

THE AMERICAN CATHOLIC FUTURE: CREATIVE WAYS TO END A MILLENNIUM

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To invite a historian to speak about the future is not a call to predict. The human record is too full of variables, too full of surprises, to make prediction of any value. It is, for example, impossible to find a prognosticator who foresaw any of the major events in China or Eastern Europe as recently as a half year before they occurred. No one foresaw the action by Pope John XXIII calling the Second Vatican Council. The rise of the fundamentalist evangelical Pentecostal coalescence in American Protestantism along with a general rise of interest in intense religion was, so far as I can tell utterly unforeseen around 1965. What a historian foresees for the year 2000 would be of little value.

Historians play a somewhat different role. Abraham Lincoln once said something to the effect that if we could first know where we are and whither we are tending, we might know what to do and how to do it. The historian plays at least a modest role in accounting for "where we are" by seeing where we have been. He or she can point to the social identity of a group or movement and, by reference to events and tendencies, help project a path toward one of several kinds of futures.

The approach one uses will also be based on the philosophy of history of the observer. The progressive works with a metaphysic which assures that, whatever the temporary setbacks, there will be a better future. The cynic believes in nothing, hopes for nothing, and works for nothing. Sometimes people give away their philosophy of history, their sense of the present in the light of outcomes, in subtle ways. German theologian Gerhard Ebeling once pointed out as an example: when someone uses the word "still" in reference to a trend within a phenomenon, that person is giving away a whole philosophy of history. Can one still believe? Can the Catholic Church still hold loyalty? Can we still expect our children to carry on the tradition? The word "still" is like the cancer in the marrow, the canker in the apple. It will have its way. It assumes that there was more in the past than in the present, and that the present will give way to a future in which there will be less.

In the Christian case, the approach based in realistic hope seems most appropriate. Realism conditions every view of the human scene. Finitude, contingency, and transience mark all human endeavors and aspirations. One never expects too much; the war in the human soul and the conflict in the human condition leads one to be wary. Yet Christians move not only in the light of the empirical situation but also in the faith that God is in control of history, that the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ represent a turn which makes everything new. Cynicism and despair are as out of place as natural optimism. In the light of realistic hope, one can look ahead to the future, the Catholic future, the American Catholic future.

It is already commonplace to say that the year 2000 will be alluring through the 1990s. The turn of a Christian millennium seems portentous: a time for measuring, for resolve. In the case of apocalyptic sorts, for no logical or chronological reason and certainly not for any reason in biblical revelation or church teaching, there will be prophesies of the end time. Often one hears that there were such outbursts of millennialism in the year 1000; history can repeat itself. My colleagues in medieval studies assure me, however, that the year 1000 produced no extraordinary millennial thinking in an era when apocalyptic views of the future were common.

And we have the '90s before us. How to regard them will no doubt be an issue which rises from how we regard what has gone before. I recall hearing of a corporate meeting at Christmas in 1979. A nonagenarian corporate founder was wheeled in to the office party for one more toast, as he was every year. He delivered himself of a few very optimistic projections about the economy in the forthcoming '80s. Few were predicting such possibilities. A young member of the firm, not yet coached not to ask questions of Mr. Big, had the temerity to query: Why did Mr. Big think the '80s would be so good? The answer came with the sweep of an arm and a hurrah with a smile: "They were good last time."

Christians have no good old days, no golden age on which to look. Were the '90s good for American Catholicism last time? It depends on how one relates to issues like Americanism, immigration and the attitude of the church toward labor. But however the decade appears, it provides no special precedent for what occurs and will occur now.

One of the best ways to look toward the future is based on an "if ... then" contingency. If this or that begins to develop, then this or that is an appropriate response. For instance, had Americans been schooled to recognize the power in revitalized hardline modern religions such as Shiite fundamentalism, they could have prepared better for what happened in Iran. With knowledge of such power in mind, we look into the '90s aware that ethnic and religious particularity is likely to be a major element in Eastern European power plays and can do some anticipating.

Now, however, we have only the American Catholic Church about which to think. I am going to propose two counsels, conceiving them in the present (academic) circumstance in connection with the verb "to teach." In the simplest outline imaginable, we shall suggest that creative ways to end a millennium would involve:

Teaching on the basis of secrets learned from recent experiences of loss.

Teaching on the basis of secrets learned from recent experiences of gain.

I. Loss

It may seem un-American to begin with reference to loss. The Catholic Church participates in the American ethos, one in which putatively we are always building upon achievements and assessments of existing strength. Yet it would be dishonest reporting the failure to live up to the Lincolnian theme of providing an accurate accounting of "where we are" not to mention loss in the hope of doing something creative with awareness of it.

The American Catholic Church, while it has African and Asian participants and while much of its future will be under Hispanic influence, derives from European source: and still "still!" draws upon them for direction. This is particularly the case of Catholicism among American faiths because of the location of the Vatican in Europe, but two millennia of European shaping cannot fail to have an effect. It was only 50 years ago when Hilaire Belloc was still saying: Europe is the faith. The faith is Europe.

Europe is back in the news again, challenging the Asian markets and the volatility of the Middle East, Latin America and the Asian subcontinent in newsmaking. And in Europe's memory there are vital expressions of faith, seen most evidently in the resistance to the Soviet Union on the part of Christians, in Polish and other Eastern

European freedom movements on the part of Catholics, sometimes with the partnership of Orthodox (as in Romania) and Lutheranism (in Germany). Yet much of Western Europe has seen little but decline for centuries. The candles go out, the cathedrals empty, the seminaries are deserted, the landmarks and museums recall a faith once vital in Christendom.

To see the tall towers of total Christendom fall into neglect certainly must evoke a sense of loss, regret and anxiety: it can happen here. Less than 10 percent of the Catholic populations are regulators at Mass in Western Europe outside Ireland. When the cardinal of Paris enjoys the presence of the premier at his ceremonies, one has to know that this is in part a gesture to one who is a Jew turned Catholic and hardly the beginning of a new entente. The Pope, who chides American Catholics for living distracted lives even though he can see half of them at Mass, looks out the window at Rome where fewer than 10 percent attend.

Catholicism in Europe, especially Western Europe, then, is dislodged, displaced, depleted. One senses in the cities there an almost oppressive secularity, a hedonism and materialism which displays populations unmindful of Christian norms. Less and less does one turn to Europe as backstop or source, for polity, theology or heroic example.

Latin America? In some reckonings it represents two-thirds of the nominal Catholics of the world. There are myriad signs of vitality, in base communities, liberation theology expressions, charismatic forces, and the quiet faithfulness of millions who try to pick their way through times of change with the resources of faith. Yet loss also characterizes much of the Latin American scene. Protestant pentecostals proselytize and boast that every hour 400 people, most of them baptized Catholic, turn Protestant evangelical. That does not represent a loss to Christianity, but it is an element of concern to Catholics.

Loss in North America is spoken of more by the disgruntled Catholic Right than by others. But anyone who loves the heritage of the immigrant church cannot help but feel some tinges of regret for a dispersal and diffusion of Catholic populations. There are, each year, more people than ever who wish to be called Catholic and who find it important in their identity. But this wishing is not reflected in vocations to priesthood or mass attendance. The great basilicas and cathedrals which once were refuges and centers for immigrant populations fell to bulldozers and black Baptists. Peter Laslett has spoken of *The World We Have Lost*. He could be referring to the loss of intactness in a Catholic world. Authority means little, and the cohesive power of Catholicism lessens progressively. Loss.

We suggested that one can teach on the basis of secrets learned from loss. I urge that in the sudden changes within ageless Catholicism there are lessons for the Church, the churches and the culture. Our culture is based upon the ideal of success and does not make room for interpreting failure. It puts a premium on managing and drives people to competitive manic fury in order for them to be in power-without helping them make room for the chaos which storms the soul and the city. Every college, every corporate body, stresses the need to excel. Yet the very concept of excelling for all its worth, allows for little empathy for those who cannot, who must come in second if someone comes in first. Domination and control: these are the great dreams and norms in the emergent culture.

Signs of this trend, which allows for no incorporation of loss into thinking, abound. The television commercial may be the most powerful medium as it turns viewers into elements in a chain of consumption. Products offered always promise that their users will succeed, manage, excel, dominate and control: the new automobile, the right deodorant, the proper regimen for body building will assure that.

In business, the world of takeovers and buyouts; of mergers which are mindless of human loss; of investment patterns which enrich the few and leave the thousands jobless; the competitive world bannered in front of career-seeking collegians: these habituate populations to ways of life and thought which challenge basic faith. They represent a spiritual problem, one which would be well addressed by people who can internalize and interpret loss.

This is not the place to detail all the other features of contemporary life in which coping with loss has no place. Obviously, the very term is purged of dignity in the athletic realm, and there are only sneers for anyone who wants to teach teams to live with an experience that has to happen to half of them every day. In gender relations, in a world where men dominate and control, or dominated and controlled, some elements of the women's movements suggest that "now it's our turn" and, in turning over patriarchies, want compensatory control now. They can take lessons from men, who keep managing. And even in health, where all bodies are destined for death and all are vulnerable to illness, the message comes of only success for those who meditate, eat macrobiotic foods, or "take command" of their bodies.

The Church, of course, spent a millennium and a half giving lessons in domination and control, in managing and claiming success. From, say, the year 313 to the year 1776, if we want to take symbolic dates for the beginning and end of legal Christendom as it affects Americans, the great temptation of the Church, often fulfilled, was to preach the cross of Jesus Christ but to live with the trappings of temporal power. In America there were special reasons for Catholics to cover up the reality of loss, since they were busy assuring themselves and their neighbors that they belonged. We Chicagoans recall a 1926 Eucharistic Congress with its display of "Catholic power," or the rally the archdiocese used to fill Soldiers Field a week or two after Protestants and Orthodox had almost done so in 1954, during a World Council of Churches meeting. In such recall we saw efforts to impress, to flex ecclesiastical muscles lessons well learned from the Protestant majority, but less relevant now.

The secret is out: that kind of power is gone. Much of it was based on the coercive authority of the Church. Today that authority is diminished, if not disappearing. When Catholics are persuaded of a churchly teaching, you cannot keep them from being faithful to it. When they are unconvinced and cannot be persuaded, no amount of coercion induces threat. Such a change represents loss in the eyes of a certain kind of church leader or nostalgic sort. But in our reading of creative ways to end a millennium, it is possible to see the other side, based on the concept of loss, as being of help.

While neither a preacher nor a theologian in my professional roles, I find myself coming to where preachers and theologians do. That is, if there is to be power in weakness, recovery in loss, resolve in setback, Catholics have their focus and source in the figure of Jesus Christ on the cross. They know his sense of abandonment and cry of dereliction. They welcome his kenosis, his self-emptying, his choosing to set aside the prerogatives of godhood or godhead, his willingness to be helpless. In Christ, at every eucharist and encounter with the Word, Catholics are confronted with otherness, with an other which addresses them with an alternative interpretation of loss.

A creative way of ending the millennium might be for American Catholics to use the centrality of the cross as an agent for reinterpreting its work, finding a new appeal. Let me point in six directions:

Worship: Romano Guardini called it *zwecklos aber doch sinnvoll*, "pointless but significant." The liturgy, the people's worship, is the central act of Catholicism. With the loss of triumphalism there came trivialization. Can we read in the casual folksy (more than folk) liturgies, which borrow concepts of "celebration" from who knows where, a great evasion of the central point of worship: to bring people to an encounter with the Other who would reduce us in awe and then enable us with grace? Christians are not in the business of cultivating a cult of suffering, but they are, in the eucharist, in the presence of a condescending God who lets them be honest with their losses, since a final victory in the resurrection, now proclaimed, also begins to be realized.

Embodiment. I refer here to Catholic community. There has been loss in the chain of power by which Catholic authority is felt as deriving from Rome, from a distance, and cycling back to it. Now, I would readily agree that to break the cycle or circle would threaten what is integral to Catholicism. But when in the terms of human observation that authority chain is weakened and the distance is heightened, there are compensations. What looks like loss may actually be an opportunity to learn what Catholicism has also been about all along. That in the local community where Christ is present in the eucharist and sacramental life in general there God draws near. In the local community we confront along with the divine Other the human embodiments: in the fellow parishioner, the friend, the neighbor, the family member, the stranger. "As you have done to the least of these my brothers and sisters..." Realization of the embodiment of Christ in these others and in local and immediate situation

allows for a reappraisal in which the sense of loss comes to be related to concrete foreshadowing of victories.

Therapy. I already mentioned the impulse to advocate regimens or products which assure people can take command. Yet almost none of the six billion people now on the earth will be here a century from now. Death has its way: there's a lot of it going around these days. So are limits. People may follow all the holistic and wholistic principles and still not be in control. Automobile accidents, cancer, addictions have their own way. Yet in the Christ who in the gospels showed awareness of human limitations and loss and lived in the shadow of the Otherness death invokes, the Catholic community has its own interpretation of suffering. Leszek Kolakowski the Polish intellectual who was a Marxist humanist, is a friend of the Pope, and who speaks up now for religion and myth, sees pathos when Christians, who have an interpretation of suffering, gloss over it in order to use triumphal models of human command over body and mind. It may be that the AIDS crisis and other plagues and setbacks will impose on Catholicism an agenda out of which it can make a distinctive address among the fashionable therapies of the day.

Message. Not a few diagnosticians of Catholic loss relate it in part to muffled messages, mumbled homilies, maldirected voicings of the Gospel failure to communicate the ways of God so as to address needs of personal and community life. Yet in our time there is a recovery on many levels, from the pop "when bad things happen to good people" to the elaborate processive views of God participating in human suffering. These are excellent times to recover theodicy, a recovery which involves laity and clergy, poets and prophets and professors.

Structure. Of course, anyone who "ran the show" in the old style will sense loss in today's church. Once upon a time, as folk wisdom put it, "what the pope or bishop or priest said, went." Now, as a priest friend of mine says: it is like show business. "You are only as good as your last act. There are few automatic appeals to be nude to an authority structure. Persuasion has to be the mode. Yet, for all the temptations to autonomy of even rebellion, one must note as well a strong message sent by tens of millions of Catholic faithful. They want to be part of the community of the Church and are stumbling along with the hierarchy in a search of forms appropriate to the new situation.

Agenda. This is not the place to elaborate a social agenda, but one can point in a direction or two. Thus few who look ahead fail to list as a prime item concern for stewardship of the earth, from the height of the ozone layer to the ocean depth. We sense loss: of the days when resources were apparently limitless; when America was dominant and in control and could do what it wanted with resources. Now nature acts up in reactive response and shows how fragile, how delicate the membrane of life around us is. The first lines of the Bible and the Creeds, by witnessing to divine creatorship, commit Christians to lead in facing loss and finding new vision and mission in respect to the jeopardized created order.

Otherness also beckons in the world of human arrangements. The biblical "hospitality to the stranger" takes on new meaning in a society where we have experienced the loss of control the limits of welfare funding, the overpowering weight of national debt, the willingness to see a permanent underclass develop. The Catholic church is a prime motivator in the field of voluntary change and has political interests which can help a society regain direction. Is there a "market" for action based on the idea of internalizing loss and integrating it into strategy? Not when the shortrange approach to self-interest dominates; Catholicism, with its long memory and patience, ought to be able to help reorient a society to move, if not toward altruism - societies do not live by altruism - but by longrange self-interest.

II. Gains

As with learning from loss, so one takes lessons from compensatory gains and teaches on the basis of these. Here one must begin by resituating Catholicism in its global context. A church which has universal interests written into its name and definition ought to be the last place where parish turns to parochialism, province to provincialism, love of nation turns to chauvinism. Editors of religious periodicals report that they get little response to international stories. But the international scene has a bearing on every move made in Catholicism in America.

As a first illustration, we can look at East and West, symbolic terms for the world which lived under Marxist-Leninist or Marxist-Maoist persuasion and shaped into economic and political structure whole ways of life. Now, suddenly, we see the collapse of that structure, the questioning of its ideology, the display for all the world that populations if given even a bit of opportunity to show where they stand do stand in the capitol squares shouting for freedom. This is not the time to elaborate on the chaos and struggles which will follow the great falls of Communist empires in 1989. It is the place to see the potential gain for Catholic Christianity there and to see whether American Catholicism can help address the spiritual void which is apparent. No one expects new opportunities for Catholic domination or control. But to build upon the sense of participation one observes in the Eastern European shifts there has to be a demonstration that Catholics can outthink or outimagine the principalities and powers.

When one looks to North and South, there are also gains. One should not put Latin America in the "loss" column: the late 20th century is seeing change which brings many assets. It is interesting to note how many of the heroines and heroes of North American Catholicism now belong to the southern world: Mother Teresa, Oscar Romero, Dom Helder Camara, South African dissidents. And there is growth of Christian, often Catholic populations, in sub-Saharan Africa, where every 24 hours there are 16,000 new Christians. The use of the word "still" is out of place there.

Much of that growth relativizes the philosophies and structures which guided and undergirded American Catholicism. Many Catholics there find irrelevant the dominance-and-control models of the rich world church. On the other hand, there is no point in romanticizing the poor world Christianity which is emerging. It, too, is in the hands of people who seek to wrest power and to dominate. Its membership is made up of sinners. Deprivation and poverty do not dignify everyone; there is meanness and selfishness in the Third World church. And there will be setbacks, as Muslims in Africa and materialists in Latin America have their way, or as petty new regimes persecute Catholics, as they do in some African nations. Yet one can use a metaphoric global "trickle-up" theory to suggest that the North American Catholic world can learn from the charisms, the exuberance, the explanatory power and community building loyalties of Catholics who live in worlds quite different from our own.

People who did not come to think Christianly by way of Plato and Aristotle, Greco-Roman philosophy and Western European theology and North American vitality, are showing that with the loss of certain worlds - Marxist - Leninist and, in some ways, Enlightenment-Western rationality - the faith will find new ways to express itself. And that is a gain from which one can learn in North America.

There is another East which impinges on the American Catholic Church. We have truly entered the Pacific era, and our business leaders are busier making sense of Japan and the Asian rim markets and cities than they are in Europe or, for that matter, much of North America. Similarly, in religion, theologians are dealing with the problem posed by pluralism as they enact conversations with Hindu, Buddhist and other resources. This dialogue can represent threat, a loss, in this case of Christian monopoly of meanings. Yet Asian religion and Asian Christianity are teaching Catholicism additional modes of being, ways which depart from the "control" model. The "theology of the pain of God" school in Japan, for instance, teaches Catholics and other Christians to allow themselves to be vulnerable, even when asserting power.

Gains closer to home? My remark above about some feminists using dominance and control models compensatorily does not do justice to the highly diverse movement of liberation and change in self-concepts on the part of women. The movement of millions from work in the home, to work in the home and in the work force outside the home, was a change in lifestyle that inevitably called for new interpretations. It is impossible to undergo such a drastic shift as America, and with it American Catholicism, has experienced in the past two decades, without disruption and unsettlement. Frustration with official church policy in respect to certain roles for women will only increase. But for the most part, the church has experienced an infusion of new talent, energy and vision with the new understanding of women's roles. That has to be put into the "gains" column, along with analogous movements in black and Hispanic Catholicism or wherever once-dominated groups no longer permit others to

define them.

On the gain side one also sites the change in laity. I like to say that alongside Vatican II and the election of John E Kennedy to the presidency as a symbolic act, suburbanization and the G.I. Bill were the other major events in recent decades among American Catholics. The immigrant church before World War II produced rather small elites, circumscribed as they were in a Protestant culture. Now Catholicism has as large, well-informed and well-off a lay leadership as does any ethnic or religious group in America, and is busy adjusting to what this means in the life of parishes and the church at large. The shortage of priests and nuns, which we put in the loss column, has also made room for emergent lay expression, which in any definition or experience of the church, has to be a gain.

For all the crisis in vocations, I wonder whether we cannot also say that there has been a growth, on which American Catholicism can build, in the understanding of "vocation" among those who remain and in the laity at large. In a dominance-and-control culture the premium is always placed on work and job, occupation and career or profession: the church is interested in the vocation, the calling under God and to the world, which informs all the above. This is a great underdeveloped resource.

Gains? I would cite growth in various areas of experimental thought. These are not days for the emergence of celebrity theologians on the model of John Courtney Murray in America or Karl Rahner and Hans Kueng in Europe. There is more talent than genius, more specialized achievement than comprehensive power. But we are not bereft. Here one can only point:

The bishops pastorals display a fresh rhetoric which shows an alertness to the need to persuade. "Come let us reason together" replaces the "This we have decided, and you must obey" model, in both the pastoral on peace and on the economy. There is an invitation to non-Catholics and even non-Christians to participate in the process. Another instance: Catholicism is producing major figures in the urgent debate over questions concerning medical ethics and the allocation of medical resources or development of human care.

Ecumenically, many would put the trend in the loss column, so far as structure and movement are concerned during the pontificate of Pope John Paul II. Protestants meanwhile have shown interest in new particularisms and a lack of enthusiasm for further ecumenical polity development. But this trend is superficial and illusory: if the ecumenical movement is stalemated, the ecumenical spirit grows. Thus Catholics are finding kindred spirits among many Protestant evangelicals, who were not part of the formal ecumenical movement. In thousands of local communities, sometimes on an ad hoc basis, Catholics and other Christians are finding ways to study, celebrate and act together. So sudden has change come that it is hard to picture the "before" to younger people who came of age or were born "after" Vatican II and its follow up. Creative ways to end the millennium will involve Catholics finding new models to express the reality of an emergent church with illdefined new boundaries, but with a strong center in witness to Jesus Christ.

The half century has also seen gains in public expression by Catholics: in the arts, entertainment and literary world. Flannery O'Connor, Walker Percy and J.E. Powers have belonged to our time, outliving the prophecies that Catholicism in literature was a theme in the past. Such expressions are too rare, and in their imaginative constructs will always look unorthodox and threatening to the conventional, but the apologetic possibilities in this outreach belong to the inventory of potential gains.

Throughout this survey I have consistently pointed to one theme: that one can learn from the losses that American Catholicism has experienced during these years of growth and change, and that such learning can also inform the interpretation of apparent gains. This alerts us to the possibility that we may consistently confuse categories. Perhaps in the eye of God or the weight of the centuries, what looks like loss now is really a gain in the long-term economy of the church and what looks like gain now can be illusions or seductions.

If the creative use of loss and interpretation of gain is to contribute to the church of the third millennium, we shall see that it all makes sense only in the context of basic faith. A bustling, active, successful church does not have to be attentive to what goes on in its realm. A church troubled by the mixed record of gain and setback can be motivated to readdress this faith issue. Acts of worship have to stimulate awe and help worshippers confront the question of what they experience and believe. The way Catholics tell stories, work with symbols, engage in actions, testify, converse, commune and think will show whether they are aware of the crisis of faith in a time of distraction.

Catholics in North America are learning that the resources of faith are not self-replenishing. Each generation has to situate itself in such a way that grace can move and change it. The present generation is learning that the secular or liberal culture around it did not exhaust the permanent possibilities of interpretation and inspiration. Along with the skeptical rationality that marks the time, there are signs of spiritual stirrings, sacramental awareness, signs that the Other awaits confrontation and the Other as gracious God offers supplies of creativity.

The enemy in this venture of response is less the notion of the death of God or the real presence of the secular humanist than it is of non-communal devotion to the way of God. Privatization, going it alone, finding people in cafeteria lines of options, where they replace conviction with opinion and go shopping for community or worshipping in isolation: these are threats. Therefore, sustaining and rebuilding the Catholic community, whether this be locally, nationally or catholically, remains urgent on the agenda. For it is in the formation of reconciling communities, where the Other greets us even as fellow-worshipper, that the potential for new life in the church of the third millennium will come. We shall find, then, that people can still believe. Cross that: they can believe already, looking into futures yet to be disclosed.

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