the cultural distance to the teachings of the Catholic

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[5] Cf. Stefan Paas, "Post-Christian, Post-Christendom, and Post-Modern Europe: Towards the Interaction of Missiology and the Social Sciences," *Mission Studies* 28 (2011): 3-25.

[6] E.g., Janusz Marianski, "The Roman Catholic Church in Poland and Civil Society: Contradiction or Complementarity?" *Religious Studies and Theology* 27 (2008): 21-42, and Karen Andersen, "Irish secularization and Religious Identities: Evidence of an Emerging New Catholic Habitus," *Social Compass* 57 (2010): 15-39.

[7] Cf. Ian Leigh, "Balancing Religious Autonomy and Other Human Rights under the European Convention," *Oxford Journal of Law and Religion* 1 (2012): 109-125.

Church increases within a society, then the scope of religious freedom also diminishes.[8]

Benedict, in *Porta Fidei*, resolutely opposes this development first by insisting that faith is compatible with reason—that is, rational. Second, based on the rationality of faith, he rejects the privatization of Christianity, insisting that faith deserves a place in the public sphere.

However, this is not enough for an actual return of faith, it merely provides the right to do so. Therefore he demands of the individual Christian a public confession of faith; belief is not a private act (*PF* 10). The return to faith requires a public declaration of and commitment to faith. According to the secular context sketched above, this is something that involves risk and a willingness to sacrifice. The post-Christian nation will probably be impatient with such a reawakened zeal for what it has left behind.

The pope has obviously not provided Catholics with an easy task. It is not merely that they are to reaffirm their faith in the liturgy and their personal prayers within the constraints of modern society, but they are to challenge the constraints put upon it by secularization. This requires a thoughtful reconsideration of different forms of double truth approaches: the division between official personas, social roles, and personal religious beliefs. And the answer will be varying with different social contexts, as for example, Saudi Arabia, Sweden or the United States.

This exterior manifestation of faith is demanded not merely of individuals, but also of organizations such as Catholic universities, hospitals, religious orders and relief organizations. The opposition to such a public confession (the *mandatum* for example)[9] is mainly that instead of confessing the now contra-cultural beliefs of the Catholic Church; the Church itself should reconsider its beliefs where they clash with the self-determination of the modern person, especially within the area of sexual morality.

The question, then, is what will the Magisterium do, when perhaps a majority of individual Catholics and organizations reject the demand for the public confession of traditional Catholic faith and morals? Will these, as a university in Peru recently, be stripped of their right to call themselves Catholic? Or will non-consequential large crowds at events such as papal masses be considered as successes, or even as proofs for the demanded confession of faith?

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[8] James Schall S.J., "Under the Control of the State," *The CWR Blog*, February 17, 2012, www.catholicworldreport.com/Blog/1126/under_the_control_of_the_state.aspx (accessed October 31, 2012).

[9] In the U.S., see, for example, USCCB (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops), "Guidelines Concerning the Academic Mandatum in Catholic Universities (Canon 812)," http://nccbuscc.org/bishops/mandatumguidelines.shtml (accessed October 22, 2012).

Besides the risk now connected to expressing and acting in accordance with Catholic beliefs in public, mainly within the realm of morality, at least in societies where conscientious objection is not accepted, there is also the possibility that this demand of a public confession of faith exposes the deep rift in the Church between traditional or conservative and liberal or progressive Catholics, and even perhaps makes a schism or a series of schisms unavoidable. That is, with the demand of a public confession a 'don't ask, don't tell' policy in regard to certain sensitive doctrinal and moral questions in the post Vatican II Church is with necessity broken.

III. New Evangelization and the Organic Growth of the Church

If we turn to the newly established (2010) Pontifical Council for new evangelization, which is hosting the website for the Year of Faith and hence closely connected to it, we find in Benedict's apostolic letter establishing the council once again how missionary activity is set up against the landscape of the modern crisis of faith. In this document, modernity is described in a little more detail and its undeniable positive sides acknowledged, but the loss of the sacred is lamented. The council is thus mainly directed toward societies where secularization is strong and where Christianity has a long tradition (*Ubicumque et Semper* [*US*] 2).

In *Porta Fides*, two important means are connected to the Year of Faith by way of anniversaries (4). The first is the fiftieth anniversary of opening of the Second Vatican Council, and one of the tasks set by Benedict for a new evangelization is to firmly establish a hermeneutics of continuity instead of rupture for understanding the council. This is no small task as it has to address the division between traditional and liberal interpretations. Both traditionalists in the form of *Societas of St. Pius V* and liberal organizations such as *We are the Church* see the council as a break with what came before: it was thus significantly "new." To provide force to the new evangelization Benedict must, therefore, show that newness rests upon doctrinal continuity. But what is then "new" if we stress the continuity thesis? Is it merely a new way of expressing the same thing?

Here I would like to direct the attention to another way of understanding "new," namely "new" as in the unfolding of organic growth— which is not a new idea, I must add, but quite old, even ancient.[10] We can thus see faith as realized in history as an unfolding of the person of Christ

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[10] The most influential modern position is of course John Henry Newman's notion of the development of doctrine formulated in the 19th century: John Henry Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2011 [1878]); A Project Gutenberg Ebook, www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/35110 (accessed October 31, 2012).

which achieves its perfection in the second coming. A simple view of the same message with different sorts of pedagogical and technological means is therefore misleading. The context of secularization activates and brings forth meanings, insights and ways of living which are potential in faith. For example, the notion of a Catholic nation has to be rethought in the present context of globalization. To balance newness with continuity with regard to Vatican II is, in my view, to argue for a model of organic growth for the Church.

The second is the twentieth anniversary of the publication of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which is presented as an authentic fruit of Vatican II; in a sense the systematic interpretation of it (*PF* 4). But, as said earlier, in order for the *Catechism* not to be used merely as a shopping catalogue one has to address both the noncompliance with some of its moral teachings and the actual rejection of those principles by many Catholic laypersons, clerics and organizations. The Church, in order to realize the intentions of Benedict, must address the elephant in the room—that is, not only the difficult condition of secularization *extra muros* (in the world) but also *intra muros* (in the Church). In other words, even among active Catholics there is present a far-reaching reduction of the perceived legitimate scope of the teaching authority of the Church, especially on moral questions.

Now, the context for a consideration of Catholic identity has been sufficiently sketched for the present purpose. In order to proceed, we must though first probe the concepts of "identity" and "Catholic."

IV. What is Identity?

If we start with looking up the word 'identity' in *Oxford Dictionary of English*, we find four meanings listed of which two are mathematical and do not concern us here. The two remaining are: "the fact of being who or what a person or thing is," and "a close similarity or affinity."[11] The first refers to the essence of a person or a thing (numerical identity), while the second refers to similarity (qualitative identity), which can be thought as having degrees, ranging from faint resemblance to complete identity. This twofold meaning of identity, as essence and approximation to that essence, is important for our discussion of Catholic identity.

Another philosophical notion that can be of importance is "identity over time," that is, the criteria for establishing when an object, person and institution is the same or whether an essential change has occurred. We have

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[11] *Oxford Dictionary of English* (2010), s. v. "identity," www.oxford reference.com (accessed October 30, 2012).

already touched upon this topic in relation to Vatican II, namely the balance between continuity and change, and the notion of organic growth.

In the social sciences, "identity" is a much-used word, though as usual in the case with popular concepts this is done with many different meanings. If we consult for example, the *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, we find articles on the following topics: personal identity, social identity, ethnic identity, cultural identity, race identity and regional identity. Important distinctions that emerge from the social science discourse are those between subjective and objective identity, and between personal and social identity. The first pair of opposites refers to the difference between the characteristics a person is conscious of (subjective identity), and those characteristics that a person need not be conscious of (objective identity), for example, biological traits. A social identity denotes the social groups or roles that a person belongs to or occupies, for example, being a member of the Catholic Church or being pope. Personal identity refers to the particular characteristics of a person not necessarily connected to social categories, such as being mild-mannered and having a fondness for long walks.[12]

A central question is to what extent qualities, and categorizations based upon them, are arbitrary constructions, or whether at least some of them are based upon the nature of things and persons. And consequently, the existential crux is what part of my identity is up to my choice, and which parts of me are beyond my control. For example, is my identity as a man a cultural subjective identity, or is it objective? Can I choose to be a woman instead? And, is the Catholic identity of an individual primarily personal and subjective or objective and social?

V. What is Catholic?

Having touched upon the notion of identity, we can turn to the adjective "catholic." Catholic means in its primary sense, "universal" and "general." The word thus denoted in early Christianity the whole church in distinction to a local church. With the appearance of heretical movements, its connection with orthodox, that is the correct faith, developed. In such a situation, where the very definition of the true faith and true church to which it has been entrusted is put into question, the discussion of criteria for distinguishing whether a particular group or person is part of the Catholic Church becomes inevitable. That is, the discussion of the essence of

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[12] For an overview of the theme religion and identity see Arthure L Greil and Lynn Davidman, "Religion and Identity," in The SAGE Handbook of the Sociology of Religion, ed. James A. Beckford and N. J. Demerath III (London: SAGE publications, 2010), pp. 549–566.

catholicity presents itself: what we now call Catholic identity. If we start with orthodox, this merely postpones the decision of the question of who decides what the right faith is and by what criteria. To the criterion of orthodoxy, one therefore needs to add Catholicity in the sense of representing the whole of the church and not merely a particular group, region or nation. Furthermore, the crucial criterion is historical continuity through apostolic succession, and for the Roman Catholic Church union with the bishop of Rome.[13]

These criteria merely provide a minimum definition of being Catholic, providing the outer contour of Catholic identity as expressed by the Magisterium of the Roman Catholic Church, which, as we all are aware of, has been seriously challenged during different time periods. For this paper, focusing on Catholic identity in relation to the Year of Faith, we, however, need not enter into detailed historical investigations, but will focus on the challenge of secularization for Catholic identity understood in the sense above.

VI. Secularization and Catholic Identity

If one searches on the internet for "Catholic identity," it is telling that the majority of sites that explicitly mention this theme are those of organizations. For example, on the site of the College of Saint Mary-of-the-Woods, besides "Academics" and "Athletics" there is a page named "Catholic Identity".[14] On that, the college "pledges its faithfulness to Catholic values" and claims to be "rooted deeply in Catholic values and traditions." Similar pages are found on the sites of other Catholic colleges and constitute the place where the argument is made that the college in question is actually a Catholic institution.

We can distinguish between Catholic identity in a vague sense of being founded as a Catholic institution and having subjects such as Catholic theology, liturgical celebrations on campus, etc. In a more restricted sense, "Catholic" means being in union with the Magisterium of the Church, which is regulated by, for example, the constitution *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*. And, it is when this is faulty that the Holy See may take action, though many Catholic universities have slowly lost their Catholic identity in this sense, without any disciplinary action being taken.

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[13] A. M. Ramsey, "Catholicism," in *A New Dictionary of Christian Theology*, ed. Alan Richardson and John Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1991), pp. 86–87.

[14] "About/Catholic Identity," Saint Mary-of-The-Woods College, accessed October 24, 2012, www.smwc.edu/about/catholic-identity. For a discussion of Catholic college identity in relation to a critical mass of Catholic faculty see, D. Paul Sullins, "The Difference Catholic Makes: Catholic Faculty and Catholic Identity," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 43 (2004), pp. 83–101.

How does secularization effect this question? In United States the most controversial question right now is the Health and Human Services mandate, which requires institutions such as colleges to provide health insurances that include coverage of contraceptives and abortions. The crucial point is whether faith-based institutions can, by the principles of conscientious objection and religious freedom, be allowed an exception to the mandate or not. The answer of the Obama administration is that only religious institutions are exempted, not institutions providing other services such as health care and education, even though they are declaring themselves, as the College of Saint Mary-of-the-Woods, to have a Catholic identity.[15] This policy decision is based on the view that such functions in society are to be secular and thus not exempted from the mandate by the principle of religious freedom, as they are not religious in a restricted sense. We can also see the principle of privatization of religion at play here, where religious activity is restricted to the individual and his or her private life; the public sphere is to be secular and ultimately under the control of the state. The result is increased secularization of civil society.

This is already much the case in Europe, so there the most dramatic question is of Catholic identity on the national level, for example, in Italy, Spain and Ireland. These countries seem to be losing their connection to the Catholic Church at a rapid pace that is quite dramatic. At least if we are to believe the results of surveys that pose questions like whether individuals identify themselves as Catholics, or what their view is on contested issues such as the legalization of same-sex marriages.[16] Simultaneously, we see in some countries how religious symbols are legislated away from the public sphere in order to uphold its secularity, for example, in schools and hospitals.

Taking all these currents of the New Secularization into account, which seem to limit religious freedom in a strong way, the question is what the consequences are for our theme of Catholic identity and New Evangelization?

First, having a Catholic identity that requires one to be Catholic in public, not only in private, will have to be achieved in the secular west, with greater struggle as the difference with the dominant culture increases. It will be hard, for example, for educational institutions to keep on the road laid out by the Magisterium as this new cultural matrix is manifested in the promulgation of new laws.

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[15] Cf. "Issues and Acton/Religious Liberty/HHS Mandate," United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, accessed October 24, 2012, www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/religious-liberty/hhs-mandate.

[16] For example, see the poll by Amárach Research on attitudes of Catholics on Ireland, "Contemporary Catholic Perspectives: Commissioned by the Association of Catholic Priests," www.amarach.com/assets/files/ConsumerForesightArchive/ACP%20Survey%20Findings%20April%202012.pdf (accessed October 24, 2012).

Second, the separation between the Catholic identity and other parts of the social identity of individuals and institutions will disconnect the meaning of being Catholic from more narrow identities such as ethnic, state and race identities. The Vatican will have to be less Italian; the Irish Catholic Church will have to figure out how to disengage from the Irish state and cultural ethos without nostalgia for what once existed.

Third, these two put into the context of globalization will provide space for a new committed Catholicity that is truly global; this is actually the first time period when this is possible. The crucial question will thus be the connection between "global" and "Catholic."

This particular circumstance will be present on all levels. It will be there for the individual in his or her search for a deepening of the personal Catholic identity, going beyond that of his or her ethnos, society and culture. The same applies to the Catholic family, the parish, religious orders, the national churches and the Holy See—the last in relation to the Vatican State and Italy. The difference will become clearer between those who make the hard choice of a strong Catholic identity in relation to other forms of social identity and those who do not and instead try to forge their Catholic identity in harmony with the norms and values of the locally dominant culture, of the state or the ethnic group.

The combined processes of globalization and secularization will make the fault lines in the Church more marked. For example, when the tension between a particular nation and the Church increases, at a certain breaking point we will probably witness a split between those who side with the new laws of the state and those who opposes them. The second group will, as in the case of the Protestant Reformation, perhaps lose large parts of their possessions, which in Europe are mostly held in some kind of symbiosis with or dependency on the state.

This departure from the surrounding culture will increase the sharpness of Catholic essence in relation to national religious cultures, for example, Polish Catholicism or Irish Catholicism. And this emerging identity, I would like to argue, will manifest itself on the model of organic growth, as a new explicitness of the universality of the Catholic Church.

But, is such a global Catholicism merely an affair of the elite? Will it be a cosmopolitan Catholicism for the globalized elite, while the masses will have to be content with more local variants?[17]

And one can ask, is a central quality of the incarnational interculturation of Christianity then lost? That is, how is one to balance the universal and the individual, the global and the local? The situation is akin to

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[17] Larry R. Petersen, and K. Peter Takayama, "Local-Cosmopolitan Theory and Religiosity among Catholic Nuns and Brothers," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 22 (1983), pp. 303–315.

the fall of the Roman Empire which prompted Augustine's discourse on the two cities. Or, in a later age, when the combined effect of Protestantism, national states and the exploration of new continents prompted the Catholic Church to reformulate its identity and mission.

My conclusion, which I present to you as a kind of starting point, is that the present condition is one of opportunity for the Church to become truly Catholic, but that this will require great courage and willingness to sacrifice. Perhaps whole national cultures with beautiful churches and cultural customs will have to be left behind as these foremost form parts of particular cultural and national identities which are not open to the global nature of contemporary society. We should not as Lot's wife look back with nostalgia upon that which inevitably disintegrates. On the contrary, the opportunity to live at a time when the questions of universality and globality converge should fill us with a sense of purpose, and also, I think, not of fear but awe.

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