

Article

Christology and the Catholic Encounter with World Religions

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Abstract: Taking into consideration both of the statements of the Catholic magisterium and the pastoral environment of Catholic institutions, this essay offers some observations on the roots and objectives of interreligious dialogue. Framing dialogue in the faith experience of Christ as Lord allows the dialogue of life to emerge as a living expression of the way of life of every faithful Catholic. To live in Christ is the essence of being the Church. The mission of the Church is to proclaim the saving work and living presence of Christ. Christian spirituality is an intentional search for the fullness of Christ's humanity so that the community at prayer can embody the Risen One under all circumstances. This "embodiment" necessarily includes encountering human "others", diminishing the feeling of separateness, and discerning human conditions and possibilities for growth. To accomplish this task, Catholic Christians are invited to find Christ in all phenomena, including in other religions as disclosures of what it is to be human. To grow spiritually under the present circumstances of our communities, Catholics can begin to listen to hear the "voice" of the Good Shepherd wherever it resounds. In hearing the authentic ring of this voice of mercy and love, the community discerns that a previously "unknown" Christ is present before us, inviting a deepened understanding of Christ, both human and divine. Out of this understanding arises an affirmation of the Christologies of the historical Catholic consensus, now impelling the Church toward new forms of mission, service, and contemplation. This essay takes note of recent trends in Christology, suggesting correction courses for both progressive and traditionalist approaches.

Keywords: Allah; Christology; church growth; ethnic ministries; Abu Dhabi Declaration; dialogue of life; Vatican II; aggiornamento; Catholic Christianity; world religions; pre-conciliar theology; religious exclusivism; fundamentalism; magisterium; religious consciousness; Christ-event; development of doctrine; consensus; Feeney case; love of God; anthropology; unknown Christ; ritual; subtle body; charisms



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1. Introduction

Christology has been a long-term interest of mine, as could only be expected in someone trying to find a way to live in faithfulness to the calling of diocesan priesthood and to some sort of "contemplative life". Back in 1977, at Harvard, I begged to be allowed to participate in George Williams' memorable seminar on Arian Christologies, in which only candidates for the doctorate were allowed. There, I learned of the Arian recension of the letters of St. Ignatius of Antioch, by which one could detect an entire theological program in just a few words judiciously inserted—in the fourth century—here and there in a second-century text. I also met graduate students from various parts of the Christian world, each of whom had a preferred Christology and way of defining the issues in debates going back to the earliest Christian communities. In 1980, I began to collect materials for a new Christology based on my studies in Mahayana Buddhism. It seemed that the time

was ripe for a look at the altruistic figure of the Bodhisattva (someone who consciously chooses to become a fully enlightened Buddha no matter how long it takes) in comparison with the person of Jesus Christ, whose death on the cross overturned all the expectations for a world savior. John P. Keenan eventually published a study of Mahayana Christology (Keenan 1989), while I dedicated my attention to the study of Indo-Tibetan Buddhism, with particular attention to holy persons and their biographies. I was convinced that much more could be achieved along these lines, as we discovered in actual Buddhist–Catholic dialogues (2000–2009) sponsored by the USCCB. However, a new Christology based on interreligious dialogue must also take into consideration the criteria for an authentic “intra-religious dialogue” which can never be “generic”.

During the winter of 2000, I was teaching a seminar on interreligious dialogue for the Trappist scholastics at Vina, California. One of the international students brought my attention to an article (“Vatican II, Christology, and the World Religions”), by the Irish theologian Dermot Lane (1999). Our close reading of this article became, for me, a sort of milestone in developing a program of research on interreligious relations, methodologies of dialogue, and the implications of dialogue for Catholic theology. Lane’s use of the term “religion” is so broadly generic that it effectively undermines the persuasive purposes of the essay. In this essay, a generic notion of “religion” lacking specific doctrinal content is employed as a strategy for deconstructing the traditional Christian creedal consensus. Something similar may be found in Hans Küng et al.’s (1986) volume on *Christianity and World Religions*. Although not all of the co-authors are in agreement with this strategy, the main thrust of this book consists of a tendentious reading of the beliefs and history of other world religions used as a lever to upend the Catholic historical consensus. These and other similar works by post-Vatican II authors have contributed to a real “crisis of dialogue” in Catholic Christianity. This crisis can be described briefly as the tendency to employ methodologies supposedly deriving from authentic dialogue with other religions in order to advance an agenda of radical change within Catholic Christianity. The ethical motivation for performing this is frequently framed in terms of socio-economic theories of justice and liberation. Thus, the Church is no longer defined as an effective means of spiritual transformation under grace, but instead becomes an instrument for promoting social change. Much of liberation theology took up this same agenda, as if the Church were truly equipped to become a tool of social revolution. All this was decided in classrooms and seminars far away from the lives lived in cities, suburbs, favellas, and villages in the real world. The theoretical basis for these strategies was made explicit in John O’Malley’s (1971) article “Reform, Historical Consciousness, and Vatican II’s *aggiornamento*”, which interpreted *aggiornamento* to mean radical change, and not “reform” or even “updating” the message of the Church in the modern world. Consensus statements of the theological past are now to be relativized, or even eliminated, by means of a sociological analysis of the context in which those statements were formulated. There is no doubt that many statements in Denzinger (Hünemann et al. 2012) must be tempered by an appreciation for the context in which they were written, but in O’Malley’s essay, historicism becomes an overriding norm, excluding the dynamic features of religious consciousness embodied in a sense of the sacred. Tradition, in this perspective, is entirely disempowered as a theological category, leaving the koinonia of the churches entirely adrift in the vicissitudes of historical events and sociological impulses. Strangely enough, the anthropological structure of religion—any religion—completely disappears from the perspective of these authors.

2. In Search of Balance, in Search of Theological Roots

My purpose in the present essay is to advance our understanding of the Christ-event, without discarding the received theological consensus. I hope to propose for the Church a

pathway—through dialogue with committed religious partners—that may give rise to a natural development in our understanding of Christ, such as that envisioned in Newman’s *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (Newman [1945] 1878). This should give the Church’s teaching about Christ a wider space in which to grow. Not only are all the faithful included in this “space” of dialogue, but also, their witnessing of Christ takes an active form in both proclaiming the Christ event with their lives, and in discerning the resonances of the Gospel to be heard outside the Church itself. This should clarify the Church’s mission of discernment regarding the possible truths embodied in other religions, which I call “hearing the voice of the Good Shepherd wherever it may be found”. This does not mean, however, that the Catholic Church and its ecumenical partners can proceed toward forms of collaboration and unity entirely cut off from the heritage of past consensus¹ statements, particularly those that are embedded in practices and institutions definitive of Christian identity. For this reason, I am mindful that this essay should contribute to a future consensus within the Christian oikumene with regard both to Christology and to relations with other religions, which are necessarily encountered as distinct cultural traditions and not as a generic sociological category. The principle of interpretation guiding this process of discernment is the life of the believing community itself, that “dialogue of life” that can take many fruitful forms, all of them incarnating the Church’s historical faith while being at the service of the hopes of humanity.

3. Defining Christology

What, then, is “Christology”? Our first concern is to note that there is a sort of periodization of various Christologies, and some recent research has clarified the complexity of these attempts to describe the Christ-event. For readers of this essay, Brian Daley S.J.’s (Daley 2018) *God Visible: Patristic Christology Reconsidered*, is probably the most relevant. Depending on the urgency of emphasis in different moments of the history of Christianity, authors have argued in favor of different aspects of the Christ-event.

- To look at “why God became man” in Jesus of Nazareth;
- To examine the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah (Christ) in the life of Jesus;
- To find a way to describe how Jesus Christ saved humanity by his death and resurrection;
- To show the relationship between Jesus Christ and the Church;
- To describe the relationship between the pre-existent Word of God and the Christ-event in the person of Jesus;
- To examine the relationship between the Christ-event as a whole and humanity as a whole, or even to creation as a whole.

Recent scholarship has shown that the diversity of views [the variety of theological expressions in response to questions about Christ’s identity as God and human being] expressed over the first six centuries of Christian history should not be suppressed in favor of an exclusive concentration on the orthodox consensus to which the Seven Ecumenical Councils committed the churches that remained in communion with one another at that time. Giving attention even to those views declared “heretical” gives at least two advantages: they show that there was a diversity of responses to the Christ-event and to the scriptural accounts of the meaning of that event, and they contain elements of truth that further reflection employed to arrive at creedal consensus. Consensus is thus achieved through critical reflection on the implications, or consequences, of less adequate ways of expressing the message and person of Jesus Christ. In exploring the possibilities that open up for a new set of Christologies through an encounter with world religions, we can draw upon the legacy of debate and the consensus of the earliest Christian centuries. A return

to the sources also enables the contemporary theologian a certain amount of flexibility in constructing an understanding of the Christ-event in ways that correspond to the evolving consensus among Christian churches and communities, as well as within the Catholic magisterium. We are therefore not restricted to the post-Tridentine theological manuals, nor even to the *nouvelle théologie* of the 1940s and 1950s that contributed so much to the documents of the Second Vatican Council. We can also draw upon untapped historical sources for potentially fruitful insights. For example, the theological debates that early modern missionary activity stimulated (Pomplun 2010, 2011; Becker et al. 2010) are of great value, as are the Chinese Christian documents of the 8th century, about which I have commented extensively elsewhere. In his commentary on a working document of the magisterium, *The Bible and Christology*, Joseph Fitzmyer, S.J. elucidated the Christological approaches identified by the Commission (Fitzmyer 1986):

- The classic treatises of the theological manuals formerly used in the Roman international seminaries: *De Verbo incarnato* and *De redemptione*;
- Historical reconstructions of the life of Jesus (nineteenth century “searches” for the historical Jesus, and the recent critical achievement of John P. Meier (1991–2016) in his monumental study, *A Marginal Jew*;
- Christology and the history of religions, which was unfortunately limited to theories about the possibility of early Christian syncretism with the religious world of the ancient Mediterranean;
- Jesus as a Jew, which offers insights into some aspects of the Gospel text that are difficult to understand without a knowledge of ancient Jewish practices and sectarian movements;
- Christology and salvation history, which explores the implications of the New Testament titles of Jesus and the theological meaning of the faith of the early Christians in his resurrection and return in glory;
- Christology and Philosophical Anthropology, in which authors such as Karl Rahner (1961, 1966), Hans Küng et al. (1986), and Edward Schillebeeckx (1979, 1980) explored the implications of the Christ-event for an understanding of universal human destiny;
- An existentialist interpretation of Jesus Christ, which, in the case of Bultmann, was an attempt to understand the contemporary significance of the life and the messages of Jesus in scripture, given the difficulties of ascertaining the historical facts in the scholarly “search” for the historical Jesus;
- Christology and social concerns, which refers to the emphasis on orthopraxis (social justice in action) as advanced by the theology of liberation. This would be another way of bringing the Christ-event into the contemporary world by applying the Gospel message to the task of reforming the social order;
- Christology as a theological revelation of the nature of God: here, we find both Karl Barth and Hans Urs von Balthasar, who see in Jesus the disclosure of the true identity of God, including His interventions in history, and His invitation to human maturity in the spiritual life;
- Other themes typical of Christological inquiry include those based on the humanity of Christ; those emphasizing the divinity of Christ; those tracing the inquiry back to the person of Jesus and the faith of his disciples; Christ as the unique mediator of salvation; and the total, or cosmic, Christ as the goal of all creation.

4. Cultural Anthropology as a Resource for a Christology in Interreligious Dialogue

Our own approach to Christology in relation to the project of interreligious dialogue borrows from some of these well-known articulations of responses to the Biblical question:

“Who do people say that I am?” (cf. Matthew 16:13–20). When we turn to the Chalcedonian creedal consensus that Christ is “true God and true man”, we immediately become aware that “true man” takes us into the realm of the “Anthropos”—the human person—who is the object of attention of our sympathetic anthropologist—whether of the philosophical kind or else the courageous explorer with notebook and cassette recorder. The question, “What is it to be a human being?” quickly acquires theological urgency when the Anthropos of scientific research meets the *Homo religiosus* of humanistic and theological reflection. Is it sufficient to seek a common denominator in the being who possesses a certain set of genetic information? In terms of the anthropology of the human person, genetics is insufficient for the simple reason that even the information encoded in genetic material may or may not be expressed depending on psychological and contextual conditions (epigenetics). In fact, the entire human phenomenon seems accessible only in terms of the interaction (or even “enaction”, cf. Varela et al. 2016) of human persons inseparably from their environment, their human community, and the ecosystem. The environment and the “information package” of DNA interact continuously to give rise to and sustain the network of relationships that are summed up in the term “a human being”—the Anthropos of the Anthropozoic Era. Thus, for the purposes of this essay, we are going to restrict the space of our attention to the religious aspects of that environment of co-enaction, although we could just as easily direct our attention to any area of human activity, applying the same critical criteria to guide our observations.

From a theological perspective, when we assert, as an article of faith, that Jesus Christ is the “true God and true man”, we are saying that the savior of the world is embedded in the world in the same way that any other human being is so embedded in the very same web of genetic and environmental energetic interactions that, as we have said, give rise to and sustain human life and activity. When we speak of being “embedded” we specifically mean situated interactively in a cultural matrix that determines development, gene expression, linguistics, relationships, and spirituality. Our challenge as theologians is not that far from the challenge of our predecessors: how is it possible for God to manifest in a particular person, time, place, culture, and biological environment in order to create the conditions for the possibility of all human beings to obtain—or better receive—the benefits God wishes to bestow upon them? Even more immediately, as people of the Church, how is this community of faith supposed to encounter other communities of faith with their own narratives of the divine in ways that guarantee that the essential values represented by Jesus Christ are not eclipsed by what we say and do in relation to those who do not believe as Christians do, or wish to do? We might even reformulate the question as follows: having believed in and known the Savior of the world in Jesus Christ, are we sure that our faith has thoroughly examined the human phenomenon in such a way as to guarantee that our relations with other persons emerge from true universal faith in Jesus Christ, and not from a limited cultural or historical horizon of our own? (see Appendix A)

The reader can readily see that the history of Christian missionary activities, including their limitations and mistakes, must impact our understanding of who Christ is for the foreseeable human future. Here, the discoveries made in other religious cultures of that which constitute a human person inevitably come into our Christian theological conversation about what it is for Christ to be human. Christians are beginning to ask if our lack of knowledge of the many crucial discoveries about the human condition made in other religious cultures impedes not only the mission to spread the Gospel among all “creatures”, but even our understanding of the Savior himself. In other words, do we truly know the Christ in whom we believe if we do not know the human phenomena present in at least some of the great religious cultures that have arisen among human communities over the millennia? As Raimon Panikkar posed the question long ago: Do we truly know Jesus Christ if we

do not know the “unknown Christ” present in Hinduism [or any other religion at all]? It seems to me that knowing this “unknown Christ” has now acquired a certain urgency for the future of Christian faith. If we believe in and love the Savior of the world, we need to know in greater depth His very humanity. In coming to know that humanity, we need to learn from other human beings, because our own roots, Semitic, Hellenistic, Germanic, are incomplete. We have long known this to be true, but we have not yet incorporated the disquietude of the early modern missionaries into a coherent world Christology. The project of interreligious dialogue in its various dimensions is a concrete expression of our willingness as a Church to acknowledge the legitimacy of our own disquietude; in other words, we do not fully know what it is to be human, and therefore we do not know Christ as well as we should and would like to. For this reason, we are not living our own faith as we should and would until we have known the “unknown Christ” wherever He may be found. He is found by listening to the voice of other people, where His voice can be heard resonating and calling us to spiritual growth.

Christology within dialogue gains a great deal by accepting the growing consensus in the study of religions that an “anthropology of religions” gives the best prospects for a communicable understanding of the phenomenon we call “religion” among human societies. In an anthropology of religions, direct contact with the religious practices of specific communities is the primary methodological tool. This subsumes other approaches, including a sociology of religions, a psychology of religions, a history of religions, an archeology of religions, and even a philosophy of religions. The anthropological study of religions provides the basic data on which “thick description” of communal identities and embodied responses can be written. An anthropological approach mediates between a scientific, scholarship-oriented society and communities of religious engagement as they exist in any cultural context, past or present. The anthropologist in a sense is bringing some authentic news about a particular social grouping to another specific social grouping, both of which are convinced of the validity of their own identity and perspective on life, its meaning and purpose. Anthropologists can do this well to the extent that they have engaged deeply with both distinctive identities, and have nurtured a sympathy for the perspectives of both.

These criteria of sympathy and engagement also describe the work of those who engage in ongoing interreligious dialogue. I think it is possible to bring together Biblical hermeneutics and the general theory of the role of religion in the evolution of human consciousness to illuminate a “new Christology” capable of engaging world religions in fruitful dialogue and cooperation. Religions are everywhere, even where their legitimacy is denied. They represent for the human species a kind of creative singularity that bridges the progress of the species in time, and the attraction of a transcendent reality beyond time. This singularity is a fusion of light, form, and sound, seen among religious people in ritual and symbolism. In the world of ritual and belief, everything created is charged with meaning, and energizes the life processes of communities.

Religious rituals display the intuitive grasp of this nearness of the sacred that is characteristic of conscious beings. It is for this reason that R. Panikkar (1979, 1981) wrote of the *purushamedha* (sacrifice of the primordial Man) as incorporating the entire cosmos of the various “*lokas*” (realms): angels, gods, humans, titans, ghosts, demons, and animals. For a religious mind, all energetic phenomena in the universe are conscious, and constitute an unending self-offering to its Source. In this reflection, it becomes possible to locate the voice (light–sound–form) of the Logos in whom all things are constantly emerging in human displays of an intuition of the nearness of the Divine Source, the background radiation of infinite Intelligence. Christ, Christians might think, is “unknown” in other religions both to their enclosed followers who have never really heard the message of the Gospel, but also by

the baptized observer who has not yet understood the meaning of Christ's High Priesthood "according to the order of Melchisedek" (Hebrews 7:17; Psalm 110:4). Melchisedek, the Letter to the Hebrews tells us, was higher than Abraham, and participated in the timeless archetype of the sacrificial priesthood, offering bread and wine to God the Most High. This is truly a universal vision of priesthood and of sacrifice, linking the Christ-event to the barely acknowledged intimations of that event in the pre-incarnational universal church of humanity "in the world"—the church of Christ before the Incarnation (I Corinthians 10:4). Although human sinful behavior obstructs the view of the deeper reality, this bridge between time and eternity cannot be suppressed because it continues to radiate light and sacred sound in the offerings of all (cf. Bhagavad Gita 9:26: A leaf, a flower, a fruit, a drop of water. . . all that may be offered with devotion are offered to Me). Through the gift of insight, which Christians (often in the writings of Saint John Paul II, see: Francesco [Gioia 2006](#)) attribute to the gift of the Holy Spirit, some people awaken to recognition: (a) in Christ, the incarnate Word: sound, light, bridge, eternal, temporal, manifest and as yet unmanifest self-giving sacrifice; (b) in all manifestations of the authentic word, light, love, generosity, perseverance, patience, wisdom, and union on opposites. (c) In terms of praxis, a part of the Church's mission to announce Christ to the world (to "all creatures") requires the people of God to do both (a) and (b) unceasingly and thoroughly.

This obliges the people of God in our time to learn new ways to read the Scriptures, to practice "Lectio Divina", guided by the Holy Spirit who knows and pervades all phenomena. The Holy Spirit grants the people of God the power to engage science and life experience, having been trained at the nurturing table of the Word. The horizons of the human task in the universe—to explore, to do research, to create new interconnections, to discover the texture of dialogic relationships—expand in proportion to our faith in the Spirit.

One anthropological dimension that surfaces in both traditional and recent conversations about spirituality comes from the Hindu yogic tradition, with strong resonances found in late forms of Buddhism and Daoism. Similar notions, at times subjected to warnings, may be found in the Syriac mystics, Byzantine hesychasm, and the 14th century English mystics. I am referring here to the notion of a "subtle body" or a yogic energetic body in numerous systems of contemplative training. Although there are occasional and unsystematic discussions of energy centers and light phenomena in our own contemplative/mystical writings, Christians, in general, have almost nothing comparable to this systematic description of the energetic aspects of the human body, constituting a mediating principle between the apparent material body and the more subtle dimension of the "soul", however that may be defined. China, India, Tibet, and many indigenous cultures do have elaborate teachings on this aspect of the human person that are used both to promote physical health and to guide safely the processes by which a person becomes aware of the transformative presence of the divine. The Gospels tell us that Jesus was transfigured on Mount Tabor in the presence of Peter, James, and John (Matthew 17:2). Moses and Elijah were present, along with a voice from the clouds. What does this tell us about the humanity of Jesus? What does this tell us about the condition of human beings beyond the span of a normal human lifetime? What does it mean when we claim that Jesus rose from the dead, and even ate material food with his disciples after rising from the dead? How was it possible for Jesus to perform miracles, including restoring body parts and raising people from the dead? What kind of anthropology—in this case, the full description of the nature of a human being taken as a whole—would be required to describe a human being capable of performing such prodigies? The miracles are usually described as manifestations of the first part of the creedal assertion: true God. However, Jesus himself said that greater things than these will be performed by the disciples, who are never described as being divine as Jesus is divine.

As a result of missionary activities in various world cultures, some converts to Christianity have asked questions of this kind, and all too often without obtaining coherent answers. How did Jesus perform miracles, and how can the faithful disciple continue to perform prodigies as part of one's obedience to the mission statement of Jesus himself (Matthew: 28:19)? The entire Pentecostal phenomenon is an attempt to respond to this kind of question, with dramatic worship services in which healing and exorcism are essential "events" that proclaim the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit among Christian believers. Catholic and Orthodox Christianity give a great deal of importance to the practice of liturgical, sacramental worship. These churches also assert that charisms are given to saintly believers so that miracles continue to occur. Indeed, the canonization of saints requires the verification of miracles attributable to the intercessory power of certain deceased "servants of God". How these holy persons acquired their charisms is left as a great unanswered question, because "by the grace of God" is a response that only begs a plethora of further questions.

Charismatic phenomena are not absent from other religious communities. Such abilities are acquired by means of specific "technologies of the sacred", some of which are not dramatically different from those that survive in some of our own contemplative communities. Christians can learn something about miracles and charisms from other religious traditions, as I have described in the book *Rainbow Body and Resurrection* (Tiso 2016). In a noosphere characterized by instantaneous communications on any imaginable topic, it is no longer possible to ignore the pastoral questions that arise as a result of our contact with remarkable people who are practicing other religions, some of whom are living in our own neighborhoods. Even remote hermitages and exotic rituals appear regularly on the internet, prodding us to look more deeply. This is why I think it is urgent that Christians learn how to discern the "voice" of the Good Shepherd within the voices of others, for in that way, we will come to love the "unknown Christ" as we love the Christ in whom we now believe. This is why it is important to become familiar with the tools by which that eternal voice can be recognized from within the Christian tradition, so that in extending our understanding, we remain faithful to the consensus that we have faithfully received.

5. Challenges That Constitute a "Crisis of Dialogue"

There are some Christians who react instinctively against recognizing similarities between their way of being religious and that of others. Among such persons, feeling an attraction for the rituals, scriptures, practices, and beliefs of other religions and churches creates a sense of uneasiness as if in the presence of a "seduction of the spirit". In other words, the encounter is seen as a source of temptation, and the risk is that of falling into a complex of errors. From the perspective of a religious encounter (as in Rudolph Otto's famous 1923 book on the *Holy* (Otto [1923] 1958)), whenever there is a glimmer of *fascinsum*, there is a fear of *tremendum*. That is to say, where there is attraction, one begins to tremble in fear of falling off a cliff! This can be seen psychologically as a failure to embrace the Holy as it is in its wholeness, in fullness. The sense of unexpectedly discovering wholeness in the holiness of others creates a sense of the proximity of danger, and requires such persons to cobble together plausible statements of self-defense. Unfortunately, from the perspective of growth in the spiritual life, such defensiveness only succeeds in diminishing one's access to the Holy even in one's own religious environment. This kind of defensiveness in the context of "modernity" resembles very closely the spontaneous negative reactions of secularized people to all forms of religious practice. They quickly learn that both the alluring external features of religion and the internal attractions that one may experience towards the mysterious "sacred" are pathologies to be avoided at all costs.

Many formally religious people are very much in agreement with completely non-religious people: they reject feelings of attraction to the sacred, or the “Holy” in any form at all. Self-styled religious people are willing to adhere to a set of external religious observances that are taken as normative without any experiential dimension at all. I should also make it clear that this pattern of rejection should not be restricted only to the thought patterns of certain individuals, since that too is typical of modernity, with its emphasis on individuality. The rejection of the “other” as a bearer of the sacred can and does shape the way persons belong to one another in churches. This is readily observed in the Catholic Church by the persistent habit of being a spectator rather than a participant in the liturgical life of one’s parish. This may extend to the habit of preferring Mass on television to actually being present with other Catholics in a real church building. The habit of rejecting “otherness” quickly collapses into debilitating forms of solipsism. Our challenge in this essay on Christology is to find a way to include the experience of an encounter with the sacredness of other religions within the faith perspective of the Catholic community that does not collapse into the black hole of “I alone hold the truth”. For that reason, it is a mistake to ignore the dynamic features of authentic Catholic faith and life. There, transformation in Christ may be received as the highest of graces.

In my research over the years, I have discovered that it is easier to write about this topic from a philosophical or even anthropological perspective than from a pragmatic, pastoral perspective. Even in a parish located in a densely populated neighborhood in a multi-ethnic city, it is still possible to go to church and feel that one has the true faith without any particular need to find out anything the people down the street believe to be true and holy. Sooner or later, however, the inevitable pastoral questions emerge, whether or not the community and its clergy are eager to field such questions. A young university student is studying religion and knocks on the rectory door, loaded with questions. A young Catholic brings his Muslim fiancée to talk with the pastor. The list of possibilities is quite long.

A remarkable example of this problem comes to mind from my experience as an associate pastor in a dying “quasi-parish” in the City of San Francisco. The parish was brought back to life (2002–2004) by incorporating a number of ethnic groups into the parish programs in various ways: Palestinian Catholics, Burmese people, Brazilians, and people from the Philippines. In the City of San Francisco, the majority of neighborhoods are home to foreign-born nationals. The neighborhood proportions twenty years ago ranged in many cases from 35% to over 60%. Anyone trying to organize the life of a Catholic parish would have to take into consideration the possibility that at least some of these immigrants might be Catholic. Hence, an outreach based on ethnic ministry would have seemed to be a good strategy for ensuring church growth. Yet the one department of the archdiocesan chancery that the majority of the Catholic pastors considered of low priority, and which could be abolished to save money, was that tasked with coordinating ethnic ministries. Here, we are only describing an outreach to people of the Catholic faith, whose “otherness” was mainly cultural and linguistic! If such isolation was possible in a city like San Francisco, one can only imagine the degree to which isolation frequently characterizes pastoral collaboration with non-Catholic groups and associations elsewhere in the USA.

Why would the Catholic community even care that there might be an “unknown Christ” alive and well in the neighboring mosque, Zen center, or Hindu temple? The theologians and scholars of religious studies might publish thousands of pages of reflection on the social implications of a multi-religious society, and yet it is quite possible that all that brain power would not make the slightest dent in the *modus operandi* of the local Catholic parish, no matter where that parish stood on the spectrum of post-Vatican II reform models.

The level of indifference is not always benign. I am reminded of the episode of a visit of His Holiness the Dalai Lama to a Catholic parish in Indiana a number of years ago. A friend described his horror when he saw the women of the parish on the day after the visit cleaning the pews in the church *with holy water*, so as to purify the contamination that this famous “idolater” may have brought into their sacred space. Real life Catholicism is far behind the exploratory adventures of pre- and post-Vatican II Catholic missionaries, theologians, and philosophers. This essay is an attempt to encourage some long overdue changes, not only in the area of ideas, but also in the way Catholics practice their faith in parish communities.²

If Catholicism is to be an authentic expression of Christian faith, it must enact that faith in the forms of collaboration and outreach that correspond to the natural diversity that God created on this planet, in this universe full of wonder! Those forms of Catholic life that embody an awareness of the presence of God, accessible through prayer, will be eager to move towards growth and transformation. The fullness of God in Christ will not allow the believing community to construct a hermetically sealed isolation chamber cut off from the neighborhood, the planet, and the vastness of the universe that so eloquently speaks of the glory of God. The claim of Christian uniqueness stands or falls on whether or not the Christian message—as it is enacted in real life—corresponds to the entire human experience of the “Holy”. Authentic Catholic faith is eager to “find God in all things”. This is why the Council and the papal magisterium since the Council have insisted on a “culture of dialogue” in the Church, closely associated with the mission of evangelization. Christianity itself will become the locked tabernacle of an “unknown Christ” if the Church is not actually engaging with real human beings who live alongside the faith community, the local parish, the Catholic school, the youth group, the programs of assistance, and so forth. The Church tests its Catholicity and its faithfulness to Christ, true God and true man, through these very real forms of dialogical living.

It is not enough to join the fundamentalists who say “We are right, they are wrong, so they have to convert. End of message”. This kind of thinking gives rise to the allergy to the sacred that we mentioned above: by failing to recognize holiness in other people of other faiths, Christians lose the ability to recognize holiness in our own experience of faith, and become incapable of healing the wounds of the dark history of the human past.

This is not only true of the traditionalists, but also of the progressives. It was Thomas Merton (1997) who noted that the enthusiastic progressives who took charge of the implementation of Vatican II in American parishes and religious orders in the 1960s were “of course” open to interreligious dialogue. However, Merton wondered if they knew what they were getting into with this dialogue. Perhaps the emphasis on ritual, contemplation, and traditional moral values among other people of faith might not have been particularly welcome on the progressives’ agenda. I think this is true even today for many who prefer a “generic” use of the word “religion”. Like them, conservative Catholics have not been particularly skillful in building bridges with other religious believers on moral and spiritual grounds. The “culture wars” phenomenon has polarized the Catholic community very deeply, making it even more difficult today than it was fifty years ago to imagine alliances with people of other faiths. The “culture of dialogue” remains a minority phenomenon, creating uneasiness on both sides of this polarization.

In a recent article in *Crisis* by Eric Sammons (2023), we find the “allergic” reaction in full display. He refers to the worship space constructed in Abu Dhabi as a visible response to the “Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together” (His Holiness Pope Francis et al. 2019) as “The Abrahamic Family House Abomination”. The same mentality that cleans the pews with holy water after a visit from the Dalai Lama is fully displayed in this essay (“The Equalization of Religions and the Troublesome

Abu Dhabi Declaration”), in which the author decides to ignore the living traditions of Christians of virtually all the historic churches of the Middle East in order to promote a typically modern fundamentalist definition of Catholic Christianity, over and against Islam. It would have been quite easy to find out that Arabic-speaking Eastern Rite and Latin Rite Christians in the Arabic-speaking world use the word “Allah” for “God” even in the liturgy. These Christians have persevered under the Muslim conquest for more than 1400 years, and remain faithful to the historical creeds of the early ecumenical councils, confessing the Trinity and the Incarnation as emphatically as anyone may. Yet they have no problem with “Allah”, nor do they (as in fact, can be said of St. Thomas Aquinas, cf. [Aquinas 1996](#)) entertain even for a moment the idea that the Muslims are worshipping a different God. They are well aware of the difference between the Trinity and the radical monotheism of the Muslims. Even so, it would be unimaginable for them to assert that we are not in some sense children of Abraham (Eucharistic Prayer I: “Our father in faith”), and that Islamic monotheism is grounded not only in the Qur’an, but also in Biblical revelation. Now, granted, Sammons makes the same point that I myself made above that it is a mistake to take “religion” as a single, generic phenomenon. Each religion should be recognized for what it says of itself and how it enacts its own identity in the world of human beings. That being said, the criterion of self-definition ought not to exclude noticing that some things are held in common, even on historical grounds. There is indeed a certain “*fascinosum*” in becoming aware of the fact that Muslims, Jews, Zoroastrians, many Hindus, and others share a certain monotheistic sensibility, vested in distinctive theologies and liturgical practices. On the basis of both theology and anthropology, I would reject the statement that “religions are too fundamentally different to accurately classify them all under one heading. . . . a single category of ‘religion’ that includes both Catholicism and all other religions does not align with the historic Catholic view of the world”. “Religion” as a topic of study can be defined usefully in the terms worked out by the anthropologist of Islamic societies, Clifford [Geertz \(\[1966\] 1993\)](#). It is *religious consciousness* that brings the religions together for dialogue, and “Religion” in the *Summa Theologiae* (Part I of the Second Part, Q. 60, art. 3) is treated among the deeply human virtues.

The Abu Dhabi document worked out by [His Holiness Pope Francis et al. \(2019\)](#) is to be read, not as a dogmatic definition, but as a prolegomenon for future dialogical activities. Its oversimplifications are part of a dynamic process, a conversation long overdue. As an example, on the website of the USCCB, the Secretariate for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs (SEIA) has a number of documents that do take up some of these topics in forms elaborated by Catholic and Muslim representatives. For example, there is [Revelation: Catholic and Muslim Perspectives \(2007\)](#), and [Marriage: Catholic and Muslim Perspectives \(2009\)](#). Recent work has addressed Religion and Violence and Religious Education. The “Walking Together” series of pamphlets was meant to offer an accessible introduction to the work of dialogue, designed for Catholic parishioners and their friends. A Catholic view of history and of the world cannot ignore what “is”.

“Crisis” complains about the architecture of the building that was built for ecumenical Christian worship on the site of the “Abrahamic Family House” in Abu Dhabi. I can recall a visit to a site in Turkey in 2004 in which the contributions of Turkish truckers were put to use in constructing three houses of worship: A mosque, a synagogue, and a church. Granted, in a majority-Muslim country in which the public school system does not teach anything about the Christian history of the country, it was only to be expected that the mosque was a real mosque, and the synagogue and the church were more like someone’s vague idea of what such buildings might be like. The Abu Dhabi building is considerably more well-informed. Of course, it is lacking in the usual Catholic kitsch, but then so are many Catholic churches outside of the Middle East. Whether these modern

structures are to one's taste or not, there is nothing particularly unusual in the Abu Dhabi Christian structure, available for worship by a plurality of denominations. It is hardly an "abomination".

The problematic views of the folks cleaning the pews with holy water reflect a deeper fear that the other religions are the result of some kind of diabolical contamination. David Snellgrove (1987), a British anthropologist who early in life converted to Catholic Christianity, commented on his own amazement when he discovered elderly Tibetan lamas who had spent a lifetime worshipping the horrendous images of wrathful deities who were yet among the most altruistic and generous people he had ever met. A Catholic who does not ask the relevant questions about observations of this kind, and who does not know how to formulate such questions in charity while searching for truth, cannot bear the burden of the multicultural future that inevitably awaits most of the cities of the world. Buddhists claim that they do not believe in a god who created a visible universe, and they have cogent arguments to sustain their position. They also insist that enlightenment without universal compassion is unattainable. Many Buddhist sects support monasteries that even today house and train thousands of young men and women in the precepts of their faith. Not all of them are saints, but it is undeniable that there are many serious candidates for the religious life among them. It cannot be denied that a large body of highly educated Westerners has found the path to the contemplative life among these institutions—something that they found to be almost completely absent in Christianity. It seems to me that we Catholics would be doing ourselves a great favor in becoming conversant with the variety of religious forms in use among the Buddhists in order to understand ourselves better, and perhaps even to improve on the deficiencies that so widely prevail in our own institutions.

The myth of religious exclusivism ("we alone hold the truth") is an obstacle not only to fruitful dialogue, but also to the implementation of much-needed internal reform. The arrogance manifested in the position of religious superiority only produces blowback and hate messages on the web. We Catholics are already abundantly persecuted without having to wave a red matador's cloak at everyone else! As I hope to argue, by learning to listen to the presence of Christ in other faiths, "hearing the voice of the good shepherd", the Church will become more fully what it was always meant to be: not only to announce the good news of grace in Christ Jesus, but also to gather into one, through meaningful dialogue, the scattered children of God wherever they may be found. To do this requires the grace of discernment, for not all the voices are those of the Good Shepherd. To detect and discern requires the gift of the Holy Spirit. It also requires accurate knowledge of the other faiths with whom we may be in dialogue, preferably as communicated by the recognized leadership of those faiths. We should expect no less from others in our own regard. After all, some of our dialogue partners sincerely believe that we are living in error and confusion.

I hope that my readers will also be aware of the fact that what I am saying here is not something that emerged suddenly after the Second Vatican Council. As an example of a prominent Catholic thinker who bridged the pre- and post-conciliar period, let us have a look at Bernard Lonergan, S.J. The theological works of Bernard Lonergan (1990), one of the greatest philosophers of the twentieth century, were elaborated before the Council, when he was teaching at the Gregorian University in Rome. His view of the Church's mission corresponds to what I am saying here. In an important summary of the influence of Lonergan on theology and pastoral practice, Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini made the following remarks (my translation from the Italian published in *La Civiltà Cattolica* (Martini 2005)):

First of all, [Lonergan sustained] a somewhat mystical view of human existence, which puts in first place the love of God poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit (Rom. 5.5). Here, I finally found a theologian who gave primacy to the experience of God or, as he

himself expressed it, to falling in love with God and who made everything derive from this fundamental experience. I was equally struck by the central place given to “conversion” in his organic arrangement of theology, and therefore to the practical and experiential aspect of Christian life, on which theology reflects. Even if, especially in his fundamental work *Insight*, what appears in the foreground is the human mind that seeks to experience, reflect, evaluate, know, and thus become aware of the constant and invariable functioning of the path of knowledge, in reality in his theological work it becomes evident that the focal point of everything is ultimately constituted by the gift of God poured into our spirit.

There is therefore a Lonergan the philosopher, who appears in—let us say—80 percent of his work as a philosopher of the centrality of human beings and their knowledge, as an expert in anthropology and epistemology, but there is in greater depth a Lonergan who I would call “mystical”, who recognizes the primacy of God’s love poured out on us and of the experience of the Spirit. For the first time I found a theologian who also had the courage to say that love on some privileged occasions precedes knowledge. I quote his words verbatim:

“It is usually said: *Nihil amatum nisi praecognitum*, that is, knowledge precedes love [...]. There is a secondary exception to this rule, in that human beings fall in love and this falling in love is something disproportionate to its causes, its conditions, its occasions, its antecedents. The reason is that falling in love represents a new beginning, an exercise of vertical freedom in which one’s world is subjected to a new principle of organization. But the most important exception to the Latin saying comes from the gift that God gives us out of his love, a love that floods our hearts. Then, we are in the dynamic state of being in love. But who the one we love may be is not given, nor is it yet understood. Our capacity for moral self-transcendence has found a fulfillment that brings intimate joy and profound peace. Love reveals to us values that we did not appreciate before, the value of prayer and adoration, of repentance and faith. But if we want to know what is happening inside us, if we want to learn to integrate it with the rest of our lives, we must investigate, search, ask for advice. It is thus that, in matters of religion, love precedes knowledge and, since this love is a gift from God, the *initium fidei* itself is due to the grace of God”. (Lonergan 1990, p. 122)

Many practical consequences derive from this principle in apologetics, in preaching, and in pastoral work. It also touches upon the problem of the salvation of non-Christians. This is why Lonergan returns to the topic several times, in particular, when he talks about pluralism in religious language. He underlines how the grace with which God floods our hearts before any form of knowledge “could be the grace that God offers to all people, which supports what is good in the religions of humanity, which explains how those who have never heard the Gospel may be saved. It could be what allows simple believers to pray secretly to their heavenly Father, even when their religious understanding is imperfect. Finally, it is in this grace that one can find the theological justification of Catholic dialogue with all Christians, with non-Christians, and even with atheists who can love God in their hearts even though they do not love God with their heads” (Lonergan 1990, p. 278).

I took the liberty of taking this long quote from a page of *Method in Theology* to show how much even the pastor can draw from that wisdom that Lonergan began to establish starting from a rigorous analysis of human understanding and therefore from a strictly anthropological basis because this is, above all, how Lonergan is known, that is, as a philosopher of the human intellect; but, precisely for this reason I wanted to underline an aspect that has given me so much as a pastor and has been an inspiration and support to me in many initiatives serving the people’s faith (Martini 2005).

Loneragan has left us a great legacy, immediately relevant to pastoral care and spiritual growth. When we carefully read Raimon Panikkar's (1981) great monograph, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*, we may be surprised to discover that most of this seminal work is based on pre-conciliar theological writings of impeccable authority. Panikkar was trained in the world of pre-Vatican II theological reflection at its best. He brought his deep knowledge of European theology and science to his own personal encounter with Indian spirituality to create a synthesis that continues to challenge the Catholic imagination. I am emphasizing this aspect of his thought, i.e., the pre-conciliar sources, not only to remind readers of a tradition that went into eclipse in the post-conciliar decades, but also to challenge conservative Catholics to re-evaluate the sources of the strongly held prejudices that have emerged over the years in periodicals such as *Crisis* and *First Things*.

I admit that we have a sort of personnel problem that few have addressed. Many recent critics of the reforms of the Second Vatican Council have not studied theology as it progressed through the decades before and after the Council (1962–1965). They pretend to be “shocked” and “surprised” by many things which, with a little patience, may be found among the very authoritative writings of theologians of the 30s, 40s and 50s and not only among the group known as “*la nouvelle théologie*”, which in any case advocated for a return to the sources (*ressourcement*). The questions, and attempted answers, were elaborated by great scholars who had something that more recent scholars did not have: time to study calmly. Many scholars until the 1970s were members of religious orders. They lived in community. They studied many languages. They traveled at the community's expense. They bought endless books. They did not have to prepare food, do laundry, answer the phone, take care of parishes. . .no, they just had to study, write, and teach the seminarians. Of course, this meant that they could delve into a topic from many aspects, using highly developed linguistic skills. In recent decades, we have many professors, but no longer many members of religious orders. Professors are men and women, often married, who must necessarily find a job—a professorship if that is possible—in a very tight market. They do not have the freedom of their predecessors allowing them time to weigh all angles. Instead, they have to write new, “out of the box” things to attract attention. Perhaps it is time to return to the writers and scholars of the pre-conciliar period where one can find many treasures of common sense, and a vision aimed at the future of the Church. Indeed, it was they who drafted the documents of the Council. These were not the activists who invented devious applications of the conciliar decrees. I met some of these older theologians in the 60s and 70s, and also studied with their students, who were genuinely good teachers. If one reads Raimondo Panikkar's books and articles from the 1960s, one can obtain a good idea of the extent to which he relies on these thinkers to develop his own ideas on interreligious dialogue, meeting the challenges of the modern world. The groundwork was still authentically Catholic and traditional.

Recent Catholic conservatives seem to be unaware of these pre-conciliar Catholic theologians who were building bridges between neo-Thomism and the rest of the world. It seems that they have preferred positions inspired by the more intransigent writings of Karl Barth, heightened by the apparent popularity of evangelical, or even fundamentalist, neo-Protestantism. There has certainly been an influence on the Catholic laity, thanks to the earnest proselytizing efforts of these non-denominational Christians. Catholics have felt backed into a corner, and their reception of the Second Vatican Council has been significantly impeded. It is as if the Leonard Feeney affair (Kelly 1996–2011) had never happened. In fact, during my eleven years of service as a priest in the United States, I was surprised to learn that views of religious others like those of Fr. Feeney were imposed with impunity on Catholics in many parishes in the United States as late as the 1990s, in spite of the condemnation of this by Pius XII back in 1947. With that kind of background, combined

with the “dialogue of life” with the fundamentalists, it is no surprise that many American Catholics are at odds with the present pontificate. Surely, Catholics can do better than this. Surely, fundamentalism does not resonate with the voice of the Good Shepherd.

6. Conclusions

In conclusion, it should be stated that interreligious dialogue obliges the Catholic community as a whole to reflect anew on the following great question: “Who do people say that I am?” The challenge of witnessing to our faith in Christ who is risen, who is in fact still alive among us, is a new dimension of Catholic life in a multicultural world. To witness is to communicate. To communicate means to find and use a common language skillfully. Using a common language implies sharing a common public space and creating a motivated community of discourse. If Catholics have no Christology to communicate in this way, then there will be no consistent Catholic community to sustain, discern, critique, and engage the mission of building a dialogical world, a world in which peace may still be possible. Dialogue cannot be a mere academic exercise. It is the task of those men and women who live firmly convinced that Jesus Christ is Lord, and that He may be found everywhere. On the basis of that conviction, they adhere in faith to the Church that we believe to be His Body, a beacon of hope for the world. As Benedict XVI said at the Pope John Paul II Cultural Center in Washington, D.C. on 17 April 2008 ([Pope Benedict XVI 2008](#)):

“The transmission of religious traditions to succeeding generations not only helps to preserve a heritage; it also sustains and nourishes the surrounding culture in the present day. The same holds true for dialogue between religions: both the participants and society are enriched. As we grow in understanding of one another, we see that we share an esteem for ethical values, discernable to human reason, which are revered by all peoples of goodwill. The world begs for a common witness to these values. I therefore invite all religious people to view dialogue not only as a means of enhancing mutual understanding, but also as a way of serving society at large. ... Spiritual leaders have a special duty, and we might say competence, to place the deeper questions at the forefront of human consciousness, to reawaken mankind to the mystery of human existence, and to make space in a frenetic world for reflection and prayer”.

In short, having found the fullness of life in Christ means to know Him wherever He may be found, and to love those upon whom He has showered His grace.

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Appendix A

Quotations from St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Robert Bellarmine, Francisco Suárez, Pope St. Paul VI, and Pope St. John Paul II relevant to the question of the worship of the one true God.

St. Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225–1274), *Reasons for the Faith against Muslim Objections* (cf. [Aquinas 1996](#)).

“I say this supposing our belief that the whole disposition of nature and all human acts are subject to Divine Providence. Take this belief away and all worship of the Divinity is excluded. Yet we argue presently against those who say they are

worshippers of God, whether Muslims or Christians or Jews”. (from chapter seven)

“But if someone does not admit the omnipotence of God, we do not attempt to argue with him in this work. We are here arguing against Muslims and others who confess the omnipotence of God”. (from chapter eight)

St. Robert Bellarmine (1542–1621) believed that Jews and Muslims worship the one God. In Book III, chapter 10 of his *Controversy on the Word of God (De Verbo Dei)*, he writes: “Jeremiah foretold the future—that in the time of the New Testament all men will know the one God, which certainly now is fulfilled; for the Gentiles have been converted to the Faith, and also the Jews and the Turks, who, although they are impious, still worship the one God” (*tamen unum Deum collunt*). [Robert Bellarmine, *Opera Omnia*, Paris, Vivès, 1870, Tome I, p. 188;] (Bellarmine 1870).

The Jesuit, **Francisco Suárez (1548–1617)**, thought that Christian rulers could allow the infidels freedom of worship within their realms as long as their forms of worship were not opposed to the natural law. Thus, he thought that religious rites that were not intrinsically evil or contrary to natural reason could be tolerated. Among these “are the Jewish rites and perhaps even many rites of the Muslims and similar non-believers, who adore only the one true God: (*ut sunt ritus Judaeorum, et fortasse multi etiam ritus Sarracenorum, et similibus infidelium, qui unum tantum verum Deum adorant*) [De fide. disp. XVIII, sect. 4 n. 9 in, *Opera omnia*, Vivès. 1858, Vol. XII, p. 451] (Suárez 1858).

Pope St. Paul VI (r. 1963–1978), in his 1964 encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam* no. 107, recognizes Muslims as worshipers of the one God: “Then we have those worshipers who adhere to other monotheistic systems of religion, especially the Moslem religion. We do well to admire these people for all that is good and true in their worship of God [*quos propter ea quae in eorum cultu vera sunt et probanda, merito admiramur*] (Paul VI 1964).

Pope St. John Paul II (r. 1978–2005), in a 19 August 1985 address to young Muslims in Morocco, states that Christians and Muslims believe in the same God: “Christians and Muslims, we have many things in common, as believers and as human beings. We live in the same world, marked by many signs of hope, but also by multiple signs of anguish. For us, Abraham is a very model of faith in God, of submission to his will and of confidence in his goodness. We believe in the same God, the one God, the living God, the God who created the world and brings his creatures to their perfection. [In the French original: *Nous croyons au même Dieu, le Dieu unique, le Dieu vivant, le Dieu qui crée les mondes et porte ses créatures à leur perfection*] (John Paul II 1985).

Notes

- ¹ By consensus, I have in mind the Greek term *kath'holon*, which is the real meaning of “catholic”: the church that adheres to the theological consensus of all the churches of the apostolic age. I am also thinking of “*lex orandi, lex credendi*”, by which I understand that what is set forth as prayer in the liturgy is determinative of what is to be believed as true by the worshipping community. We do not have space here to work out all the implications of these terms, but it should be obvious that they make Catholic identity explicit and perennial.
- ² See Gina Christian in Our Sunday Visitor, on the removal by stealth of a beloved icon of Christ as an Apache healer from the Mescalero Mission in New Mexico on 3 July 2024. The episode has the whole Native American Catholic community in a state of shock, since the deed was engineered by the non-resident pastor and his associates!

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