

What is a Catholic Worldview?

Without (to my knowledge) recourse to another, readily available definition, I present the following: To have a Catholic Worldview is to view the world as Christ Himself sees it, informed by conscience and the work of the Holy Spirit, working through the traditions and revelations of the Church.

As we are Christians, people of Christ, we strive to be more like him, and specifically to love one another as he has loved us. A Catholic worldview, as distinct from that of other Christian traditions, is able to draw from the wealth of tradition and the example of the saints which the Church has handed down to us.

What a Catholic Worldview is not

1. It is not a political system, which prescribes the laws and standards by which men are to interact in civil society.
2. It is not a strictly cultural phenomenon. It has no defined language, no delineated societal structure, no musical or artistic standards of its own.

I do not mean to imply that a Catholic worldview does not have any bearing in these arenas; rather, it informs and evaluates these institutions and ideas, but is not to be absorbed into them or superseded by them. It is above them.

Attributes of a Catholic Worldview

What follows is not an exhaustive list. These are attributes of a worldview which I would recognize as Catholic.

1. It is based on the love which Christ has for each individual human being. What we know about God, as revealed through His Son, is that God is Love.
2. It is directed toward the World to come (cf. MT 5 - 7, particularly 6:25-33). Our goal is God himself. All other goals are either intermediate, or detrimental.
3. It is person based; personal. God loves each individual human. I believe that what every Christian should communicate to everyone he meets should be: "God sent me to tell you that He loves you." A Catholic's worldview must, I believe, be entirely expressed in the language of personal love.
4. A Catholic worldview should be evaluated against the two great commandments, found in MT 23:37-40.

I recently came across the following passage, regarding those commandments (if you'll forgive me a lengthy quote):

"For our good, about which philosophers so keenly contended, is nothing else than to be united to God. It is, if I may say so, by spiritually embracing Him that the intellectual soul is filled and impregnated with true virtues. We are enjoined to love this god with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our strength. To this good we ought to be led by those who love us, and to lead those we love. Thus are fulfilled those two commandments on which hang all the law and the prophets: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy mind, and with all thy soul;" and "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself." For, that man might be intelligent in his self-love, there was appointed for him an end to which he might refer all his actions, that he might be blessed. For he who loves himself wishes nothing else than this. And the end set before him is "to draw near to God." And so, when one who has this intelligent self-love is commanded to love his neighbor as himself, what else is enjoined than that he shall do all in his power to commend to him the love of God?"

(St. Augustine, The City of God, X, iii)

How I feel we as Catholics most often do it wrong

1. I believe that one of the most common mistakes that people make in addressing one another, and in this way Catholics are no different than others, is the presupposition of a shared point-of-view in others where none exists. This comes out most prominently when we discuss matters of morality or doctrine with non-Christians and non-Catholics. We too often skip right to the part where they must change and abandon sin (which is indeed true), but without first adequately explaining why, namely because God loves them too much to wish them to remain in sin. Our explanation of Catholic positions on moral matters, even to ourselves and each other, too seldom begin with "God loves us."
2. A tendency to be too legalistic, or rule-centered. Even people I know who have been brought up in the church and in good Catholic families still see Catholic moral teaching as "a bunch of rules," rather than as being the logical and moral implications of the Love which we've been given. We behave the way we do, which is indeed differently than non-Christians, because of the love of God. I believe that this point is very poorly communicated, even to Catholics. I don't honestly know how we should do better, but I know many people in my parents' generation who can still recite the Baltimore Catechism without ever having internalized what could be the single most important aspect of our faith, namely that God loves us. Indeed, we should adhere to the Church's moral teachings, but I think we too often skip to the end.
3. Expectation to be accepted by the secular world. American and European cultures have been inculcably shaped by Christianity, but they are not Christian cultures. Even when many of a society's civil laws were based upon Christian morality, following those laws to the letter was and is still insufficient for gaining eternal life. Certainly it is demanded of a Christian to not commit adultery and not steal, but the crux of the matter is that we are commanded to love God with our whole being. In our contemporary society, it is indeed "normal" to be on some level Christian. I believe that the so-called "mega-churches" currently so popular in our country are a cultural artifact of Christianity, but without the challenging parts. People in this country, including many Catholics, go to church (at least on Easter and Christmas) because that's what normal people do.

We don't live in a Christian world, and to some extent, we never will. Christ sends us out "as sheep among wolves," and assures us that as the world abused and ridiculed him, it will do the same to us. I don't mean that we should withdraw from the world, but that our efforts should always be directed at saving people's souls and protecting their dignity, always with the message that God loves them. I believe that too often when American Catholics engage in the political sphere, we're trying to enforce Christian morality in an unchristian world, and the result is that people believe Christians are just trying to keep them from being free.

By way of conclusion, Kevin Perrotta mentioned the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church in his remarks, and having read it (and many of the encyclicals and council documents it cites), I believe that it's an important and informative work, which should be read by anyone who wishes to teach a Catholic worldview. However, it is not light reading, and not being as well educated or intelligent as I should wish to be, I confess that much of it probably escaped me even while I was reading it. There has been a wealth of writing from our recent Pontiffs and bishops on social matters, and much of it of great intellectual rigor. However, I feel that much of it has escaped the eye of the average Catholic, either because they haven't read it, or because they found it difficult to understand. I don't know from experience, but I think there must be a better teaching tool for the average parishoner. I'm personally struck by the example of Mother Teresa, who, as far as I know, was less educated than I am, but had as profound an understanding of the Love of God as anyone I've ever heard of.

~ By a life-long member of Christ the King, married and in his mid-twenties