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Forum: The Catholic Intellectual Tradition. The Many Ways of Being Catholic

Eduardo C. Fernandez, S.J.

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knowledge of the truth. This carries both assets and liabilities. Hence the extreme importance of Liddy's invocation of historical consciousness. The Catholic quest for objective truth is framed and protected by Catholicism's global institutional structure; the requirement of basic doctrinal coherence or "orthodoxy;" and, at the moral or ethical level, the premise that all humans share in common some basic experiences, values, and obligations. A virtue of the Catholic intellectual tradition is resistance to reducing truth to power, and to thoroughgoing relativism regarding human dignity and social justice. It also sets parameters for expressing the truths of creation, the incarnation, the Trinity, and the continuing presence of Christ's Spirit in the church.

But the limits and even vices of this grand tradition must be put on the table. Too often Catholicism has

denied that "traditional" formulations of truth must be revised or rejected, and that general truths can take very different concrete shapes. "The Catholic intellectual tradition" is infected by elitism, exclusivism, and a Eurocentric bias. In fact, the same can be said of Catholic morality, politics, art, and liturgy. Diverse, emerging expressions of Catholicism do not just receive Western "communications"; they interrupt them, challenge them, and reconfigure the tradition. As Liddy insists, "The Catholic intellectual tradition is not a closed 'canon' of Western works only." Openings include feminist theology, liberation theology, and Catholic theologies from Latin America, Asia, and Africa. And all of these quests for intellectual understanding and truth are interactive with their own specific takes on moral and political goodness, artistic beauty, and divine worship.

Recently Boston College art historian Pamela Berger presented research on the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem at the Boisi Center for Religion and Public Life. Her aim was to understand the history of this Muslim temple as a site of worship by Muslims, Jews, and Christians over the ages, and particularly of past simultaneous use by Jews and Muslims. She drew on art, iconography, liturgical artifacts, religious texts, and historical scholarship; her thesis has clear political consequences. Her scholarship exemplifies the intellectual, moral, aesthetic, and religious cross-fertilization possible in today's Catholic university, with its new global and inter-religious vista. ■

Lisa Soule Cabill is the J. Donald Monan, S.J., professor of theology at Boston College.

THE MANY WAYS OF BEING CATHOLIC

Eduardo C. Fernández, S.J.

Every year during our intersession, we take our first year masters of divinity students to Mexico City for about a ten day cultural immersion. One of our aims in doing so is to help them learn how to do common theological reflection. Easier said than done! While social analysis, one of its important components, cannot be done without taking into account the cultural, economic, political, and religious aspects of a culture, how do you impress upon students the value of doing it *in situ*? What becomes especially challenging is integrating the more abstract, theoretical dis-

coveries with the experiential ones, whether those which are the fruit of personal encounters with the people of the country, for example, by staying in poor people's homes, engaging in conversation on panels, or by being exposed to their cultural heritage by going on pilgrimage to a shrine dear to them, visiting a museum or an archeological site, or attending an artistic performance.

This was the experience of a Vietnamese American student, someone who himself had come to the U.S. as a boat person, when, after witnessing an amazingly colorful, choreographed folk dance at the national *Bellas Artes* theater, remarked, "Now I get this culture!"

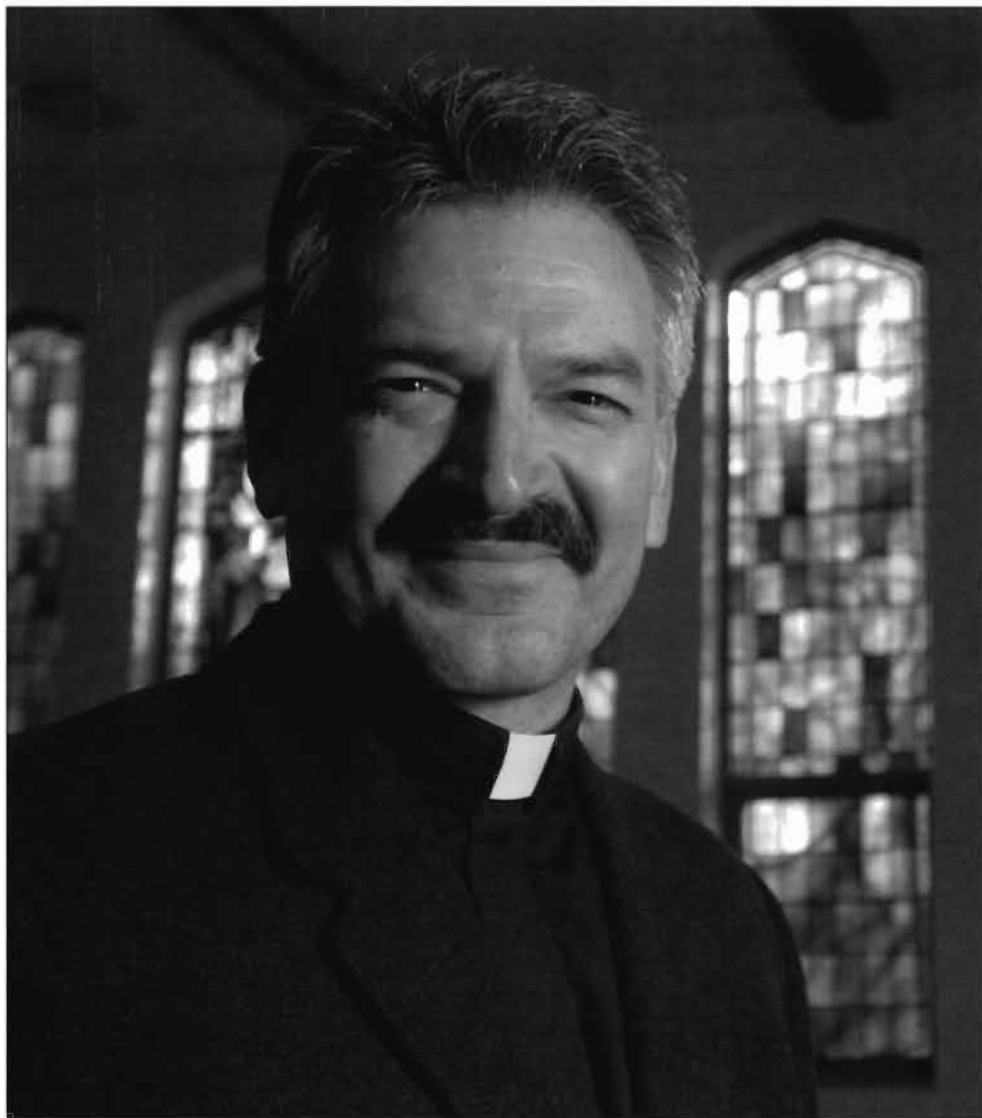
A few hours spent witnessing a distillation of Indigenous, European, and African cultural threads woven together over the course of centuries through dance had been the key, an experiential key, to entering a new cultural world.

One of the most appealing aspects of Richard M. Liddy's essay is that he does not ignore the more artistic, lived experiential aspect of the Catholic intellectual tradition. As the example above with the Vietnamese American student illustrates, there are many ways of knowing. In fact, by hearing a little bit of Liddy's own story, we get a glimpse of how lived Catholicism has influenced him, more specifical-

ly, how he, along with his understanding of the tradition, moved from a more static, classicist notion to a more vibrant, historically conscious, evolving one. I am reminded of my colleague Alex García-Rivera's insistence that all the little stories find their place in the big one, that is, the Christ event. By sharing some of his story with us, Liddy elicits our own stories, for one story invites another.

Another appealing aspect of Liddy's essay is his focus on the person of Jesus. At times we can forget the power of symbol, especially in a culture which is often oversaturated with visual images. But this was not always so, and, as art history reminds us, for centuries people slowly contemplated sacred images or prayed in buildings especially designed to help them enter into the mystery of God's presence. I was reminded of the power of these sacred images when I recently listened to a friend from El Salvador, who fled the war-torn country with her family in the late 80s, telling me about the heaviness she felt in her heart, one provoked by family problems, when she entered the Oakland Cathedral for a diaconal ordination. But as the liturgy progressed, and as she contemplated the massive image inspired by the Christ in Chartres cathedral above the main entrance, she felt God's comforting presence descend upon her. This depiction of Christ present in Word and Sacrament, became very real for her, as real as it has been for believers throughout the centuries, thus becoming, in fact, a gateway to the Sacred.

Reading Liddy's finely articulated composition has left me with some questions in regards to my own attempts to further the current dialogue of faith and culture. Since the wisdom of Catholicism is not static but rather dynamic and vivacious as it is lived throughout the world, what can we Westerners learn from newer religious Christian communities in other parts of the



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world, or even within our diverse U.S. communities? Experiencing the vibrancy of the African American church in the United States or hearing about the lived experience of the church in Africa, for example, I suspect that its gifts to the wider church are just unfolding. Is there not more than one way of being Catholic?

In the same vein, how much do our Latin American Catholic traditions get ignored either because they are seen as connected to Europe and therefore "colonized" or because we are ignorant of their African or Indigenous strands? In the current interest in popular piety, for exam-

ple, might we be witnessing a recovery of some medieval forms of Catholicism which have been judged as being irrelevant and archaic? Could it be that sometimes our modern walk-a-thons echo an ancient form of pilgrimage, our films reveal newer versions of miracle plays, and our museums quickly become our new cathedrals where we encounter the Sacred on a Sunday afternoon? ■

Eduardo C. Fernández, S.J. is associate professor of pastoral theology and ministry at the Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley, California.