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Catholicism in American Society at the Dawn of the 21st Century

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The germ of this lecture goes back to the first televised press conference of the newly appointed archbishop of Chicago, Francis George. Of the many questions asked and answers given, two stand out as particularly witty and illuminating, leading me to think "This is going to be interesting!"

To relentless questioning, "Will you be another Bernardin?" Archbishop George responded: "The Catholic Church does not believe in cloning." Catholics who don't attend mass or otherwise participate in the sacraments may be affected, the archbishop allowed, by "epistemological dissonance."

It is the notion of epistemological dissonance that provides the structure of the following remarks: epistemological dissonance, by which I understand to mean a fundamental break between Catholicism and American popular culture, in ways of knowing, in what counts as and for knowledge, in the understanding of the relationship between information and wisdom. This fundamental discontinuity between Christian answers to the question about the good, and our society's way of asking the question, is at the root of our present situation; it is what led the theologian Karl Rahner and many after him to speak of ours as a neo-pagan or post-Christian culture; it is a reality the priest is called to resist—the priest as Catechist and Evangelizer to a know-nothing, seek-everything generation.

What world confronts Catholics at the dawn of the twenty-first century?

In the United States, it is not one "world" that awaits, but several brave new worlds. More than ever before, the hallmark of American Catholicism is diversity—in ethnic heritage, social class, family structure, educational level, spiritual formation and theological orientation. Readers even casually acquainted with the history of the American church will recognize the phrase "more than ever before" to be a significant, almost startling claim: Catholicism, which helped establish the nation's reputation as a "melting pot" of diverse peoples has been the leading American "community of communities" since the mid-nineteenth century. A more mongrel church could scarcely be imagined.

Never before, however, have the pastoral challenges posed by the Church's ethnic, social and cultural diversity been compounded by the proliferation of so many differing (and often competing) theologies, worldviews, and models of what the Church is and ought to become. No previous generation of American Catholics, it could be argued, inherited so little of the content and sensibility of the faith from their parents, as have today's Catholic youth. At no point during the previous 150 years of Catholic life in America has a need for the widespread catechesis and re-evangelization of broad segments of the Catholic community coincided with so dire a shortage in the number of priests, religious and seminarians.

Both the challenges and the resources for meeting them come from the dizzying variety of peoples that constitute the Church. Several distinct communities and cultures co-exist within the American church, each needing "purifying and strengthening," each requiring its own specialized pastoral ministries and programs of theological education and spiritual formation. With their radically different historical experiences and patterns of assimilation and "Americanization," these various Hispanic, Asian, European and African American communities face the new century from their separate social locations and at various degrees of cultural and psychological distance from their ancient homelands. Moreover, there is considerable diversity within each of the various ethnic and "post-ethnic" Catholic communities, divided as they are into generations with differing levels of education, language, and differing attitudes toward the Asian, Latin American or European country of origin.

The Hispanic "community" in the United States, for example, includes millions of native-born Americans as well as first-generation immigrant populations. Those called "Hispanic" or "Latino/a" hail from Cuba, Puerto Rico, Mexico and elsewhere; they do not constitute a single Hispanic-American subculture in the United States. Nor do Asian Catholics, who began to arrive in the late sixties from the Philippines, the Koreans, Cambodia and Vietnam, constitute a unified Asian-American subculture. Yet through baptism, the eucharist, the hierarchy and other visible signs and means of Roman Catholic unity, all of these peoples belong to one Church.

If their calling to be active members of the Body of Christ binds together these various American Catholics, another common experience threatens to pull them apart. Like all Americans of religious conviction, Catholics find their faith and morals put to the test by the secular ethos of mainstream U. S. society—by its rampant materialism and hedonistic lifestyles. Thus the ministers of the Church, priests and laity alike, encounter not one but two major threats to Catholic identity: the threat to unity posed by ethnic, generational, and class diversity, and the threat to religious belief itself posed by a consumerist society which has attained unprecedented affluence for some but remains mired in moral and material poverty.

The Euro-American Catholics: A Tale of Three Generations

White middle and upper-middle class Catholics are "post-ethnic" Americans, to borrow the historian David Hollinger's phrase. No longer segregated into coherent subcultures, these Americans of Irish, German, Italian, Polish, Lithuanian or other European descent have formed multiple associations with one another and with non-Catholics in social locations far removed from the traditional formative triangle of home, church, and ethnic neighborhood. If the enclave has disappeared, however, another set of boundaries and barriers has taken its place in the widely differing religious sensibilities of the three adult generations comprising these 40 million white American Catholics of European descent.

Only a dwindling minority were formed by "the old Church"—the "church militant" of the preconciliar era (1920-1960), with its supernaturalist theology, liturgies and architecture saturated by the smells, sounds and images of the sacred, and its burgeoning subculture sustained by the thick associational and devotional bonds of the immigrant community. These Catholics, fifty-five and older, came of age late in the immigrant era. Unlike their children, they believe that the magisterium, not the individual, is the supreme moral judge in matters of personal and sexual morality such as abortion, homosexuality and birth control. Approximately six of ten pre-Vatican II Catholics polled in a 1996 survey of Laity: American and Catholic said "the Church is important," whereas less than one-third of their children thought so. The older generation attended Mass twice as frequently as did their children, and were more familiar with Church teaching. In addition, a larger proportion of preconciliar Catholics tended to think of the Roman Catholic Church as the privileged or exclusive vehicle of salvation.

Catholics formed during the Vatican II era (1960-1980), by contrast, were taught to think of themselves as "the People of God," a pilgrim people sinful and flawed but redeemed in Christ and joined by other peoples of different religious traditions in the journey of faith. Change came most powerfully for this generation through the trickle-down impact of the new theologies which emerged after the Council. In many Catholic colleges and universities and seminaries Thomism was supplemented or supplanted by narrative, feminist, liberationist and other inductive theologies grounded in the communal and personal experiences of the multicultural People of God. The pluralism of method and perspective which characterized postconciliar American Catholic theology eventually made its way into the theology and religion courses taught in Catholic high schools and Confraternity of Christian Doctrine (CCD) programs. Lost to most American Catholics amidst these rapid developments was the sense of belonging to a church whose unity was based on an underlying theological and liturgical homogeneity. No longer did the Tridentine Latin Mass and widespread popular devotion to the Holy Father and the Blessed Virgin (both powerful symbols of the universal church centered in Rome) provide even the illusion of uniformity.

Indeed, the exercise of the Church's universal governance from Rome allowed and even seemed to encourage expressions of the integrity and (limited) autonomy of the national and local Catholic churches. These churches, in turn, participated more fully in the "inculturation" of the faith—the adaptation of Roman rites and understandings to local idioms, indigenous cultural forms, languages and symbol-systems. Coinciding with a new wave of immigrants who came to the United States from Latin America and Asia, this process of inculturation and localization was accelerated by the growing availability of the new experience-based theologies and spiritualities. The result was the emergence of a U.S. Catholicism more complexly catholic than ever.

New theologies and spiritualities were not the only developments competing for the attention of the middle-class white Catholics born between 1946 and 1962. As members of the Baby Boomer generation, they enjoyed upward social mobility and access to public as well as Catholic institutions of higher education. Taking their cues from their professional colleagues, the marketplace, the law, the health-and-recreation industry and other relatively autonomous zones of public life, they made their own way, constructing their identities at a greater distance from the institutional church than did their parents. Adopting a deinstitutionalized and democratic view of the Church, Boomer Catholics reserved the right to make up their own minds on religious and moral as well as political and economic issues. The aforementioned 1996 sociological study reported that Boomers placed a higher priority on being a good Christian than being a good Catholic and were more likely than their parents' generation to disagree with the Church's teachings, about which they were generally uninformed.

Less religiously literate than their parents, Boomer Catholics did a poorer job in handing on the faith to their own children, the so-called Generation X Catholics, who lack a recognizably Catholic moral and religious vocabulary. In fairness to the millions of Boomer parents who sought to keep the faith, they were trying to raise Catholic children at a particularly difficult time in history for both Roman Catholics and Americans. As the first generation of American Catholics to enjoy the full benefits of cultural acceptability and economic prosperity, the Boomers possessed the capacity to lose themselves in the seduction of a "culture of narcissism" that took American fondness for "rugged individualism" to solipsistic extremes. Some Boomer Catholics were influenced by a personally expressive mode of religiosity, based in part on a consumerist model, that encouraged Americans to create their own spiritual identities by picking and choosing, mixing and matching items from an eclectic menu of disembedded cultural practices and philosophies that were advertised as "self-help" or "New Age" religion. The sociologist Robert Bellah described this highly privatized style of religion as "Sheila-ism." He borrowed the term from Sheila Larson, a nurse who described her faith ("my own little voice") as a personal construct, an amalgam of her own religious backgrounds, spiritual experiences, and cultural preferences.

Those Boomer Catholics who turned instead to the institutional church for guidance sometimes found priests and women religious preoccupied to varying degrees with their own personal and professional problems. Not least of these were the career and vocations crises provoked by the wholesale rethinking of

the Catholic priesthood and religious life that actually preceded Vatican II but accelerated in its aftermath. The Council charted new directions in Catholic self-understanding and in the Church's relation to the world that were overwhelming in their cumulative impact. The bishops, priests, nuns, and newly laicized priests and religious of the conciliar era had little choice but to focus their energies on the daunting challenge of comprehending "the new Church" in order to reinvent their ministries around it.

It took many years, in fact, for "professional Catholics" to work out the practical pastoral and institutional implications of Vatican II's People of God ecclesiology, its dramatic development of Catholic social teaching and defense of religious liberty, and its retrieval of Scripture as a primary source of Catholic theology. What, for example, were the limits of the Church's new openness to the sciences and secular knowledge in general? How should the hierarchy respond to the Vatican II-inspired call for a deeper involvement of the laity in the pastoral ministries and public witness of the Church? Which of the proposed liturgical reforms—and innovations—were to accompany the introduction of the Novus Ordo Mass in the vernacular?

Reformers and would-be reformers of Catholic religious education did not sit idly by while these and other fundamental questions were being raised and debated. Inevitably, perhaps, the late sixties and seventies was a time of experimentation in parochial school and CCD curricula. With noble intentions but decidedly mixed results, textbook authors attempted to wed traditional Catholic doctrine to Sheila-like borrowings from pop psychology, secular values and non-Catholic religious precepts. Adult education programs were overhauled, eventually for the better, but not before years of hit-and-miss experimentation. At every level fundamentals were ignored or subordinated to the instructor's "interpretations" of Church history; these sometimes radical revisions of the Catholic past were often drawn from the personal faith journey of the instructor rather than from a more objective study of the subject. Influential Catholic educators questioned the compatibility of "education" and "formation," concepts which preconciliar Catholics had understood to be intimately related. Some reformers downplayed content—i.e., doctrine and morals—in favor of "independent" reasoning and formation of conscience, while others attacked the very concept of formation, preferring educational methods supposedly more in keeping with inductive secular models of learning and with the new Catholic emphasis on ecumenism.

The Catholic Culture Wars

While priests, women religious and laity were busy constructing and inhabiting new religious and political identities and revising the curricula and pedagogy of Catholic religious education, they did not command the resources to battle the irreligious trends building in American society during the last decades of the twentieth century. Nor were they prepared to pass on to the younger generation a synthesis of old and new Catholicisms, old and new Americas, that they themselves had not yet achieved.

Instead, the social thinning of American Catholicism—the virtual collapse of the old associational networks fostered by the immigrant neighborhoods, devotional societies, ubiquitous parochial schools, and family religious practices—was accompanied by a theological and institutional de-centering of the faith. Symptomatic of the fragmentation that followed was an ideological struggle that came to resemble a Catholic version of America's "culture wars." The assortment of professional interpreters and expositors of the faith—the religious, the lay and clerical theologians, the public intellectuals of the church, the catechists and directors of religious education—split into "liberal" and "conservative" camps, with reforming movements of spirituality and activism such as Call to Action, Womanchurch and Pax Christi positioned on the left, and Cursillo, Catholics United for the Faith, and Opus Dei, among others, occupying the right half of the ideological map.

The disputes about the legacy of Vatican II that have colored the life of the Church are mostly the concern of preconciliar Catholics and their Boomer children. That these disputants and disputes seem increasingly irrelevant to the coming generation seems not to lessen their capacity to absorb the time and energies of Catholic publishers, educators, diocesan administrators, pastors and parishioners.

Not all points along the spectrum are equally represented—or equally vocal—in most post-ethnic parishes, colleges, and other Catholic organizations. Ultra-conservative or traditionalist Catholics, who deem the pastoral application of Vatican II a disaster, like to cite authoritative (usually papal) teaching against their insufficiently vigilant co-religionists. But most abandoned their parishes and migrated to an "orthodox" parish, chapel, college or seminary after their response to Sheila-ism—the restoration of the Tridentine Mass, preconciliar devotional practices and traditional theology—failed to appeal to more than a small minority of American Catholics.

Those who usually call themselves conservatives, by contrast, tend to work within the parish, where some function as self-appointed guardians of orthodoxy. Others join or support organizations such as the Catholic Campaign for America, or the Catholic League for Civil and Religious Rights, where they contest anti-Catholic and irreligious forces in mainstream society. Conservative activists acknowledge the decline of support for traditional religion in the larger culture, but they believe that Catholics, if not entirely impervious, should rise above the situation and provide leadership toward the moral regeneration of the Church and nation. They feel a profound sense of regret, shading into outrage, over certain postconciliar developments, including the rise in moral relativism and fundamental theological illiteracy on the part of significant segments of the laity; the blurring of the distinctive features of religious identity, making it difficult to distinguish Catholics from mainline Protestants in mutually useful ways; the flight from ordained and religious life; and the weakening of the status and authority of the institutional church.

Those who call themselves "progressives" or "liberals" expend their energies on preserving and extending the reforms of Vatican II. Some pastoral leaders and parishioners in this camp worry that the hierarchy, with some notable exceptions, has been insufficiently attentive to the pressing task of empowering laity leadership. The bishops, they charge, have been slow to provide adequate financial and moral support to laity seeking advanced degrees or other training in ministry. Progressives tend to support or staff advocacy groups pursuing internal church reform, such as Call to Action, Women's Ordination Conference, and organizations dedicated to promoting the rights of homosexuals, retired priests and other aggrieved minorities within the Church. They seek to move

the Church toward positions consistent with the spirit of the Council as articulated by feminist, liberationist, and ecumenical theologians in recent decades.

Progressive Catholics are also defined by their commitment to raising parishioners' awareness of Catholic social teaching and increasing their moral sensitivity to the concrete demands of justice. Activism on behalf of the poor and the dispossessed is their fort . Some join or support lobbying and policy organizations such as Network and Pax Christi; many commit themselves to advocacy in pursuit of the elimination of racism, human rights violations around the world and other forms of social discrimination.

While the articulation of "liberal" and "conservative" perspectives may have been a necessary and even healthy means of coming to terms with the most important ecumenical council in four hundred years, the internal disputes distracted some of the Church's best minds, thereby weakening its public presence at a time when American society needed strong and unified religious and moral leadership. No simple cause-effect relationship explains these simultaneous developments: the advent of a post-Christian America cannot be blamed on the intramural squabbling that preoccupied Catholics and other Christians; nor, on the other hand, can the turmoil of the American sixties, the disillusionment of the seventies, and the hedonism of the eighties be held entirely accountable for the dissension and divisions in the American church.

Future historians will address the question of cause and effect. For our purposes it is the results of the simultaneous revolutions in Church and society that matter. In this regard, the besetting preoccupation of American Catholics as the new century dawns will not be the clash of postconciliar visions of authority, lay involvement or women's rights in the Church. Rather, the Church will be engaged by a far more profound and disturbing crisis of belief and meaning. In light of the extent and depth of this crisis, the attention given to "Catholic culture wars" will come to be seen as an unaffordable luxury.

Beyond the Culture Wars, A Crisis of Meaning

By way of summary, let us consider the world which the upcoming generation of Catholics is poised to inherit. For theists—for believers—living at the end of the twentieth century, the secularization process has reached an alarming stage. The operative agnosticism of the majority of professional, corporate, artistic, and intellectual elites in the United States has decisively penetrated mainstream media, political, educational, and cultural institutions, and shaped popular sensibilities to such a degree that American culture, while not systematically or comprehensively hostile to religious faith, nevertheless undermines its plausibility structures, erodes its ethical foundations, and debases its public manifestations.

Contemporary popular American culture, driven by the secular media and Madison Avenue, trivializes religion, commodifies the spiritual, confuses accidents for substance, absorbs and flattens potentially subversive ideologies, promotes a consumerist approach to traditions of wisdom, glamorizes artifice, scorns self-denial, creates need and exploits desire, celebrates superficiality, and courts violence.

Otherwise, it poses no serious threat to Christian faith.

This familiar litany of cultural complaints notwithstanding, I perceive no conspiracy against religion by secular humanists or anyone else. Rather, among too many Catholics there exists a widespread attitude of indifference, whether inspired by convictions as to the irrelevance of the Church or, among younger Catholics, by disillusionment with its unfulfilled promises. Outrage at hypocrisy on the part of Christianity's supposed practitioners, surveys indicate, also has a powerful alienating effect.

One result of the social thinning of American Catholicism has been a lowering of the religious literacy of younger Catholics. Hastened, ironically, by the extended period of experiments in religious education, the dumbing down of Catholic Americans qua Catholics left the generation born after the Council—people who are now in their teens, twenties and thirties—groping for a way to integrate a Catholic sensibility into their lives. That sensibility now must be achieved, in other words; it can no longer be taken for granted.

Religious educator Thomas Beaudoin describes the anxieties of his generation of Catholics, who constitute slightly more than one-fifth of "Generation X," the 80 million Americans born between 1962 and 1982:

While we are a multicultural generation, racism still infects our relationships. While we are a generation that has been generally open to the equality of women, sexism still works subtly even among our most intimate friends. While we are more progressive than any previous American generation in accepting various sexual orientations, the roots of homophobia still run deep, and run religious. We inherit homelessness, illiteracy, spousal abuse, drug abuse, and a hypersexual culture from our parents.

America's 13th generation, the most diverse yet, is approximately 70 percent white, 13 percent African American, 12 percent Hispanic, 4 percent Asian, and 1 percent Native American or other ethnicity. (Young Catholics are somewhat more Hispanic-American and less African-American than their generational cohort.)

The majority hails from a middle class background, and is the most well-educated in American history, but it came of age in a time when real wages were declining, despite the fact Americans worked an average of one month more per year than they did in the sixties. Nearly one in three college graduates of the nineties took a job that did not require a college degree—up from 1 in 10 in the 1960s. In 1993 AIDS was the top killer of young adults in 64 cities and five states. Every day of that year twenty-five percent of all African American men in their 20s were either in prison, on probation, or on parole; there were more than 2,500 divorces or separations; ninety children were taken from their parents' custody and committed to foster homes; thirteen Americans aged 15 to 24 committed suicide and another 16 were murdered; 3,610 teenagers were assaulted, 6,530 were robbed, and 80 were raped; 500 adolescents began using illegals

drugs and 1,000 took up drinking alcohol; 1,000 unwed teenage girls became mothers and 2,200 kids dropped out of school. While young Catholics accounted for a relatively small fraction of these statistics, they were nonetheless shaped by the urban and suburban environments which produced them.

In this milieu a crisis of religious meaning binds GenXers together. In surveys conducted from 1990 to 1992 statistician George Barna found that while 53 percent of Xers defined themselves as "religious," seventy percent said that "absolute truth does not exist." Young Catholics are less cynical, writes Beaudoin but many join their generational cohort in feeling alienated from their parents' world of affluence and "modernity." They evince far less trust in reason and "progress," and are skeptical of grand narratives which attempt to enfold within one philosophical vision or worldview the diversity, competitiveness and acquisitiveness, chaos and violence of the world they know.

More so than for their parents or grandparents, young Catholics' religious sensibilities have been affected by morally unsettling trends in the secular mainstream culture. The generation is coming to maturity, Beaudoin explains, in a media-driven and cyberspace culture which trades in images, symbols, and simulations. Radicalizing an insight inherited from their Boomer parents, many young people suspect that the constructed self is the only self. Almost half of the GenXers, Barna found, "believe that the values and lifestyles shown in movies, television programs, and music videos are an accurate, representative depiction of the way Americans live and think these days."

The GenXers tend to ask not "What can I do for my church and my faith?" or "What can it do for me?" but "Is there any discernible purpose to this existence, to the madcap rush for material riches and 'success?'" Whereas preconiliar Catholics and their Boomer offspring shared, beneath their surface animosities and contrasting pieties, a simple trust in the holiness and permanence of the Church (despite its manifest temporal flaws) the generation coming to maturity today has not internalized this assumption. From her perspective as a self-described GenX Catholic, a thirty-something lawyer comments:

Catholics formed prior to and even during the Council seem to take for granted that the Church has always been, is now, and forever shall be a historical force, a relevant institution in American society, and of course much more—the means of their salvation in Christ. Catholics of my parents' and grandparents' generations feel this to the tips of their fingers and toes, it's bred in their bones, they exude Catholicism and speak unselfconsciously from its depths. There is such a taken-for-grantedness about it all that is so foreign to me and my peers. My generation is not asking, what should we do about the role of women in the church? what about the creeping infallibility of the papacy? They are asking: Is Richard Rorty right?

They are asking, that is, whether we must abandon the notion of an objectively ordered universe and all claims to knowledge which appeal to the authority of universal and abiding principles. In staking out his position within the company of thinkers known as antifoundationalists, Rorty, an influential philosopher at the University of Virginia, argues that metaphysics has finally run its course. Modern science, he concludes, has undermined the Cartesian claim that we find an ineluctable truth and basis for certainty of knowledge by turning inward and examining the process of thought itself. Accordingly, moral "truth" remains merely subjective; neither religion nor morality has the authority to impose limits on the possible results of empirical inquiry. Philosophy is, for Rorty, continuous and coterminous with science. Thus the philosopher must abandon belief in "the mind" as an independent and transcendent reality, just as he must abandon "knowledge" as something about which one ought to have a "theory" and which has "foundations."

In this way of thinking the quest for certitude and common first principles is quixotic. It, too, must be abandoned in favor of an open-ended dialogue in which hermeneutics (theories of interpretation) are not a method for uncovering "the Truth" but a style of philosophy that enables an ongoing exchange of views about what is meaningful in individual lives, in disciplines and cultures. Rorty has described such a dialogue as a "way of coping" with the realization that we no longer sit atop a pyramid of knowledge built on rock-solid epistemic foundations but, rather, are marooned on a raft tossed about by the churning waters of history, context, and contingency, our goal being to keep the fragile life preserver intact, presumably by constantly chattering about it.

Imagine a generation, naive yet cynical, that inherits a world, the ground in Being and transcendent meaning of which is denied by its most influential interpreters. Imagine, also, the havoc antifoundationalism visits on the Catholic orientation to reality by denying any transcendental standpoint from which one can judge human belief and behavior. Such skepticism undermines the plausibility of belief in the existence of an Objective Moral Order—a phrase by which the Catholic bishops have indicated that the Church's moral teaching is rooted not in historically contingent philosophizing but in the very fabric of being. Yet, for Rorty and the company of modern thinkers influenced by antifoundationalism, the "Objective Moral Order" and other metaphysical assertions have no place in public discourse because they cannot be demonstrated empirically. Such notions, Rorty has written, are "a religious conversation stopper."

How, then, is the Church to respond to an end-of-century nihilism that finds voice not only in public philosophers' esoteric debates but in the lyrics of the popular rock bands, in the current cinema, in the cynicism of our political discourse and in our own unexamined personal attitudes? In this milieu, is it really surprising to observe younger Catholics raising to the level of operating principles the suspicion of authority and tradition entertained by their skeptical and metaphysically challenged but still believing Boomer parents?

The challenge for priests and ministers of the gospel in the current era, then, is to re-contextualize Christian images, symbols and doctrines for believers of all ages, thereby (re) initiating them into a coherent and profound worldview and set of practices that serve authentic human flourishing. Pastoral and intellectual leaders in tomorrow's church must speak to the metaphysical doubts and superficial samplings of Boomer and Buster Catholics alike. They must be sophisticated evangelists to a Catholic diaspora. This is not a call to abandon the fight for justice in the church and in the world; but it is to remind priest and ministers in training that a new set of fundamental educational and pastoral challenges await them. People want to belong, but are shy of making commitments that would distract them from other pursuits they mistakenly believe to be more life-enriching.

In our time it is not Spirituality that is in danger but Religiosity—the spiritual life lived in communion and community with others. The Catholic life imposes

certain obligations on the individual—to observe binding norms, practice shared disciplines of prayer and self-sacrifice in service to others and meet the bracing demands of moral transformation. Such challenges, the preparation for which have perpetually defined the task of religious education and spiritual formation, must be encountered in startling new ways by the assimilated white middle-class Catholics.

On this point, at least, much the same could be said of the Hispanic minority, which is projected to grow toward majority status in the next century, and of Asian and African-American Catholics, whose attitudes and sensibilities have been shaped not only by the dominant white American culture but by their own distinctive ethnocultural traditions, some of which remain strongly influential. These various groups are assimilated to different degrees to the overarching American culture; in that respect, their pastoral needs differ somewhat from those of post-ethnic Catholics, who had blended decisively into the mainstream by the 1960s. The rise of theologies of inculturation coincided with heightened political self-awareness on the part of American minorities and their growing sophistication in articulating and advancing their claims to political—and pastoral—attention. During the decades following Vatican II each of these religious subcultures sought to strike the proper balance between developing its own distinctive theologies and fostering distinctive Mexican-American, Korean-American, Filipino-American, etc., communities, on the one hand, and seeking greater fellowship and unity with segments of the broader Church, on the other. Pastoral and intellectual leaders of the Hispanic communities, for example, have been engaged in developing theologies that both reflect and bridge the differences between the various Latino cultures.

While the requirements of inculturation remain strong in these precincts of the U. S. church, Hispanic, Asian and African-Americans have the same basic pastoral needs—for catechesis, religious education, moral formation, sacramental presence, and so on—as do the post-ethnic white Americans. Nor is the crisis of meaning restricted to any one group. The homogenizing effect of the media and the marketplace is far-reaching, penetrating Hispanic and Asian enclaves in large urban centers such as Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York. How shall Hispanic and Asian Catholic subcultures resist the secularizing forces of the dominant culture in the United States? How will these subcultures become integrated more fully into one religious body in the years ahead? As a multicultural, multiethnic community seeking to fend off the spiritual side-effects of living alongside a "culture of disbelief," the American Catholic Church must locate and solidify the "common ground" underlying Hispanic, Asian, African, and European theologies, religious experiences, liturgical forms, and ideologies. Priests and ministers must be visible signs of unity, reaching out to incorporate a variety of Catholic styles and sensibilities.

Lest the picture painted here become unjustifiably bleak, it is important to acknowledge that historians might judge the turn of the twentieth century to be the passage to a renewed U.S. Catholicism. The extraordinary accomplishments of the postconciliar American church give rise to such expectations. These accomplishments include the consolidation of a century of institutional growth which has seen the church become the nation's largest non-public provider of education and health care; the gains made in ecumenical relations and, more profoundly, the vastly improved attitudes toward "non-Catholics"; the development of a broad range of dynamic lay ministries at the parish level; and the articulation of a clearly defined set of principles by which Americans might pursue "the common good," at the center of which is a consistent ethic of life. American Catholics are better educated than at any time in the past, and at the dawn of the twenty-first century there are more laity studying for advanced degrees in theology and ministry than ever before in the history of Roman Catholicism.

The Church remains remarkably active in service to its members and to Americans beyond its faith community. Perusing the index of *Origins*, the weekly publication of representative documents and speeches compiled by the Catholic News Service, one is overwhelmed by the initiatives taken at the national, diocesan, and parish levels in 1994-'95. Perusing only the letters A through C, one notes the impressive range of Catholic service to Church and society: providing alternatives to abortion; staffing adoption agencies; conducting adult education courses; addressing African-American Catholics' pastoral needs; funding programs to prevent alcohol abuse; implementing a new policy on altar servers and guidelines for the Anointing of the Sick; lobbying for arms control; eliminating asbestos in public housing; supporting the activities of the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities (227 strong); challenging atheism in American society; establishing base communities (a.k.a. small faith communities); providing aid to war victims in Bosnia; conducting Catholic research in bioethics; publicizing the new Catechism of the Catholic Church; battling child abuse; strengthening the relationship between church and labor unions; deepening the structures and expressions of collegiality in the local and diocesan church.

These items merely suggest the direction of Catholic energies in the 1990s. They do not include, for example, Catholic Charities' extensive network of 1,400 charitable agencies serving 18 million people; the Catholic Health Association's 600 hospitals and 300 long-term care facilities serving 20 million people; or the Campaign for Human Development's efforts to organize and empower the poor, with 200 local antipoverty groups working to improve policies, practice and laws affecting low-income individuals.

This chronicle of Catholic engagement tells only part of the story, however, masking concerns about the gradual depletion of the resources and personnel needed to maintain these programs and their Catholic identity. The shortage of priests and women religious, the graying of the leadership of Catholic agencies and institutions, and the apathy of sizeable sectors of the laity are among the obstacles in the road ahead.

Only a small percentage of the Catholic population actually participates in or contributes to the range of services and pastoral initiatives celebrated in the *Origins* catalogue of activities. By other markers as well, increasing numbers of lay Catholics seem detached from the central beliefs, religious practices, and everyday ministries of their church. Less than one-third of the U. S. Catholic population regularly attended weekly mass during the nineties. A 1993 Gallup poll found that, of those who did, only 30 percent believed they were actually receiving the body and blood of Christ in the eucharist; and only 21 percent under the age of fifty so believed. Meanwhile one-fourth of Catholics agreed that Christ becomes present in the bread and wine only if the recipient believe this to be so. One need not be a stickler for orthodoxy to be alarmed by such attitudes toward the doctrine of the real presence of Christ in the eucharist—the central affirmation of the worshipping Catholic community. To describe the situation as a catechetical crisis seems warranted.

The enormous untapped financial, personal and intellectual resources of the laity prompts soul-searching. Is the poor record of resource mobilization

attributable to a lack of generosity on the part of most baptized Catholics? Given the prodigious record of lay support of Catholic schools and hospitals, this seems a difficult case to make. Do pastoral leaders possess the self-confidence necessary to welcome a diversity of gifts from the laity—including vigorous leadership at the parish and diocesan levels? Some commentators have suggested that lay Catholics, especially the significant portion with advanced degrees, want the Church to become more open to lay participation in decision-making. Others complain that some pastors' attitudes or personal styles lend credibility to charges of an inherent sexism in the Church. Is preaching inspired, liturgy welcoming, spiritual guidance available? Among the newer immigrant groups, are pastoral leaders sufficiently attentive to linguistic and other ethnic particularities in worship and education?

A snapshot of the American church at the dawn of the new millennium offers a mixed picture. On the one hand, the broad range of pastoral ministries and social action programs involve informed, dedicated and faithful Catholics in almost every aspect of society. The Catholic culture wars notwithstanding, Catholic institutions follow a clearly defined set of principles by which to pursue the common good. Since the Council the American bishops have produced a striking series of pastoral letters, acclaimed not only by Catholic intellectuals working in universities and the media, but also by influential segments of the non-Catholic elite in the United States. In its pastoral life, moreover, the U.S. church embodies compassion, sustains a gentle sense of irony, and offers a remarkable witness to the possibilities of holiness in everyday life. Priests, sisters, and lay ministers serving the parishes continue to baptize, confirm, educate and be educated by a bewildering variety of American Catholics drawn from dozens of racial and ethnic backgrounds. Most remarkable, perhaps, they balance loyalty to a universal church and its pontiff, who is not daily ministering to the North American cultural environment, with the demands of a lay population often unrealistic in its expectations of the clergy, or merely indifferent, distracted by a culture of self-absorption.

On the other hand, one finds a thin layer of dedicated but aging professionals at the pinnacle of the Catholic organizational pyramid, priests overworked to the point of exhaustion, and thus an increasingly unstable base of operations. The Church is relatively ineffective in mobilizing resources not only politically and socially, but pastorally and ecclesially. If the challenges to belief and meaning posed by American society are to be met, Catholic leaders must develop new strategies for capturing the religious imagination of the faithful and enlisting them in the Church's work.

The local church remains the great strength of American Catholicism. Most parishes have a non-ideological core of gifted and dedicated pastoral and lay leaders who staff an array of programs and activities that appeal to the various generational and cultural sensibilities sketched above. Despite splintering of some Catholics into entrenched ideological camps of "left" and "right," most conservatives and progressives co-exist rather peaceably within a broad "middle" encompassing the vast majority of active parishioners. Through their scriptural, sacramental, educational and pastoral offerings, the most successful parishes sustain a coherent religious culture—a "world" whose imagery and symbols bespeak a real (not merely superficial or simulated) presence of the sacred.

Thus U.S. Catholics have come full circle. Like their co-religionists of the early American republic, today's Catholics live in a society that puts their Christian faith to the test on a daily basis, yet they continue to build and sustain vital communities of shared faith and common purpose. They do so, increasingly, in the absence of the tight ethno-religious enclaves and material interdependence that characterized the immigrant church. At its best the contemporary parish provides the space for re-ordering priorities, recommitting oneself to the service of others, re-integrating partial truths within a comprehensive system of belief and moral purpose, and rejecting the moral vacuities of American consumerism, racism, and classism.

If the Church is to flourish in the twenty-first century, a new generation of priests and lay ministers must emerge to renew the foundations of Catholic belief and practice. Their work will be fundamental in that they can no longer take for granted a measure of religious literacy among those Catholics who do not participate in formative Catholic institutions, the parish foremost among them. Depending on one's attitude toward hard work against daunting odds, serving the People of God as a priest or lay minister in such times will be either an exhilarating opportunity or an excruciatingly difficult calling. Recent history suggests that it will be a full measure of both experiences.

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