

Healing the Political and Social Divide in America

by John T. Pawlikowski, OSM

The deepening divisions in American society present a new pastoral challenge for the Catholic Church. If Catholicism is to make a positive contribution towards healing this current divide it will need to develop an ecclesiological vision and spirituality rooted in the conciliar reforms of Vatican II. In a perceptive short volume titled *Catholicism and Citizenship: Political Cultures of the Church in the Twenty-First Century*,¹ the Italian and American theologian Massimo Faggioli from Villanova University argues that Pope Francis in his approach to the regeneration of the church basically takes the ecclesiology found in Vatican II's *Gaudium et Spes* (The Church and the Modern World) as his foundation. This ecclesiology, according to Faggioli, profoundly anchors the church in the social and political structures of our time. This is not to say that the church is merely another social service institution in contemporary society. It has a sacral dimension that can never be obscured.

The church's response to the ongoing rift in American society needs to be developed within the context of Pope Francis's efforts to renew the church worldwide, a context that has the spirituality and ecclesial understanding found in *Gaudium et Spes* at its very heart. This vision must become the engine for American Catholicism's pastoral response now and in the future.

This response will necessarily entail a number of key components. The first is a recognition that any meaningful pastoral response will necessarily involve political activity. So very often I have heard pastoral leaders define Catholicism's response to social issues as fundamentally "apolitical." If the use of this term is intended to avoid an exclusively "partisan" political approach than I can agree. However, there is simply no effective pastoral response that is devoid of some political dimensions. Otherwise the response would merely be "charitable" and not a genuine effort to create more just structures. Without question, activities such as clothing drives and meals for the poor are important and need to be continued, but they can touch only a small handful of people and are essentially holding and transitory efforts. The call of the hour is for structural reform, something that Paul VI clearly articulated in his groundbreaking social encyclical *Populorum Progressio* (On Human Development) and by having the first two Roman Synods focus on structural change. As we are clearly seeing in the intense public debate about medical care in

1 Massimo Faggioli, *Catholicism and Citizenship: Political Cultures of the Church in the Twenty-First Century* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2017).

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America, structural change can impact the lives of millions of people for the better or the worse. An organization such as Bread for the World has demonstrated how a faith-based perspective can contribute to positive structural change in a relatively nonpartisan way.

In his above-mentioned new volume, Faggioli underscores the inevitable political nature of the struggle for justice by quoting a remark from Father Theodore Hesburgh, CSC, the late president of the University of Notre Dame, who in many ways served as a personal model for a faith perspective closely integral with politics. Hesburgh once termed voting a “civic sacrament.” More recently, Cardinal Blaise Cupich of Chicago, addressing a Catholic-Jewish gathering during a budget crisis in the State of Illinois that was having an increasingly disastrous impact on the work of Catholic Charities and other social service organizations, argued that voting carried a moral responsibility.

In any contemporary discussion of a political ecclesiology, it is helpful to recall the twentieth-century history of American Catholicism. In the document *A Program of Social Reconstruction*, issued by the U.S. Bishops in 1919, the Church in the United States committed itself to active involvement in the social situation of American Catholics, who were overwhelmingly blue collar in terms of social status and suffered from the injustices associated with that class.² This ecclesial effort was primarily devised by Monsignor John A. Ryan, the first director of the National Catholic Welfare Conference. Ryan’s vision was largely rooted in the principles advanced in Leo XIII’s groundbreaking social encyclical *Rerum Novarum*. This plan for confronting the structural injustice experienced by blue-collar Americans, including the vast body of Catholics, was implemented through strong support of the growing unionization movement often led by Catholics with the participation of clergy, sometimes, as in Detroit, in direct-action demonstrations as well as by lobbying on an interreligious basis for passage of the Roosevelt administration’s New Deal legislation. In gratitude for this mobilization of interreligious support, President Roosevelt invited Ryan to deliver the invocation at two of his inaugurations. The New Deal had a significant impact on the social and economic status of American Catholics. Ryan’s vision clearly anticipated the political ecclesiology adopted by Vatican II in *Gaudium et Spes* and further advanced through ensuing social encyclicals such as *Populorum Progressio*.

A second key component of an effective pastoral response to the current crisis is interreligious inclusivity. This goes beyond ecumenical collaboration (inter-Christian) towards an integration of diverse religious practices. Interreligious partnership is a growing reality in America. When we were planning the celebration of the one hundredth anniversary of the original Parliament of the World’s Religions held in connection with the 1893 World’s Fair in Chicago, our motto was “The Religious World was not coming to Chicago; the Interreligious world already existed in Chicago” (and many other metropolitan centers).

Interreligious perspectives still remain largely on the periphery of Catholic identity. This needs to change. Theological and spiritual perspectives from outside the classical Christian traditions must assume a greater presence for Catholics (and Christians in general) in the process of generating social healing and social cohesion. As Archbishop Michael Fitzgerald, formerly head of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, insisted in a speech originally presented at the Australian Catholic University in Sydney, an interreligious perspective was integrated to Vatican II: “It can be concluded...that the relationship of the church to other religions has not only received, for the first time in an ecumenical council, special treatment in a specific document *Nostra Aetate*, but has permeated the whole teaching of the Council.”³

2 See “Bishops’ Program of Social Reconstruction,” American Catholic History Classroom, http://cuomeka.wrlc.org/_exhibits/show/bishops/background/1919-bishops-reconstruction.

3 Michael Louis Fitzgerald, “Vatican II and Interfaith Dialogue,” in *Interfaith Dialogue: Global Perspectives*, ed. Edmund Kee-fook Chia (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 11.

A third essential ingredient of a political ecclesiology for American Catholicism is a deep rootedness in spirituality. Without such rootedness (which needs to have an interreligious dimension) the church becomes another of many mediating institutions in society. Surely there is more to the church than that.

But a spirituality for an ecclesiological vision based on *Gaudium et Spes* must promote an understanding of spirituality that recognizes the reality of what Peter Henroit, SJ, called “simultaneity.” Such a view understands an intimate linkage between involvement in the cause of justice and spiritual growth. Experiencing structural injustice in and through such social action becomes an occasion for advancing spiritual development. Spiritual consciousness and social structures remain deeply intertwined. So a commitment to the struggle for justice does not merely follow upon spiritual development, it also aids and abets such development.

A political spirituality also needs to lay to rest the destructive notion often found in classical manuals of spirituality that portray “action” as an obstacle to authentic spiritual development. Such a view was reiterated some years ago by Cardinal Avery Dulles, SJ, when he expressed concern that the renewed commitment to social justice generated by *Gaudium et Spes* and ensuing encyclicals and synod documents might undercut the sacral dimension of the contemporary church. While I would agree with Dulles on the need to preserve the sacral aspect of the church, contemporary Christianity cannot preserve the church’s holiness without a significant involvement in political society. A truly “holy” church is also a “political” church. A meaningful political ecclesiology also requires the presence of two virtues strongly emphasized in post-Vatican II social teaching. The first of these, participation, is a hallmark of Paul VI’s social vision. He often emphasized it as a core element in any ecclesiology grounded in *Gaudium et Spes*. In many ways, for Paul VI, participation replaced the more traditional stress on subsidiarity.

Faggioli, in the book under discussion, has argued that a political vision of the church will result from the joint efforts of the laity, some new ecclesial movements, and religious orders of men and women. This “from below” approach is also evident in the current attempts at comprehensive restructuring underway within several dioceses such as Chicago. It is also a clear message emerging from the closing mandate given to the some 3,000 local Catholics who assembled in Orlando this past July.

The other important virtue is solidarity, strongly promoted by John Paul II. A sense of solidarity with its focus on human dignity within community helps to create a political ecclesiology that is anti-tribal and anti-insular. It represents a direct counter to the political theology rampant in certain American political circles at the present time. The issues that Pope Francis has identified as central for the church, indeed for all religions, such as migration, economic inequality, sustainability, and peace, are global, not merely national, in scope.

Finally, I would bring to the fore what Pope Francis has identified as the critical dimension of the *Gaudium et Spes* ecclesiology at the heart of his vision of Catholic renewal—ecology. The integral ecology he has advanced in *Laudato Si’* surpasses any other social justice goals. If we fail to achieve creational sustainability we will simply erode the possibility of continued life on our planet, rendering any other achievements in social justice moot and meaningless.

In striving for the sustainability of creation the interreligious spirituality spoken of earlier will prove especially critical as integral ecology requires a multi-national approach. Hence, all religious traditions and spiritual communities must contribute insights. Christians certainly can and must reflect on a Christological basis for integral ecology. But we cannot make Christ alone the ultimate norm in the public sphere. The present challenge for Christians is to integrate our fundamental bonding with all of creation into our political ecclesiology. Such bonding will require eliminating from Christian spirituality the notion that heaven is our only true home and, while in the world we live in an exilic condition. Many traditional prayers such as the *Salve Regina* highlight such an exilic condition

for humanity, but such a view creates a sense of alienation from the world which runs counter to the spirituality urged upon us today which ties profoundly to our earthly home, a spirituality that enfolds the vision of *Laudato Si'*.

In closing, let me suggest some follow-up materials. Faggioli's volume is a must read both for its layout of Vatican II's political ecclesiology and the effort to make it integral for contemporary Catholic consciousness as well as for its further bibliographical suggestions. The two papal statements on economic justice⁴ and ecology⁵ are also crucial resources. And many available websites will prove useful. I would especially single out those of the Center for Concern⁶ and the Catholic Climate Covenant.⁷

4 Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013), http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html#Culture,_thought_and_education.

5 Francis, *Laudate si'* (2015), http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html.

6 See <https://www.coc.org/about-us>.

7 See www.catholicclimatecovenant.org.