

The church transplanted to a new culture can live in a way that fits that particular new culture without losing its own identity, just as yeast does not sacrifice its own identity.

Yeast: A Parable for Catholic Higher Education

By WALTER J. ONG

IT IS COMMON knowledge that the problem of pluralism today increasingly haunts Catholic institutions of higher education, that is, colleges and universities founded under specifically Catholic auspices and now having to redesign themselves in our present educational world. We think particularly of such institutions in the United States, where they have existed in far higher proportion than in any other part of the world. But the problem is worldwide.

In the forefront are such matters as faculties that include many members who are not Catholic, student bodies equally diversified in their religious commitments or lack thereof, questions of academic freedom and, to cap it all, the clear desire of Catholic institutions of higher education to open themselves to persons and points of view other than exclusively Catholic while maintaining a genuine Catholic identity. To this should be added a new awareness of the flexibility of Catholic teachings that many had earlier said were inflexible.

This awareness of flexibility developed widely over the past hundred years or so with the massive growth of knowledge in all fields, scientific and humanistic, creating new sensitivity to the fact that Jesus lived in a historical world and founded His church in a describable historical context. He thereby necessarily designed it for some kind of continuing development through history in the various and developing cultures across the world so as for it to realize its Catholicity. Thus "inculturation," in the sense of the rooting of the church in the distinctive features of real value in a given culture, is a significantly established and operational term today.

There is no easy answer to problems raised by our necessary pluralism. Solutions have to be worked out as we come to understand better the Catholic Church and

WALTER J. ONG, S.J., is Emeritus Professor of Humanities of St. Louis University.

the forces the church is called on to work with. Many models have been proposed for thinking about the church and, by implication, about the Catholic identity of Catholic universities and colleges. I should like simply to advance for consideration a way of thinking about this identity that, to the best of my knowledge, has not heretofore been made use of. It is not a cure-all, but may be a help. It consists in a more thorough examination of the concept of "Catholic" itself and of reflection on a Gospel parable in connection with the Catholic institutions of higher learning.

"Catholic" is commonly said to mean "universal," a term from the Latin *universalis*. The equation is not quite exact. If "universal" is the adequate meaning of "catholic," why did the Latin church, which in its vernacular language had the word *universalis*, not use this word but rather borrowed from Greek the term *katholikos* instead, speaking of the "one, holy, catholic and apostolic church" (to put it into English) instead of the "one, holy, universal and apostolic Church"? The etymological history of *universalis* is not in every detail clear, but it certainly involves the concepts of *unum*, "one," and *vertere*, "turn." It suggests using a compass to make a circle around a central point. It is an inclusive concept in the sense that the circle includes everything within it. But by the same token it also excludes everything outside it. *Universalis* contains a subtle note of negativity. *Katholikos* does not. It is more unequivocally positive. It means simply "through-the-whole" or "throughout-the-whole"—*kata* or *kath*, through or throughout; *holos*, whole, from the same Indo-European root as our English "whole."

PERHAPS *katholikos* was favored by the Latin (as well as by the Greek) church because it resonated so well with Jesus' parable in Mt. 13:33 (echoed in Lk. 13:21): "The reign of God is like yeast which a woman took and kneaded into three measures of flour. Eventually the whole mass of dough began to rise." Yeast is a plant, a fungus, something that grows with no particular limits to its borders. If the mass of dough is added to, the yeast

grows into the added portion. Understood as Catholic in terms of this parable, the Kingdom or the church is a limitless, growing reality, destined ultimately to be present everywhere and to affect everything, though by no means to convert everything into itself. Yeast acts on dough, but it does not convert all the dough into yeast, nor is it able to do so or meant to do so.

Living yeast corresponds to what the Catholic Church has really been, for the Catholic Church has in fact never been at all definitively "universal" in the sense that it has actually included all parts of the human race or even anywhere near the greater part of the human race. But if it has never been by any means "universal" in such a sense, it is certainly "catholic" in the sense that it has always been in one place or another growing, spreading into new dough, in accord with the parable of the yeast. Of recent years, it has become more widespread than ever before, geographically and culturally. It is, in fact, more through-the-whole of humanity across the face of the globe today than in any earlier age of history. The variety of the faces representing the church at the Second Vatican Council made this evident. No longer is it possible to say, as Hilaire Belloc once did, "The church is Europe, Europe is the church." This is inclusivist-exclusivist universalism with a vengeance, a statement that, it appears to me, is de facto un-Christian, although I am sure not with any conscious intent.

Many of Jesus' parables—just as, quite commonly, other parables—are multiple in signification. There are complex meanings implied here in this one, although the commentaries that I have examined often develop any implications of the parable at best only minimally. In his *Models of the Church*, Avery Dulles gives it more attention than most commentators, classing it briefly with other "botanical models" of the church that show, for example, the church's "capacity of rapid expansion," as this parable surely does. For his purposes, he had no occasion for pushing analysis of the parable of the yeast further.

BUT HERE I AM CONCERNED with pushing it further for an admittedly specialized reason—because of the particular value the parable seems to have in bringing out the usefulness of the concept of "catholic," more exhaustively understood, in treating problems of pluralism in Catholic institutions of higher education today. The applications that suggest themselves here do not apply perfectly—Father Dulles notes, quite appositely, that parables all have obvious applicational limits—but this particular parable can apparently give us some better conceptual hold on certain elements in the problems of pluralism that we face in Catholic institutions of higher education. Admittedly, in emerging only now, this fuller relevance of the parable shows itself belatedly, but certain relevancies in Jesus' saying can make themselves known only in ages later than Jesus' own age.

The word of God has fertility for the future as well as for the time in which it is first uttered.

The parable of the yeast can show more than the church's capacity for natural expansion. Yeast not only grows quickly but also nourishes itself on the dough in which it grows. This suggests that the church should build into itself the cultures or mixtures of cultures in which it finds itself. A Catholic higher educational institution should build into its tradition what those who happen not to be Catholic have to offer that fits its tradi-

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tion and what it might otherwise not know at all. The church does not have from the start everything it will later become, any more than the yeast does, other than the church's own principle of life, which is no less than Jesus Christ Himself, who lived as a visible human being in a culture or mixture of cultures quite other than any in the world today and whose Mystical Body, the church, must be inculturated now in today's world and in the world of the future, nourished on today's and tomorrow's kinds of food.

If, however, yeast nourishes itself on the dough in which it is placed, it does not do so in such a way as to spoil the dough—not from the human point of view, certainly. It makes the dough more usable, more nourishing. It not only grows in what it feeds on, but it also improves what it feeds on and makes it possible for others to feed on it as well as on itself, the yeast. The Catholic Church is not out to confront and destroy the cultures it is set in or due to encounter, but to interpenetrate these cultures, and not only on its own terms, but interactively. Yeast grows in different sorts of dough—white, whole wheat, rye and so on, not converting one sort of these doughs into any of the others. Moreover, any dough with yeast growing in it can be added to a completely different batch of dough, and the yeast will act on the new batch in accord with the way the new batch is constituted (white dough, whole wheat, rye, whatever): The church transplanted from any given culture to a new culture can live in a way that fits that particular new culture without losing its own identity, just as in doing its work of leavening, yeast does not sacrifice its own identity but remains growing yeast.

In every case, in accordance with Jesus' parable, the dough gains value from the yeast (the Kingdom, the Catholic Church) and, at the same time, the yeast (the

Kingdom, the Catholic Church) gains. It nourishes itself on the dough, comes to a realization of new potentialities (which includes a better understanding of itself), and in all cases, at least we can hope, both yeast and dough work for the good of human beings.

WHAT ARE SOME of the ways in which the parable of the yeast might help in conceiving of religious pluralism in Catholic institutions of higher education today? We can consider here only a few sample applications.

1) *The faith and academic subjects.* In a Catholic college or university, the yeast—the Kingdom in the sense of the Catholic faith—is constantly being brought into contact with new materials. These include materials in philosophy, the other humanities, the sciences and all the rest of developing human knowledge, as well as in its own special ways, theology itself.

Here there is no question of indoctrinating disciplines that are themselves separate from the faith, but of interacting with them as each requires—in patterns that have to be worked out over time, as the interacting takes place. The ferment of the yeast, the Kingdom in the sense of the church and the church's faith, will work in different ways, not all of which are by any means predictable now. At times it may have no immediate grounds for interacting at all. At times, new grounds will arise: Modern

high technology has made ecology a new massive Catholic theological and practical pastoral problem, as it hardly was before.

From its beginning, Catholic teaching has learned by contact with what is not itself and even what is opposed to itself. For example, St. Augustine and many others learned from pagan rhetoric, the most pervasive of all branches of learning in the West as well as in the Middle East over centuries. St. Thomas Aquinas learned from the pagan Aristotle—and met massive resistance for his use of this pagan author, who, moreover, was mediated to the Latin West through Muslims, Arabs and others. In our own day, Catholic teaching has learned from certain kinds of existentialism and especially from personalist philosophy. One of personalism's most ardent proponents was Jewish, Martin Buber, whose book *I and Thou* is a cardinal personalist text. Personalism has had its effects on Catholic teaching—notably in the writings and talks of Pope John Paul II. The yeast of the Kingdom has been expanding through vast new batches of dough over the centuries and will continue to do so even more radically in our computer and information age and in other ages to come.

2) *The relationship of the faith and the faculty, Catholic and other.* With regard to the faculty as individual persons, we could hope that the action of the faith, seen as
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Catholic in the sense we have been employing here, would grow within the lives of individual faculty members, in whatever way and at whatever rate the individual finds herself or himself adapted to such growth. Presumably, having aligned herself or himself with an openly Catholic university, a person who is not Catholic is willing to live somehow in contact with the yeast of faith.

But this does not of itself mean commitment to letting the faith permeate and transform his or her whole life, as it would, or should, the life of a professed Catholic. In cases of individual non-Catholics, the action of the yeast might mean ultimately such total commitment. Whether it does or not is an entirely personal matter under divine grace. Catholic institutions of higher learning have had hundreds and more utterly loyal faculty members of other faiths or of no faith at all who have lived comfortably and happily in the Catholic context for

most or all of their academic careers, not feeling imposed on. The Catholic faith wants to be interactive where interaction is feasible and called for, not where it is unwelcome.

3) *The relationship of the faith and the students.* Today the college or university is no longer felt, as it used to be several generations ago, in Catholic or other religious circles or in secular circles, as an institution functioning *in loco parentum*, as set up so as to act in the place of the students' parents in relation to the students themselves (many of whom today are in fact adults, married, with children and, even occasionally, grandchildren). The Catholic college or university retains many responsibilities to its students, some of them even enlarged responsibilities, religious and moral as well as intellectual, although they are framed rather differently now. Catholic colleges and universities must continue to foreground issues of faith and religion as part of their mission. Courses in Catholic theology, incorporating and commenting on the church's teaching, and courses on the teachings of other religions, are to be available in Catholic universities and colleges. In core curricula a certain number of such courses will be required normally of all students, if only to avoid ignorance of the massive religious dimensions of human life throughout history. Students not professing the Catholic faith need not elect specifically Catholic theology courses.

4) *Cosmology.* If the Catholic faith is viewed as yeast, as something designed to grow through human consciousness under grace into more and more of God's creation, Catholic institutions of higher education are desperately in need of every sort of knowledge available to fulfill their Catholic mission. One of the points at which this need, and the question of pluralism at present haunting Catholic education, can be examined fruitfully regards cosmology. "In the beginning... God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1). Catholic teaching is ineradicably involved with cosmology, with study of the universe that God has created, for everything that exists, save for God Himself, is the creation of God, something of His. Today we know inestimably more about what this creation was than the human authors of Genesis or any of their contemporaries could know. The dough in which the yeast of the Kingdom is planted is an immeasurably greater mass of immeasurably greater age than we used to think. Does this knowledge that we

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now have show practically in Catholic life—that is, in such things as our pastoral, homiletic and devotional life?

When we think of God as creator of the world or universe, at least in our pastoral (including liturgical), homiletic and devotional life, it appears that we are still most likely to think of the world pretty much in archaic terms. What we see around us is accommodated directly to the ordinary human senses and imagination, that is, the visible earth and what surrounds it, the sun and moon and planets and stars as they appear to the unaided eye, a world full of beauty and wonder, but constituting not one billionth of what everyone now knows the universe that God created really is (though we do not know all of it perfectly, for our knowledge is still growing). It is a universe some 14 billion years old, with billions of galaxies each containing billions of stars more or less the size of our sun, a universe that has had to undergo massive evolution to reach the point where the existence of human beings was even possible. It took billions of years for God's material creation to organize itself and in places cool down enough for DNA to exist so that life could be possible, for DNA furnishes building blocks of living organisms. Humanity is not DNA, but without DNA there could be no human life, involving nonmaterial human consciousness. Although responsible calculations still vary somewhat, humanity, ourselves, *homo sapiens*, is quite possibly some 350,000 years old. Since the appearance of *homo sapiens* and the consciousness with which humanity is endowed, God's creation has matured painstakingly but with growing acceleration through the invention of writing, print, computers and the changes in thought processes and thought management that these technologies of the word have involved. The changes have resulted in our vast humanistic studies, enriched today immeasurably beyond such studies in earlier ages.

God's creation has matured in our vast information culture with its concomitant interpretation culture, in which the interrelationships of everything—intellectual, sociological, political, scientific, philosophical, religious, psychological and so on without end—are investigated, if not always successfully, certainly with an intricate sophistication and depth impossible in earlier generations. When we think of God's creation in the ordinary context of faith, do we effectively advert to this creation of His for what we know it is—a creation that has

as part of itself depth psychology, robots, space shuttles, trips to the moon?

There have been some beginnings in relating the faith to the known fullness of God's creation. One thinks of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, whose work was pioneering and remains invaluable, but who is now no longer entirely up-to-date. Ecology has become a theological issue, as we become increasingly aware of human beings' growing responsibility for God's creation around us. Anthropocentric thinking has made us consider how the universe we know from science appears somehow constituted from the beginning—the "big bang" that many postulate—to build up a world able to sustain humanity. But most of this work and other related work has not affected our devotional, liturgical, homiletic and pastoral way of life, where the archaic visions of creation seem to linger. Paul tells us (Rom. 1:20) that we learn of God's grandeur from "the things He has made." But now that we have found out so much more about what these things really are, in our actual living of the faith we have yet to learn from them. We need to bring present knowledge of the actual universe to bear on such things as our thinking of God's creative act, of the life and life expectancy of the church, of eschatological time, of the Incarnation and the Second Coming, and so much else.

The yeast that is the Kingdom has a great deal to engage itself with here. And on what terrain more promising than that of Catholic institutions of higher education? The urgency that they be continued and strengthened is greater than ever before.

Moreover, this undertaking to engage the faith in God's real world would seem to demand pluralism. We cannot expect to draw from purely Catholic sources the knowledge we need for this vast enterprise. If the Catholic faith, the yeast, is to penetrate all of God's creation, we need the collaboration of all the knowledgeable people we can relate to. In a universe some 14 billion years old, the church is very, very young. We need to look back to the real perspectives of the past to see how young we really are. Our work of understanding the relationship of the faith to the world is possibly the major devotional and pastoral and homiletic task of the years ahead, as well as a major task in other areas of theology. Fortunately, our faith is future-oriented. We have never felt called to get back to the Garden of Eden but to look to the future coming of Christ. The Catholic intellectual life that lies ahead is one we can welcome. ■



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