

Widening Our Circle, Or, What Catholics Can Teach Us About Being Good Humanists

Dr. Matthew J. Cressler, Unitarian Church in Charleston

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Opening Words: “In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness....

“This sense of liberation from an illusory difference was such a relief and such a joy to me that I almost laughed out loud. And I supposed my happiness could have taken form in the words ‘Thank God, thank God that I *am* like other [human beings], that I am only [one human being] among many others.’...

“It is a glorious destiny to be a member of the human race, though it is a race dedicated to many absurdities and one which makes many terrible mistakes: yet, with all that, God [...] gloried in becoming a member of the human race. A member of the human race! To think that such a commonplace realization should suddenly seem like news that one holds the winning ticket in a cosmic sweepstake.

“I have the immense joy of being [*human*], a member of a race in which God [...] became incarnate. As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm me, now I realize what we all are. And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun.”

Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (1966)

Sermon: I want to begin by posing a question for us to consider, one I’ll return to at the end. It is a question that has, to my mind, been circulating through a few of the services of late and one that fits well with the moment we find ourselves in as a congregation. Here it is:

We want to widen our circle as a community, but are we willing to risk being changed in the process? We want to widen our circle, but are we willing to be changed?

Thank you Allison, Hillary and thank you to the entire Worship Committee for inviting me to speak. I’m truly humbled to be here. Thank you Rick for such beautiful music (again and as always). Thank you, all of you, for being here with me this morning. Thank you for welcoming me and my family into this community over the past three years. I feel blessed to be in the company of humanists, by which I mean, nothing more and certainly nothing less than human beings concerned with and committed to the well-being and dignity of all other human beings. This particular place, these particular people – **you** – have given me the space to grow in my humanism, which I have only begun to name as such over the past few years.

Thank you for this gift. It is the gift of a humanism named in our first three Principles:

The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
Justice, equity and compassion in all human relations;
Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations.

Now, I have to confess, I remember the first time I heard these Principles. I was a young (or, at least, young-*er*) Catholic man in the early days of dating a beautiful, red-headed Unitarian. I remember her reciting the Principles to me on a plane ride. And I remember responding...shall we say...a bit indignantly? I responded with something along the lines of “Ummmmm, okay. Sure. But I am a Catholic and I believe in all those things.” Though I didn’t put it quite this way then, what I might have said is that this *is* what my Catholicism looks like when it is *lived*. I am a humanist not despite my but *because of my* Catholicism. And now, a little over a decade later, here I am. A bona fide Catholic humanist member of a Unitarian church (which, believe you me, is quite a mouthful when I try to tell people what church I go to).

Now, I realize that this is far (faaaaaaar) from the perspective and experience of all Catholics. (#NotAllCatholics) And I recognize that Unitarian churches here and across the country serve as spiritual safe havens for a lot of people, including those who consider themselves “recovering Catholics.” I cannot and do not claim to speak for all (or even most) Catholics. (Though, I’d also add that I am by no means alone in what I am going to say today). All I hope to do as I stand here before you is share some of the gifts I’ve been given by my Catholic tradition in the hopes of offering some lessons from one humanist tradition to another. And for those of us who have been hurt, marginalized, oppressed, or enraged by Catholics and the Catholic Church, I can say, truthfully, that even as a self-identified “practicing” Catholic, I consider myself in your company. This morning I’d like to invite you to see the Catholic tradition anew, from an angle askew.

I want to bring us back to our opening words for the day. What I read was a selection from Thomas Merton’s 1965 book with the brilliant name *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*. I imagine a good many of you may have heard of Merton. He has been quoted in this church. He is often described as among the foremost spiritual writers of the twentieth century. He popularized contemplative spirituality and introduced many Americans to Thich Nhat Hanh’s brand of Zen Buddhism. He was also a Catholic. And not, like, a “Catholic.” Thomas Merton was suuuuuuuuuuper Catholic. He was a priest—known, to other Catholics, as Father Merton. I’m talking a wake-up-for-prayers-at-5AM, has-a-personal-confessor, Mass-every-damn-day kinda Catholic. One that didn’t just convert to Catholicism but joined a Trappist monastery.

Our opening words were excerpted from his now famous retelling of a mystical experience he had at the corner of 4th and Walnut in Louisville, Kentucky (which, by the way, you could read about on a historical marker if you were to visit that intersection in downtown Louisville). What Merton offers us in this excerpt is the radical root foundation of a Catholic humanism.

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“I have the immense joy of being [*human*], a member of a race in which God [...] became incarnate. As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm me, now I realize what we all are. And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun.”

Catholic humanism comes from the ground of God becoming human. Incarnate. Literally, ***into flesh, made flesh***. This is, of course, the core claim of Christianity, writ large. But for Merton and other Catholic humanists, the script is flipped. The incarnation of God, for them and for me, tells us as much about humanity as it does about God. Maybe even more so! Flesh, made divine. Human, made god. To cite the Merton quote printed in your Order of Service, it is the radical recognition that we are all already one. That what we have to be is what we are already, but have only forgotten. Dignity. Love. Unity.

The Catholic tradition gifts us a particular ***kind*** of humanism. It is not the sole province of Catholics by any means. But it ***is*** the humanism that led Francis to physically embrace the man suffering with leprosy, that led Dorothy Day not to advocate on the behalf of the poor but to dwell among them, that led the second-century saint Irenaeus to proclaim that “the glory of God is in the human person fully alive!” It is an incarnate humanism, an in-the-flesh kind of humanism that calls us—compels us!—to embrace fellow human beings. (Literally. Like, with hugs, y’all.) It is a live-with-you, laugh-with-you, bleed-and-sweat-and-cry-with-you kind of humanism. The kind that famously (or, maybe, infamously) throws water in your face and swings scented smoke across the space to awaken you to your senses, your body, and the bodies around you. (Don’t worry, I left my holy water at home.) It is the kind of humanism that climbs trees and scales buildings to protest the destruction of our planet, the kind that’s bringing people into the streets as we speak to stand against the “alt-right” white supremacists gathering in D.C., one year after Heather Heyer’s murder in Charlottesville, Virginia. It is a humanism that demands that we feed the hungry, shelter the homeless, liberate the oppressed and imprisoned with our own hands and feet and bodies and souls! One that calls us out of our comfort zone and into the in-fleshed world in all its glory (and absurdity and divinity and stupidity).

All this, at last, brings us back to where we began. We want to widen our circle, but are we willing to risk being changed in the process? I’m not sure if you picked up on it the first time, but in that same story Thomas Merton confesses that, in his own isolated life as a Catholic monk, he had deluded himself into a sense of his own superiority. “It was like waking from a dream of separateness,” he writes, waking from a dream “of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness....This sense of liberation from an illusory difference was such a relief and such a joy to me that I almost laughed out loud.”

I think, if we're honest with ourselves, we might admit that it's not just Catholic monks who think that they can lay exclusive claims to holiness. Widening our circle will involve acknowledging that we, members of this church, Unitarian Universalists and the crews we roll with, do not hold an exclusive claim to liberal religion, to humanism, to justice. It invites us to a humility that says we may even have things we can learn from other traditions that can help us be better humanists. Even (*dare I say*), Catholics! We can fool ourselves into thinking that we can lay exclusive claim to the progressive, the inclusive, the dignified, the just, the humane. Or, we can wake up from the dream of a separate, holy humanist existence and risk being changed by the others we embrace.

I want to close by paraphrasing another quote from Merton, this one from his "Letters to a White Liberal." Echoing James Baldwin and written in 1964, in the midst of the still segregated South, Merton wrote "If African Americans, as they actually are (not the 'ideal' and theoretical African American, but actual human beings), enter wholly into American society, then *that society is going to be radically changed*....this truth does not justify a conservative conclusion which clings blindly to the present impossible state of things. Instead, it calls us to change. We must dare to pay the dolorous price of change, *to grow into a new society*. Nothing else will suffice!" We, here in this community, want to widen our circle. If we succeed, that community will change. It will, and it must. But this is okay. All will be well. Because we are already one.

May it be so...and Amen.