

THE CATHOLIC MIND

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It is always risky to speak of the mind-set of collectivities, whether it be that of a race, ethnic or religious group, but sociologically such a concept is definable. Just as every individual possesses a conscience, every group possesses a cast-of-mind, or vision of the world; it is one that reflects its collective experience. That is why students of Eastern civilization can speak with authority of the Japanese mind and how it differs from its Asian cousins and Western counterparts. The same is true of religious groups.

Catholics are no more monolithic than any other group, but they nonetheless carry with them a psychology that is culturally derived. Mind-sets are not permanent fixtures, rather they are set in motion by history, thereby reflecting, as well as accounting for, change. Consider the Catholic mind and how it has changed, especially with regards to the experience of anti-Catholicism.

Until the latter part of the nineteenth century, the most predominant ethnic stock of Catholic derivation was the Irish. Enslaved by the English, more Irish died proportionately on board the slave ships than the Africans; this was due to the fact that there was no provision for Irish slavery in the New World, thus the lives of Irishmen were more expendable. Once they reached the shores of North America, the Irish were once again treated as outcasts.

It was not just the ethnicity of the Irish that the English despised, it was the religion that marked these stubborn people. Catholicism was the religion of papists, those utterly undemocratic worshippers who did not fit into the modern world. They had to be culturally tamed or, failing that, socially dumped. They were dumped.

It is easy to understand why the Irish embraced a defensive mind-set: for a very long time, they had only one leg in this country, the other being left on the boat. Their experience at the hands of bigots was later shared by Italians, Poles and other Catholics. Unavoidably, this resulted in a psychologically marginalized population, one that made most Catholics feel as if they were visitors in someone else's land. But they nonetheless persisted in fighting back, establishing their own schools, hospitals and voluntary associations. Thus the failure to integrate was not accompanied by a failure to participate—it is just that Catholics erected a parallel culture.

By the time the twentieth century was half over, the struggle for status and acceptability had mostly been won. No longer barred from Ivy League schools and senior business opportunities, Catholics had made it. Their religion was no longer a handicap to assimilation, and in 1960 one of their own had been elected President of the United States.

Unfortunately, the decline in anti-Catholicism that most Catholics experienced was not something that the Church itself experienced. The cultural upheaval of the 1960s took direct aim at any institution that taught the virtue of restraint, and that certainly meant the Catholic Church. Now that the counter-revolution of the 1960s has become the dominant culture of the 1990s, the war against the Church continues, without abatement. Only this time the troops—meaning the faithful—have gotten fat and lazy.

The quest for assimilation costs. That is one lesson most Catholics have not learned. Preoccupied with Sunday-morning soccer games and the need to be liked, Catholics have found that as long as they are doing well, it is not their problem if the Church—or the Office of the Presidency, for that matter—comes under attack. They would rather go-along so they can get-along. Hence their contemptible tolerance for anti-Catholicism.

Today's Catholic mind is everywhere in evidence. To begin with, anti-Catholicism actually has to be pointed out to most Catholics these days, something that previous generations never encountered (they didn't need instructors). Once introduced to the bigotry, we are typically told to lighten up. Worse, we are told not to rock the boat, or that the best strategy is simply to wait it out. Keep ducking, they advise.

These Catholics are psychologically disabled. Embarrassed by the hard-line approach of the Catholic League, they would rather succumb to the culture than challenge it, even if it means that their Church gets trashed mercilessly in public. They may not like the cultural bullies of our day but they like less the thought of confronting them, and this explains their preference for dialogue. We'd rather defeat them.

One of the residual effects of the Catholic League is to embolden Catholics by providing leadership. The good news is that we are witnessing an evolution in the Catholic mind-set: there is growing evidence that Catholics are waking from their slumber. And with that reawakening comes a new posture, one that seeks to change the culture, and not melt into it. Our day is coming, that's for sure.