

Albanese's brand of cultural Catholicism harks back to an earlier Australia – but it's also thoroughly modern

Frank Bongiorno

We don't know if the prime minister marks the Catholic box on his census form. We do know that his heritage is meaningful to him

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Some observers were surprised at the depth of emotion that Anthony Albanese showed when delivering his statement responding to the death of Pope Francis. The status of Australia's prime minister as "mourner-in-chief" is now well established but at this time of the year it is normally displayed in a rather different context – the Anzac Day ceremony.

Albanese was mourning a foreign head of state but also a man recognised as a spiritual leader by Australia's Catholics, who were a fifth of the population at the last census. We don't know if Albanese marks that box on his census form. We do know, from things he had to say since the Pope's death and from other statements over the years, that his Catholic heritage is meaningful to him.

"I think what people do is they draw on who they are and certainly my Catholicism is just a part of me," he said, after he took questions from journalists. And he repeated a comment he has made often over the years: that his mother raised him in three great faiths, the Catholic church, the Labor party and South Sydney football club, or the Rabbitohs. What seems to have begun as an amusing quip seems to have solidified into a more serious statement of personal identity. It evokes belonging, even a kind of tribalism.

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It is also tied up in the wider story that Albanese tells about where he came from and who he is. His mother, Maryanne, has always been central to that story but there is also his Italian father, Carlo, a ship's steward. The story young Anthony heard was that his father had died in a car accident soon after marrying his mother. Eventually, Anthony learnt from his mother that there was no marriage and no car accident. At a time, and in a religious tradition, where such things still mattered,



Maryanne had given birth out of wedlock. Anthony finally met Carlo in 2009 on a visit to Italy, and stayed in touch until his death in 2014.

Perhaps Albanese's emotion was connected with this wider story. Australian Catholicism could be punitive and unforgiving, especially to single mothers, but Francis was a man who said it was a religion for the poor and oppressed. The church needed its teachings and its truths but it should not devote itself to judging the lives of others. His was a generous and expansive vision of the faith, one of compassion, humility and justice. It is little wonder that global reaction to his death recalls that of another pope with the common touch, John XXIII, in 1963, the year of Albanese's birth.

The social justice tradition within the Catholic church – expressed most famously in Pope Leo XIII's 1891 encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*, on the "rights and duties of capital and labour" – was one of the forces that led to Catholics gravitating to the party that Albanese would come to lead. Another was that Catholics were disproportionately working class. But Labor's collectivist ideology and tight discipline chimed with the Catholic stress on community. Protestants, in their elevation of the individual conscience, could find themselves alienated by Labor's expectation that individuals would sometimes cast aside their judgments and beliefs for the sake of solidarity.

The result was a broad alignment of Labor with Catholicism and Liberal with Protestantism. As a working-class party, Labor still naturally attracted many Protestants as voters and parliamentarians, but it was disproportionately Catholic at least until 1955. The Liberal party and its predecessors attracted Catholic voters – and the United Australia Party in the 1930s even had a Catholic prime minister in Labor renegade, Joseph Lyons – but Catholics were hard to find in Menzies' postwar Liberal Party. "Be careful, boys. Here comes the Papist", Robert Menzies would joke of John Cramer, the lone Catholic in his ministry. But unlike many Liberal activists in the party's branches, Menzies himself would have been happy enough to have more in the parliament.

The Protestant-Catholic divide now seems remote from present-day Australia, in which the number of people professing no religion at all rivals the number calling themselves Christian. But sectarian feeling was high in the 1950s and contributed to a split in the Labor party that led to many Catholics departing, some of them forming the breakaway Democratic Labor party. Catholic support for the Liberals, even Catholic prime ministers and premiers, would in time become normal; Tony Abbott trained for a time as a priest in the 1980s, Malcolm Turnbull was a Catholic convert, and Peter Dutton, like Albanese, identifies as Catholic. Catholics today can be found in all major parties.

Albanese's evocation of a Catholic tribalism in his "three faiths" quip harks back to an earlier Australia. But his claim to a share in the broader cultural and political influence of Catholicism on Australian politics and society is thoroughly modern. He does not appear to be a regular churchgoer. He is not a "practising Catholic", we would once have said.

Rather he is what is sometimes called a "cultural Catholic". When I first heard that term in the mid-1980s I assumed that it was a handy euphemism for not going to church. Almost 40 years on I can see that it is more meaningful.

It is the impulse that might move an Australian prime minister to the brink of tears on the death of a pope.

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