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Contours of the Catholic Mind

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One year ago, following about six years of will-I-won't-I agonizing, I finally made it all the way into the Catholic Church. In my ongoing immersion into the Catholic world before and since (call it mystagogy, call it acculturation), I have observed a number of interesting patterns I might characterize as quintessentially Catholic ways of thinking. Of course, this is emphatically not to say that all Catholics think alike – we're as far spread all over the map as anybody, to be sure. And I am more and more convinced that there is no such thing as a typical Catholic. And yet, paradoxically, there are certain recognizable tendencies I've picked up in this oddly fascinating process of developing a Catholic mind, several of which, I find, seem to suit me surprisingly well. Here are a few of those tendencies as observed after a year of being Catholic.

The very long view. The Catholic left (and occasionally the right, if you get them going on the right issues) may get easily impatient with the pace at which the Catholic Church moves, but one thing I've noticed at all levels on which the church operates and across whatever spectrum you can name: Catholics think in centuries. There is a frequency with which we can talk in historical terms, rather than merely from the vantage point of an individual lifetime – can talk of, say, 50 or 100 or 200 years as not being a very long time. It's as though, even when we lose sight of the broader picture, the whole church's history is still inescapably there, hovering somewhere in the back of our minds.

The both/and. Maybe it comes from centuries of navigating between oversimplifications (take the early Christological heresies as a case in point), but Catholic thought, in all its beautiful and frustrating variety, has all kinds of room for nuance, and much less room for either/or dualisms. Regrettably, many Catholics seem to be keeping a pretty tenuous grip on this one. At times we seem hopelessly polarized – but even amidst the polarities, the “Catholic both/and” will occasionally slip in, like an unconscious habit. Maybe that's exactly what it is. We desperately need to recover it to our Catholic consciousness.

Tradition is a living process. And one we can't escape. Catholics use the word “traditional” the way Protestants use the word “biblical”: as a sort of measuring rod for theological one-upmanship. We all want to show how the term really applies most fully and robustly to our own position. Again regrettably, the more conventional and limiting definition of tradition, as an absence of, or aversion to, change (whether spoken of favorably or unfavorably), sometimes makes its way into Catholic semantics and clashes with the more traditional understanding.

So is conversion. What Catholics might call the “conversion process” is similar to what some of the Mennonite circles I grew up in, and still deeply appreciate, would call the “faith journey.” To tell of my conversion would be to tell of my whole life. It would not be untrue to say that both my baptism and my confirmation were climactic conversion experiences, but just as essential were the gradual conversions leading up to those decisions, as well as all the subsequent inexhaustible unpacking of those very live moments. In either case, given the amount of time and energy it takes me to decide just about anything, I'm grateful I wasn't required to pinpoint one “conversion moment.” For us it's not about one decisive moment when you “get saved” so that you can someday go to heaven, but about being in the process of being saved so that, to borrow phrasing from my days in RCIA, your whole life is God getting you in shape to “do heaven” – because “heaven isn't just a place you go, it's something you do.”

Held together by ritual. Catholics recognize the power of symbol, whether consciously or not. One of the first things I remember noticing when I began attending Mass regularly was that it's full of symbols – every ritual action has a significance beyond itself. And gradually, through liturgical immersion, I came to believe in the presence that supersaturates these symbols and makes them more than symbolic. The Eucharist, above all, is more than a symbol, but certainly not less than one. I've heard it said that Catholics can't agree on anything except the Eucharist. And we can't always agree on the best way to talk about the Eucharist. But it draws us. And by some great holy mystery it holds us together.

Liturgy is plurality. Liturgy is communal by its very nature. And all throughout the Catholic liturgy we pray in the first person plural – the “Catholic we,” as I've heard it called. “We worship you ... we believe ... our Father ... have mercy on us.” This is not just about God and me. It's about God and all of us together. Even the “I confess,” a rare liturgical act in the singular, would make no sense at all without the community of faith being present. In that sense, it may actually be the most communal thing we ever say.

In all of this, I am amazed and humbled, sometimes frustrated, but always profoundly grateful to be a part of this “we,” this big tent, this crazy parade. It's been a wild ride so far – and it's far from over.

Julia Smucker is a Mennonite Catholic, or a Mennonite who has come into full communion with the Catholic Church, or a Catholic profoundly and gratefully shaped by her Mennonite heritage – take your pick. She regularly brings the various harmonies and dissonances of this bi-ecclesial identity into her coursework as a Master of Arts student at Saint John's School of Theology-Seminary, concentrating in Systematics.