

Developments in the RCA #2: What's the Issue?

In the previous 1-pager, I outlined the options being considered for the RCA's future and then a page on our church order. The options being considered are all about the church order and polity, and remarkably not about theology, how we read Scripture or worship. In this 1-pager I'll outline what I think has become the actual challenge. On the one hand, it appears that the issue we are arguing about is about sexual ethics in general and more particularly same-sex relationships. While this is important (and it is), the decisions of the last few General Synod have made the presenting issue into a deeper crisis that undermines much hope to move forward together. Many are losing patience in our church order and have acted in ways that undermine the catholicity of the church in the RCA. Catholicity might seem like a nice idea, aloof from any practical faith. But it is the ground on which a Christian walks. Without it our faith becomes is flimsy and captive to our own whims.

What is catholicity anyway? It is not being Roman Catholic. We say in the Apostles' Creed *I believe in Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church...* Being catholic means we are a part of the universal Church. The Church is universal in both space (worldwide) and time (from all eternity and down through history). Christianity claims that the truth of Jesus Christ is not one truth among many, but the Truth, true for all time and places. It's true today as it was true for creation on day one. When we accept this feature of Christian truth we take part in the catholicity of the church. If salvation is to mean anything, it means that we are participating of the same salvation as everyone else. Even though we are reformed, (Reformed!) our confessions say there is one church- one baptism, one Lord, one Spirit (Ephesians 4:4-6, and others). There is only one Father, one Lord Jesus Christ and one Holy Spirit. And while the one Triune God works in particular ways in history; God is not a multiheaded hydra, nor even Tao, a divine tension keeping everything in equilibrium. This does not necessarily mean churches look the same or speak the same language. But we are gathering around the same Lord and same sacraments (Lord's Supper and Baptism). To disregard this connection or replace it with another center is to separate ourselves from Christ. (Belgic Confession Articles 27-30; Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 20-21). Catholicity is a given of the church. It is also an obligation; we must maintain it and work at it. Our faith in Jesus Christ is so dependent on catholicity that disregarding it would be like driving at night without headlights. To know our tendencies (that we wander) require us to attach ourselves to the catholic church that helps us stay the course. It is an anchor and our hope.

How is this the issue now in the RCA? Many churches and classes are threatening to leave if the issue of same-sex relationships isn't settled immediately to their liking, even as some have already left. In at least the three previous General Synods decisions about how we structure ourselves have undermined the catholicity of the RCA. Instead, they reflect a view of the church that it is an arbitrary, self-assembled, group that happens to have a common recent history (like being Dutch). They are living out the worst of the American religion: a self-help buffet of preferences that suits to pursue all sorts of pleasure and leisure without challenge. The options The proposed changes from the 2020 Vision Team that change the Church Order comes from an non-catholic, even anti-catholic, understanding of the church. The options suggest that churches can still retain their identity without those things which bind us. This way we don't actually have to live with others that while bound by the church are different from us. But the challenge of

living catholically together forces us to worship and work with others not like us. But we don't get to choose our fellow servants.

Does that mean churches and classes need to stick together no matter what is taught about sex and marriage for the sake of catholicity? No. Those who have disregarded the church's historical teaching as well as the current consensus on Scripture's teaching on sexuality are also ignoring catholicity. Perhaps even more so than the purity groups. Catholicity understands that the church attaches itself to Christ by the Holy Spirit and through Scripture. The church speaks of knowing the will of God because of Scripture, not despite it. Even if ones' own view of Scripture on issues of sex and marriage differ from the traditional understanding, in the effort to maintain catholicity, their practices need to defer. Instead, their actions dismantle marriage and the unity of the church. So, they act without regard for the church and put individual preferences at most important. This sort of deference sounds really strange in our time and doesn't suit our cultural spirit. We value individual rights over anything else. Therefore, this anti-catholic spirit is fracturing the church faster than any one issue has in Protestant church history. I'm not under any illusion this is going to win anyone over. But it does illustrate the dire situation the church, and churches, are in.

Both major factions in the RCA have bought into their own anti-catholic idea of the church. So it comes down to a power struggle. They both would prefer the individualistic approach of swaying a majority as proof of faithfulness. But there is narrative of being a faithful minority despite evil as being noble. Breaking fellowship threatens not just a selling point of the church to the world, but our access to the salvation we claim to have come to know. We don't get to make this stuff up nor amend it as times change. As we consider the options of the 2020 Vision Team, you'll see how these are incompatible to our charter from Christ as the church. Competing claims of protecting the truth or caring for people in our present contexts are not mutually exclusive and certainly not against unity of Christ and His Body. Both can be achieved by maintaining our catholicity. This is the only way we are able to apprehend the truth ourselves and extend it to others. Holding on to catholicity will begin to inform us how we will respond when the time comes. In the next 1-pager, I'll try to imagine how this all might play out.

- Pastor Jeff