

Baseball, the Mass and Catholic culture



A coach congratulates a player during a Catholic baseball camp in 2014 at Russell Sports Complex in Kent, Wash.

(CNS photo/Stephen Brashear)

A few years ago, a family friend from France visited us for a few days, and in an effort to expose him to American culture, we took him to a baseball game. Expectations were high as we drove to New York to attend a highly contentious game between the Yankees and Red Sox, but after a few innings, our friend was nodding off. I quizzed him, “Isn’t this awesome?” He simply responded, “I am bored.”

How could he be bored? The game was the epitome of excitement with a storied rivalry, the electricity of a sellout crowd, and the stadium a buzz with a variety of sights and sounds.

On further review, my friend’s boredom made sense. He did not know the rules of the game, the players, or the history of the teams. The unfolding game, which most Americans would enjoy and pay good money to attend, was meaningless for him. His boredom originated from his ignorance of American culture.

Culture, as defined in here, is the context that provides meaning. Beyond the baseball example, one could argue that understanding American culture enables a person to distinguish between the American flag and a piece of cloth. Culture, in short, is shared knowledge on which the entire community is built. Knowledge of the culture allows members of the community to understand its rituals, symbols, and discourses, but outsiders are completely lost.

The idea of restoring Catholic culture has been a popular concept for some time, and as such, “Catholic culture” has been overused as a buzzword. With any trendy concept, its meaning has become muddled overtime, and some feel that it is no longer a useful idea. Its importance, I think, can be illustrated by a further example,

paralleling the discussion of my French friend at a baseball game.

For many young Americans, their experience at Mass is similar to a French person at a baseball game. Regrettably, young Catholics do not know the meaning of the vestments, the text, or the movements of the priests. Due to their lack of knowledge, much of the Mass is meaningless to them, and thus, they are bored. Similar to a Frenchman unfamiliar with American culture, their boredom is caused by their lack of understanding of Catholic culture.

The Mass, unlike baseball, has profound intrinsic value, and even without any liturgical knowledge, a person could experience a feeling of mystery and awe, but this experience is the exception, not the rule.

The dire straits of Catholic culture are evident in the failed attempts to appeal to young Americans. Some liturgists have advocated adding aspects of American culture, including popular music, dance and language, into the Mass in order to draw people back to church. This method may be good in bringing people back to church, but it can only be a first step in the process and must be superseded by a deeper and more authentic understanding of the Mass. This modernization of the liturgy might also be dangerous, as amid the new trappings of the liturgy the true meaning of the Eucharist is harder to discern.

Returning to the initial analogy, my friend from France might have enjoyed the baseball game more while indulging on foie gras and a glass of Chardonnay with eurodance blaring over the speakers, but a baseball purest would have been horrified.

Such attempts to secularize the liturgy demonstrate the pervasiveness of the current, secular culture and the weakness of Catholic culture. Young people today cannot comprehend basic Catholic concepts, and the only way to enter into dialogue with them is through modern, secular avenues.

Not only is the Mass meaningless for many Catholics, they do not have a basic understanding of Catholic sexual ethics, a concept of eternity and many other fundamental principles. This modern predicament is quite the opposite of an era of a robust Catholic culture, when religion impacted everything else.

In light of this analogy, it is imperative to continue the effort to rebuild a Catholic culture. We live in hyper-political world, and the church is often drawn into the political struggle de jour. While it is essential to fight these battles, Catholic cannot forget the vital task of constructing Catholic communities rooted in Catholic culture.