About Being a Catholic

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I had better begin with some disclaimers. I am not confident of my ability to write adequately about the *justification* of being a Catholic now – this seems to have become far too complicated a problem: this issue, the sheer complexity of the problem, emerges again below, and I will have more to say about it there. Furthermore, I am certainly unable to say anything *original* about this or that disputed point in a theological or philosophical way. I hope then to proceed by working very carefully within my limits, at least as I conceive these to be, and to simply give here no "justification" but an account: an account of some aspects of what 'it feels like' for one man to be a Catholic now. Naturally, this will engage me in questions that look like issues of justification, but in so far as they are these I hope to steer clear of anything that could be called ambitious and theological (in any really exacting sense), and stick with what I can cope with – perhaps best described as a more subjective (or perhaps better: privately held rather than publicly held) account of how I (rather than we) find Catholicism to be meaningful and true.

There is of course more to the problem than this. It is not just the important question of my limitations: it is also the problem of the limitations of the time, as I have already indicated. About these I want to say here, that I try to deal with them by a now very un-novel 'method': 'These fragments I have shored against my ruins'. Juxtaposing and co-ordinating fragments of writings that have become personally important (and may even be of more extended appeal), I hope to be a fellow-traveller of those edging towards what might prove to be, (borrowing the terms of my favourite theologian), a space in which that '*claritas*, transparent radiance, which was Thomas's original and originating vision' might disclose itself once more, in however necessarily a fragmentary way. For we live in a fragmented world, characterised, perhaps, by others as the age of 'Missing Persons', or of 'The Disinherited Mind'. And so here I think it of value to give my account in this way, which is after all about the worlds of the "dream-murmur" that we all co-inspire, and "dream-murmurs" are perhaps inaccessible save by this web-weaving route.

It may already be clear from the foregoing references and hints of borrowed styles and stresses, who are the authors that I have in mind. Although I have made use and will make use of T. S. Eliot, my principals here are: Cornelius Ernst, O.P. David Jones and Heidegger. However inadequately I locate them side-by-side (the gaps are obvious, and are perhaps most important), a theme may

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link them and may, I hope, carry over to the sympathetic reader. One other writer will also be used, the critic Derek Traversi.

We live in a fragmented world: this widely acknowledged feature witnesses to the disruption of public views into 'private' and faltering speculations. Now for a Catholic it will be evident how tormenting a position he can find himself in: for he is the 'possessor' of a tradition that is powerful and all-demanding on certain fundamental matters, and yet he lives in a world transformed vis-à-vis the era for and in which the tradition was developed. The pain of the tension this produces is not easily grown into and assumed as a mature faith. I have found considerable resonances between this predicament that as Catholics we share, and the reflections of, say, T. S. Eliot and David Jones, who were similarly possessed of such a keen awareness of Tradition and simultaneously felt for the changed climate of our age's 'world'. In this respect it is pertinent to bear in mind the full force of Eliot's remark in his essay 'Tradition and the Individual Talent': 'Yet if the only form of tradition, of handing down, consisted in following the ways of the immediate generation before us in a blind or timid adherence to its successes, "tradition" should positively be discouraged. We have seen many such simple currents soon lost in the sand; and novelty is better than repetition. Tradition is a matter of much wider significance. It cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour. It involves, in the first place, the historical sense . . . a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence'.

If this sets before us, by an appeal to a common sense of what makes tradition Tradition, the stringency of the effort required of us too to rework our ground, Catholic Christianity, it seems also necessary to set the remark firmly within the horizons of our peculiar situation which is not "classical" at all. For before, 'the writer of a long "narrative" work in English . . . was able to assume that the laws which governed the telling of a story, and the purposes for which a story was told, were a matter for substantial agreement as between himself and his readers. . . . To come to the second and third decades of the present century is to contemplate a situation essentially different.' (Traversi: *T. S. Eliot, The Longer Poems.*) Traversi lists together as what was once formerly held "in common" (clearly, there was diversity: the question of degree though is surely the pertinent one here), beliefs about the nature of the universe, man's place in it, time, freedom of choice, "personality". A poet under these conditions 'was not called upon to create his own forms or to invent his own personal symbols to convey his sense of reality'. But now it is different: whereas before the interplay of received horizons and individual feelings could go on fairly equably, as represented for Eliot above all in Dante, now

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the poet is prevented from recourse to such an agreed "frame". Eliot could therefore only try a chosen frame, 'not assuming "truth" or "objective" validity of any kind as existing in the framework, but in readiness to wait to see whether, in the process of working out the original creative impulse, it would be found to *fit* and whether the sense of some unifying principle would emerge. . . . There was . . . no short cut to success in this endeavour. The reader, like the poet, could only tell if the poem constituted a unity, or had achieved form, at the end of the creative effort, after the poem itself had been experienced stage by stage and in its totality'. The test is in the match, or lack of frame and feelings: and this "shape" of the poem, if it is to come at all, can only emerge gradually, can only be achieved in the process of expression'. (All quotations here from Traversi, op. cit.).

I have to admit to some disquiet as to the frame – feelings distinction: but treating this as a metaphor, I think it is clear that there is a deep connection, one of real mutuality, between this experimental method used by Eliot and what I take to be a more realistic and fully adequate statement of the process as Theology must practise it, that Cornelius Ernst has given us. I have referred above to the creating of a space in which, we might now say, 'particular topics, above all particular historical situations, may be allowed to exhibit connections and continuities'. (All quotations from Cornelius Ernst O.P. come, unless otherwise stated, from *Multiple Echo*.) This process is an 'activity of self-understanding' ('every explicit Catholic life is a theology') a 'process by which from some preliminary, more or less implicit, understanding, some creative and constructive advance is made, in the course of which the one who understands is himself reconstituted as an identity, if only provisionally'. This view, if it says considerably more than Eliot's, is clearly similarly marked by the theme of testing: 'the process . . . is open', it has to be seen to be, to be capable of being experienced as, true. As Pannenberg has remarked, religious convincingness is the test by which all religions stand or fall.

Within the perspectives the foregoing suggest we can travel on, though we must be ready to recognise the elusive and description-defying nature of our subject. Our discussion will have, maddeningly, few fixed points, but hearteningly it has a firm centre: in particular, we can see as a proleptically realised expression in time of this centre a few key historical events, especially, of course, the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. In addition, we are trying to make an account of such a range of experience as, I think, a Christian life actually consists of, I think it will be more than usually evident how we should take seriously the idea that Reality is deserving of *poetic* expression (poetry here meaning something not narrowly defined: 'the concentration of multiple meanings' would

be a fine definition of what I intend it to mean here), and that *signs* are, as it were, the individual letters, words, motifs of the poem that a life thus makes. These condensed and pregnant remarks may both be explicated by and prepare the way for what follows.

I am stressing here then, both the need for and the experience of Catholicism now, as a praxis, a form of life, that is characterised by open-ness both to Tradition and to the contemporary world, and so also by the remaking of both Tradition and world in an act of mutual illumination that we call the Gospel. I return to this below, but here I think a few words about some poignant limitations our world imposes on us, could justifiably be thought to cast much light upon that final discussion as to some aspects of what being a Catholic now involves. In particular, I want to follow for a while the insight of contemporary man as a forgetter of his own being. Consider: 'We have nothing but dreams, and we have forgotten that seeing visions . . . was once a more significant, interesting, and disciplined kind of dreaming. We take it for granted that our dreams spring from below: possibly the quality of our dreams suffers in consequence'. 'It (the "Divine Pageant" of *Purgatorio*, XXIX) belongs to the world of what I call the high dream and the modern world seems capable only of the low dream'. (Eliot: *Dante*.) 'For nothing could surpass the "eccentricity" of the "normal" life and works of megalopolitan man today – and tomorrow. If the art of some men is abnormal it is because most men have been made so *sub*normal as to have no art to practise. No blame to them, it is the nature of our times, only it is well that this deprivation should be understood to be eccentric and not concentric in Man. We may be forced to accept the situation in the world of fact, but to accept it as normal is the final capitulation'. (David Jones: in *Epoch and Artist*). 'one day we shall learn to (re-) think our exhausted word for truth . . . Knowledge is remembrance of Being'. (Heidegger: 'The Anaximander Fragment', in *Early Greek Thinking*).

Perhaps we can gather together these "shards" by employing the perception common to Jones and to Heidegger of man as essentially poetic. Man 'is man-the-maker, and . . . *poiesis* his native and authentic mode of apperception and in the end his only mode;' 'the activity of art, far from being a branch activity, is truncal and . . . the tree of man, root, bole, branches and foliage, is involved, of its nature, in that activity'. (Jones: op. cit.). And it will be obvious to readers of either how much either is convinced of and concerned with the loss of this self-understanding, and the emergence of a view of man as an object among the other objects of a world shaped and structured by the effects and philosophies of technology and a degenerate political life. For myself I must agree: squeezed out between the dead weight of an irrelevant class-system,

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struggling to maintain its grip, and the aridity of the view of man generated by an inadequate sense of the nature of Science (especially the attendant tortures of the grim Objective-Subjective distinction, wholly incapable of adequately illuminating *human* life), it is with unspeakable relief and a refreshing of life-blood that I encounter Catholicism. I connect this reflection with what precedes by asserting, with Jones and Ernst that it is in the Christian praxis that man's poetic nature is supremely realised and receives its consecration.

Such remarks require, as I warned above, justifications of which I am only falteringly capable, if at all. "My case" will have here, if only for reasons of space, to rest on an appeal to notions and senses that may or may not be felt to be widely held. If the argument, such as it is, can be followed thus far, then I will set down next here this: 'the original genesis of meaning as constituting a human essence is an important clue: the nativity of the word, which is a very traditional notion'; and, 'Christianity assumes this universal experience of the new (the genesis of meaning) and gives it an uniquely new sense, a potentiated sense of the new'. (Ernst) If this summarises much of the preceding it also advances us in our thinking, and, together with the quotation given above from Heidegger, 'Knowledge is remembrance of Being', we might perhaps go forwards to pursue and to navigate a little further.

If man is he who 'makes things that are signs of something', (compare Schillebeeckx: 'We know reality only in signs', and knowing, the argument here implicitly declares, is to make something – be it works as various as a conversation or 'Ulysses'), then his centrally defining activity 'is making . . . (an) explicit sign . . . (a) showing forth, a re-presenting, a recalling'. *Anamnesis,* a particular kind of sign-making, a recalling of especial significance, is perhaps centrally important here: 'poetry is . . . an *anamnesis* of, i.e. an effective recalling of, something loved' (these quotations all come from Jones, op. cit.). Now as Christians we believe that 'in the *mysterion* of God's eternal purpose for man in Jesus Christ' (Ernst) certain events and signs are to be so loved, preserved and re-presented – whether in the Word, or in the Sacraments *in sensu strictu.* I lift from Ernst a piece itself from Dolle, Vol 1, p 66, n. 1 of the Sources Chretiennes edition of Leo's Sermons: 'the liturgical celebrations, while they recall the saving events of the Redeemer's life, make them really live again in their saving efficacy; they are "signs", *sacramenta,* which re-present for believers the acts which the Saviour has accomplished once for all'. Maurice de la Taille: 'He placed Himself in the order of signs'. We can say, as believers, that in certain fundamental events and actions, the Personal God we worship has made Himself present, disclosing Himself for all time and place as the One who is freely available for all, and to be

celebrated and re-presented in the *anamnesis* of these events. Catholicism has always recognised this sacramental, sign-making nature of man and has seen its Lord as one Who has entered thus into our reality.

Within this perspective Ernst has recalled us to the ontological depths of such *signa,* and has, I am sure, enabled many, and certainly has enabled me, to *consciously* share again together in 'communion in being'. Heidegger has recalled us to a deeper and enriched sense of the meaning of Truth: Knowledge is remembrance of Being. As Christians we are to step in this dance to characteristic rhythms, that derive from certain particular realisations of Being's Presencing to us. We too can say, though:

> All our heart's courage is the
> echoing response to the
> first call of Being which
> gathers our thinking into the
> play of the world.

(Heidegger: 'The Thinker as Poet' in *Poetry, Language, Thought.*) The sense of signs as the "stuff" of a life's poetry, of man as poetic, is constantly, in the fullness of its ontological depth, to be before us, for 'that we dwell unpoetically, and in what way, we can in any case learn only if we know the poetic'. 'Poetry first of all admits man's dwelling into its very nature, its presencing being. Poetry is the original admission of dwelling.' ' . . . Poetically man dwells . . .' (all here from the essay by Heidegger of this name).

It is then in the light thus cast on human nature, and the "mythic", rich, symbolic sense of all reality that, I am moved to say, Catholicism speaks, grounding all in 'an understanding of being' (Ernst: see pp. 66-67 of his *The Theology of Grace*). At least this is the way it appears to one Catholic who has found to his delight the proffering of a true vision of man and of Reality that overcomes and transforms the contemporary plight of Man who has forgotten the nature of his being, and of that of his world. But it is also surely clear that Catholicism has to "wear this Vision on its sleeve" (shake itself out of a torpor of degenerate theologies). We need to have the sense of life as poetic, for the lives we lead consist in their entire sum not of propositionally expressed truths, but of 'concentrations of multiple meanings': 'any vision of the world will have to provide for the simultaneous and successive manifestation of multiple worlds' (Ernst). And we are hereby returned to the earlier discussion of our culture's strange situation: the meeting of Catholic Tradition with the present age, thereby posed in all its intransigent and problematic form.

I think it must simply be accepted that the new sense for the richly heightened nuances of meaning in all its indefinite variety of forms, (and ultimately, therefore, for the variety of ways in which

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Being discloses itself), and perhaps especially in the face of the splendidly motivated historicist arguments of, picking three names *inter alia,* Kuhn, Foucault, Rorty, themselves immensely contributory to this renewed sense for the plurality of meaning, European Catholicism has had its self-identity painfully, if temporarily, dissolved or dispersed. Many voices replace the past's more generous sense of the one faith. This situation is deserving of serious and committed reflection, and one reason, as yet perhaps almost unspoken, why I have not tried to "justify" Catholicism is simply that when men like Ernst or Schillebeeckx are consumed with the sense of the sheer size and scope of the problem, then much, much lesser mortals should take the cue and not waste the time of their readers, especially in offering superficial consolations. It is not just Catholicism, of course, that is thus left somewhat unclad: for anyone even passingly acquainted with contemporary soul-searching in, for example, Philosophy or the Philosophy of Science, will be aware of how the dissolution is, as I have urged above, one of our culture as a whole.

It is the inspiring example of someone like Ernst that I am happy to be able to laud here. His profoundly articulated sense of God as the Meaning of meaning assists me greatly as I try, after my own fashion, to "do the Catholic thing": to make catholic this central event of God's dwelling, dying and rising amongst us. All the celebratory moments of genesis of meaning that variously order and re-order the meanings man gives the world are here, in exploratory and searching ways, tentatively and shiftingly arranged and ordered as histories of meaning. 'When we claim that 'Jesus is the Christ', we are claiming that the element "Jesus" can be picked out as the common element of various orders of meaning . . . he constitutes a fixed and a vanishing point, to which all other orders of meaning have to be referred'. And we are constantly on trial together with our faith: . . .'the thesis-statement 'Jesus is the Christ' only truly succeeds in unifying theology in so far as it succeeds in unifying the meaning of meaning'. Part of the defining feature of European Catholics now, lies in the experiencing of this tense drama: in poetic, because multiply meaningful, experiences of Reality we must yet, and indeed can only "play this game" by so doing, accept 'responsibility for a particular sequence of constructive historical moments, identified by a series of monuments of self-understanding. It involves then the acceptance by the individual theologian of membership of an identifiable society considered not only synchronistically but also diachronically . . . the theologian must accept as a defining condition of that responsibility the interpretative value of an identifiable sequence of human history, the figure in the carpet'. Relating the indefinitely various experiences of meaning to the self-disclosure of the Meaning of

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meaning in a life and its events and in certain key events associated with it, means the responsible use of the Tradition. This use must yet be radical: 'we have to ask what is the *meaning* of this historic succession of theologies . . . and we have to ask this question not within a presupposed perspective of any one of them, but ask it radically as part of *the* theological problem of the meaning of God and man for one another. . . . It is the ("ontological") meaning of (the) substantive meaning (the "ontic" answer given in Jesus Christ) we must continually search for without expecting any final answer.' 'It (meta-theology) would certainly involve the "destruction" of all previous theologies and their "recapitulation" in a history of meaning which is also a history of being'.

Man is a poetic creature living in a world requiring, because complex and various beyond all final statements, poetic interpretation. But in the Resurrection we have the supreme self-declaration of the God who is the originating source of all, an act of 'radical novelty' that transforms all human genesis of meaning into a new key. In the *anamnesis* of this transfiguring event, and in the *anamnesis* of the other signs of the deposit, fallen man, whose vocation it is to be concerned with the recovery of his adequate and proper dwelling in Being, finds himself anew and renewed. The regaining of his lost jointure, the loss and regaining of which so occupies Heidegger in his essay on the Anaximander fragment, of his well-fitting, his appropriate dwelling in Being, occurs, we can see, if we extend our range of thinking here by recalling, for example, as Jones has done for us, the early Welsh bards' self-designation 'carpenters of song', in the fitting together, trying and testing of the poem, the song that here can be said to occupy a lifetime, and whose outcome is never certain until the expression of it is finally finished – which means for us an awaiting of the eschaton. This, I suggest, is at least an authentic vision, to be sure requiring much filling in of details, of what a Catholic's life might in part be said to be.

I am sure that it can now be clearly seen why this has had to be an account and not a "Justification" in the ambitious sense: the Reality we are working with is too complex a thing for my tongue, and our agreed contemporary metaphors too few. We proceed by moving from *signa* to *signa,* touching the moments, the *sacramenta* of Real depth, and speaking to each other of our experiences. These things 'partake in some sense, however difficult to posit, of that juxtaposing by which what was *inanis et vacua* became radiant with form and abhorrent of vacua by the action of the Artifex, the Logos, who is known to our traditions as the Pontifex who formed a bridge "from nothing" and who then, like Bran in the *Mabinogion,* himself became the bridge by the Incarnation and Passion and subsequent Apotheosis'. (David Jones, op. cit.).

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