

# CrossCurrents *A Catholic Reflects on Faith in Our Times*



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## Travel Lessons: Cultural and Spiritual

**The woman raised her hand to confess** she was struggling. I had begun my talk on Catholic social teaching by urging my audience to let go of the mental baggage that Americans typically bring to social issues. I warned that our Church's complex social doctrine could not be grasped by boxing it into the two-dimensional categories of liberal/conservative, left/right, Democratic/Republican.

As the Q & A session began, this woman announced that those categories kept intruding on her listening, and she wondered how to achieve more open-mindedness.

I suggested that the challenge was more cultural than spiritual. Citing my own experience of living in a foreign country, I suggested that too few Americans acquire the kind of "intercultural literacy" that would enable them to perceive American culture from a distance -- or even from within another culture. Our geographic isolation (especially compared to Europe's jam-packed cultural mosaic) can trick us into assuming that our way is not only the *best* way, but even the *only* way.

But last week I realized that, for many Americans, such isolation is self-imposed. We New Englanders, for example, have nearby neighbors whose ways are just distinct enough to help us see ourselves in better perspective. My trip to Canada's version of Thanksgiving on October 12 is a perfect case in point. It took merely six hours driving to reach the border between Calais, Maine and Saint Stephen, New Brunswick, but immediately our life changed in ways both big and small, subtle and obvious.

Canada is metric (like most of the world) so the road signs showed kilometers, the gas sold in liters, and the speed limits were in km/h. Canada is also bi-lingual, so every sign

matched "road" with "chemin," "street" with "rue," "lane" with "allée," and the doughnut I got in francophone Cap-Pelé was "chocolat miel."

During our stay we saw differences in values, lifestyles, and attitudes. Prices seemed high for two reasons: the Canadian dollar is worth only 90¢ US, and many products and services are heavily taxed. Canadian stores keep their cigarettes covered and hidden from view until you request them, but Canadian TV ads show a nursing mother's bare breast. It begs the question: why are we Americans less discreet about selling an addictive product but more prudish and censorious about a normal maternal activity?

We spied wind-turbines and heard that they produced 20% of Canada's electric energy. This went unverified, yet there was no doubting our hosts' pride in Canada's alternative energy progress. When they noted how impressive their wind farms were to see, I couldn't help comparing the negative attitude of those New Englanders who find wind farms merely an ugly eyesore.

The biggest and timeliest difference emerged during a Thanksgiving dinner chat with an older woman from Ontario who said she and her husband vacation in Florida each winter. "But we may not continue much longer," she said. "We're getting older, and we can't afford the insurance." She meant, of course, the medical coverage that many Canadians feel compelled to purchase whenever visiting this country, where free health care is not available. "We can't afford to get sick in the States," she said, "So we have to buy insurance, but last year it cost \$500 a week."

This woman, an ardent conservative Catholic, clearly could not fathom life without government health care. She recalled having her first child before national health began, and described their anxiety that medical complications might ruin them financially. "Even if we paid high premiums and everything went well, there were always bills to pay." Government health care ended that anxiety once she had her other children, and she could not imagine going back to the old way. "We pay more for things here, we have higher taxes, but nobody ever has to worry about paying for medical care. It doesn't matter whether you have \$50 or \$50 million."

Years ago her husband required heart surgery, and recently needed additional repair work. "They told him he needed it, and they put it on their calendar, and they did it, and he's fine now. People may have to wait longer for elective surgeries, but we get what we need when we need it."

How ironic is it that Canadians typically pity Americans that we cannot share their serene lack of anxiety over health care costs?

Five days among such Canadians was enough time to confirm that others live different, often better lives, and that our ways are not the only ways -- let alone the best. It reminds me that our American compulsion to re-invent every wheel in our own isolated image, rather than learning lessons from others' successes, costs us dearly.

But amid all the differences, one disturbing similarity stood out: the fall from credibility of the Catholic hierarchy.

A few days before I arrived, the Bishop of Antigonish, Nova Scotia was arrested for possession of child pornography after customs officials in Ottawa noticed his passport indicating frequent trips to popular sex tourism destinations in Asia and then confiscated his laptop. Raymond Lahey resigned as bishop even before his arrest became public.

The awful irony: Lahey had made news just weeks earlier for negotiating an unprecedented \$15 million settlement of a class-action sex-abuse suit against the diocese of Antigonish. Canadian papers had featured photos of Bishop Lahey alongside the lead plaintiff, Ron Martin, and the Bishop got his share of praise:

*"I am firmly of the belief that we would not be here today if it wasn't for the courage of Ron Martin and the commitment of Bishop Lahey to finding a fair and just resolution to compensate legitimate victims of priest sexual abuse," John McKiggan, the lawyer behind the class-action suit, said.*

As the story developed it went from bad to worse. First a new private suit was announced by one victim who found the class-action result inadequate in the face of Lahey's arrest.

Then the Bishop of St. John's, Newfoundland, suggested that authorities there had dropped the ball years ago when a

complaint was lodged against Lahey during his time as priest there:

*Archbishop Martin Currie acknowledged in an interview Tuesday that officials may have done little to investigate a claim by Shane Earle that he saw pornographic magazines in the home of Raymond Lahey... "It seems that perhaps the whole system - the Royal Newfoundland Constabulary, the social services and the church - perhaps everyone failed Shane Earle and for that I'm very sorry."*

Even worse, Shane Earle was the very person whose abusive treatment at St. John's notorious Mount Cashel Orphanage (run by Christian Brothers) led to a public inquiry, then a huge sex-abuse scandal in 1989, and finally the orphanage's closing in 2005.

So now the parishes of Antigonish are being told to pool their own cash to fund a \$15 million suit settled by a bishop who has already resigned over a child pornography charge which reflects behavior going back more than twenty years!

*"This will bring another element of pain into the situation," Rev. Paul Abbass, a spokesman for the Antigonish diocese said. "We want to find some hope in the midst of all of this, but right now it's just so overwhelming."*

When the Mount Cashel story originally broke in 1989, I was editing a Catholic newspaper, and we covered the story as a "Canadian" phenomenon with fingers crossed, hoping there would be no expansion into the US. Of course, that expansion came all too soon, first in Louisiana, then in Boston, then in dozens of US dioceses. The Vatican, crossing its own fingers, termed it an "American problem." We have since learned that priestly sex abuse and episcopal malfeasance are not the monopoly of any country or hemisphere.

A trip like this, even to our nearest neighbor, teaches two contrasting lessons: **First**, our American mind-set is the product of our own isolation, and travel can help us become more broad-minded. **Second**, our Church is not bound by borders, and the crisis of Catholicism's credibility goes well beyond US dioceses.

Sadly, while our cultural tunnel-vision may be a peculiarly American phenomenon, Catholicism's tarnished reputation may well be universal.

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