Where Are We Going?
The Future of Ministry in the United States

Peter C. Phan

After identifying three challenges facing both the ordained and non-ordained who minister in the U.S Catholic church, the author proposes “a new way of being church” through a threefold ministry of liberation, inculturation, and interreligious dialogue.

The question in the title intimates a pervasive sense of profound unease and even total disorientation in the American Catholic church. Recent assessments of its current situation are nothing short of apocalyptic. Peter Steinfels begins his much-discussed book with a portentous declaration: “Today the Roman Catholic Church in the United States is on the verge of either an irreversible decline or a thoroughgoing transformation” (1). Even if one disagrees with Steinfels’s prognosis, still there is no gainsaying that the American Catholic church is facing an enormous crisis, and it is legitimate to ask whether the ark of St. Peter in the United States is indeed “a people adrift,” to quote the title of Steinfels’s book, and if so, how it can find its compass and set out on the right course again.

Though the future of ministry in the United States depends to a large extent on the reform of the clergy and the relationship between the hierarchy and the laity, there will be no discussion here of the clergy sexual abuse and the scandalous mishandling of it by some of the bishops nor of the allied issues of the shortage of priests, priestly celibacy, married clergy, ordination of women, and

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the role of the laity. There is already a plethora of readily available books and articles, of both conservative and liberal bent, on these subjects (see Oakley and Russett, 2004). An article of this length cannot pretend to shed any additional useful light on them. Rather, taking ministry, both ordained and non-ordained, to refer to the *triplex munus* [threefold office] of teaching, sanctifying, and service, the essay offers reflections on how this ministry should be carried out in the United States in the near future, so that the American Catholic church will be revitalized and perhaps in the long run will find a way out of the current morass. (For a detailed elaboration of the ideas that follow, see Phan, *Theological Studies* 2004.)

**A New Political, Cultural, and Religious Context**

Three new features of the American context determine both the modality and the future of the church's ministry in the United States. First, politically and socially, the United States is now the only superpower with overwhelming economic and military might, and, if the current Iraq War is any indication, one with imperialistic designs. Embedded in this superpower, how can the Catholic church credibly preach Jesus' teaching on non-violence, peace, and justice, and act in solidarity with those crushed by the United States' economic, political, and military power? Second, culturally, new immigrants are bringing to the United States a vast array of diverse patterns of thinking, valuing, and living. In this cultural diversity, how can the church, whose hierarchy is still dominated by whites, relinquish its eurocentrism and accept other cultures as valid ways of living the Gospel? Third, religiously, with immigrants hailing from non-European parts of the world, from Asia in particular, the United States has become religiously pluralistic. In this religious pluralism, how can the church, whose claims to uniqueness and universality are routinely asserted, acknowledge, preserve, and promote the teachings and the ways of worship and life inculcated by other religions? To meet these three sets of challenges effectively, the church must prioritize its tasks, formulate its strategies, and deploy its resources accordingly.

**A Church Embedded in the World Superpower: Liberation**

For better or for worse, the American Catholic Church is a beneficiary of the United States as the sole superpower. Charles Morris's book *American Catholic* is aptly subtitled: *The Saints and Sinners Who Built America's Most Powerful Church*. Sinners and saints aside, thanks to its number, wealth, and political
clout, the American Catholic church is no doubt “America’s Most Powerful Church” and wields the greatest power among the world’s religious institutions, perhaps Rome included. Theologically and canonically, Rome is said to possess the supreme ecclesiastical power, but in terms of de facto influence on the real world, it may lag far behind the American Catholic church. It has been quipped, not without a grain of truth, that when the American Catholic church sneezes, the other churches will catch cold.

But this power carries with it immense costs and responsibilities. The costs flow from the church’s “embeddedness” in its host country, a condition vulnerable to the possibility of being conniving bedfellows and the further risk of having a muted prophetic voice. Politically, this moral ambivalence was most visible in the American bishops’ failure to condemn, forthrightly and publicly, the “preemptive” Iraq War despite its flagrant infringement of the traditional criteria for a “just war” prior to its commencement, and especially after it has become incontrovertible that the reasons for going to war were totally bogus. This episcopal deafening silence will, I submit, be in the long run more detrimental to the church’s ministry than the scandal of clergy sexual abuse and its aftermath, given the enormous geopolitical consequences of the Iraq War.

Economically, the United States accumulates its wealth in part on the back of other nations. In the free-market game, which is propagated throughout the world through globalization and by means of force if necessary, not all players come out as winners. Outsourcing may bring profits to American companies and may even produce jobs in underdeveloped countries, but extremely low wages, long hours, child labor, unsanitary working conditions, lack of health insurance and other benefits, and ecological devastation are the high costs that the poor of the Third World are paying for the American “pursuit of happiness.” Multinational corporations do not always have the interests of the local people at heart. If the bottom line is in the red, they have no qualms in moving the factories to countries with cheaper labor. Indeed, it is a mantra among global economists that in recent years the poor are getting poorer, and the rich, richer. Even if the free-market economy proves to be the most productive of wealth, still it is the Moloch that devours the flesh and blood of the most vulnerable among us.

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Willy-nilly, the American Catholic church benefits from this injustice and exploitation. This collective sin—part of the “original sin”—the church must admit and confess, frankly and honestly, not out of a morbid sense of guilt, much less out of political correctness, but out of the love for truth and for the sake of the church’s moral credibility. For only the truth will set us free. If the church’s teaching on social sin has any validity, it is here that it has its bite. No Christian can say: “I have nothing to do with this unjust situation.” It is not the matter of personally having robbed or cheated. Rather, no hand, yours or mine, is clean, because we would not be able to enjoy all the things we now take for granted in this country, unless our sisters and brothers somewhere else were unjustly or unfairly deprived of even the basic necessities of life.

This honest admission must not result in an empty orgy of mea culpas (“through my fault”) and forgiveness-begging. Rather, for the American Catholic church to discharge its ministry in the economic and socio-political arenas credibly and effectively, this confession must be coupled with nothing less than a public and total commitment to and implementation of policies consistent with the “preferential option for the poor,” which, in the name of the Gospel, liberation theologians and, in their footsteps, Pope John Paul II, have made the mission of the church. The “poor” here include the defenseless unborn, but not only them. The church’s stand against abortion will be credible and will not be misinterpreted as obsession with sex and repudiation of women’s rights only if it is accompanied by a sincere and effective solidarity with other categories of the “poor,” such as the homeless, those without health care, those living in poverty, the unemployed and underemployed, the victims of racism and gender discrimination, the immigrants, and anyone who cannot afford a decent human life, here in the United States as well as elsewhere.

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Here liberation comes into full play as one of the top priorities of the church’s ministry in the immediate future. We American Catholics must be truly persuaded that working for justice—liberation—is a constitutive dimension of evangelization, on a par with preaching the Word and liturgical worship. Denouncing injustice and doing justice, both to succor the victims of injustice and to remove the unjust structures, are strict demands of discipleship to Christ and not the knee-jerk reaction of liberal Democrats and moderate Republicans.
Indeed, it is a massive failure of the leadership of the American Catholic church in the recent presidential election that they remained mute and did not have the courage to speak truth to power as the country was inflicted with an immoral war, lack of healthcare for the poorest, massive tax cuts for the wealthy, naked violations of human rights, refusal to establish effective policies to protect the life of the unborn (in spite of fervid anti-abortion rhetoric!), and the imposition of unconscionable economic burdens on future generations through a colossal federal debt. These are not just economic and political issues. They are quintessentially moral values—as much as the defense of life in all its stages and the family—that the Gospel places on us for the sake of the reign of God. Voting against abortion and gay marriage is not hard; it does not make a big hole in our pockets. But voting in support of the poor and the powerless costs us money and requires personal sacrifices.

In addition to this preferential option for the poor, there is another urgent issue on which the church’s ministry must focus in the near future, and that is the current American propensity to use violence and war to settle international problems. With the claim that the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 have changed “everything,” there is now in the United States a widespread subscription to what Walter Wink calls “the myth of redemptive violence,” a willingness to use military might to resolve international conflicts (1998, 56). Worse, this addiction to war, draped in patriotism, invokes God, the Bible, and the symbols of Christianity for self-justification. It is nothing short of idolatry and blasphemy. In this context, the church’s most pressing ministry is to proclaim, courageously and unflinchingly, Jesus’ teaching on non-violence as a way of relating not only among individuals but also among nations. Such non-violent resistance goes beyond pacifism and the theory of just war and points to the church’s ministry of reconciliation. To put teeth into its non-violence policy, church leaders must publicly oppose any candidate for public office, Democrat as well as Republican, who espouses war for political gains.

Liberation in all areas of life, then, must be one fundamental form of Christian ministry of the American Catholic church in the immediate future if it is to find again its bearings. This is no liberal or conservative agenda. Rather it is the absolute demand of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; the distinctive teaching of the Jewish prophets; the solemn injunction of Jesus; the frequent exhortation

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of popes and bishops; and the inspiring example of countless Catholic lay women and men. The American Catholic church has no future if it fails in this ministry of justice, peace, and reconciliation. Without this ministry, the church's teaching is empty rant.

**The Church with a Multi-Colored Cultural Face: Inculturation**

Like Joseph's "Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat," the American Catholic church is now displaying a dazzling variety of cultural, ethnic, and racial backgrounds. From its very beginning, it has been an "institutional immigrant." Before the massive arrival of European Catholics in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, there had already been Catholics among Native Americans, Mexicans, and African Americans on the continent. Even though the Irish and, to a lesser extent, the Germans have dominated the hierarchy, the early presence of Eastern and Southern Europeans as well as of the Chinese, the Filipinos, and the Japanese in the church was not insignificant. However, with laws imposing a severely restrictive quota system on European immigrants in the 1920s and the anti-Asian immigration legislation in 1934, it was predicted that the flow of immigrants would slow down to a trickle. Furthermore, as Catholics moved into the American mainstream, they became less distinctive, and the immigrant character of the church less pronounced. With time, the face of the church as a mosaic of different ethnic groups became blurred, especially after World War II, so much so that some church historians declared that the immigrant era of the church was over.

Recently, however, there has been a huge influx of immigrants, despite an economic slowdown, which tends to discourage immigration, and more stringent restrictions in the wake of September 11, 2001. Currently, more than 34 million immigrants live in the United States, 10 million of them illegally, and a majority of them are Catholic. Immigrants now make up 12 percent of the U.S. household population. The American Catholic church is becoming an institutional immigrant again. Furthermore, and this is vastly significant for the future of the church's ministry, within a couple of decades these "minorities" will constitute the majority in the church.

What is distinctive about the new arrivals is that they come mostly from non-European countries, especially from Africa, Asia, and Latin America, and bring with them languages, customs, and cultures vastly different from those of their host country. More importantly, unlike their predecessors, these immigrants intend to preserve their native traditions. While working hard to move into the economic and political mainstream, culturally and, as we see below, religiously, these new immigrants refuse to be assimilated into the White, Anglo-Saxon cul-
ture. Rather, they want to maintain, for themselves and their descendants, their own languages, customs, and cultures. In addition to various cultures, the new immigrants also bring with them a different brand of Catholicism and a different experience of being church.

The persistence of these non-European traditions and the immigrants’ distinctive experiences of being church present the American Catholic church’s ministry with two challenges. First, the church must devise a new style of being immigrant in the midst of the American society. The old immigrant style has been characterized by “group consciousness, defensiveness, willingness to use power to achieve concrete results” (O’Brien, 1996:55). While some of these tactics still retain their usefulness, clearly, the new Catholic immigrants cannot be brought together by means of ecclesiastical centralization, especially around the parish (they do not live in the same neighborhoods), separate education in Catholic schools (which very few can afford), and the use of political power (which they do not as yet possess). Rather, the future challenge for the church is to help immigrants maintain and transmit, especially to their children, their languages, customs, and culture, which are the glue that binds the immigrants together. This cultural task should be carried out at the parish, diocesan, and national levels, with appropriate organizations and activities, and with consistent ecclesiastical and financial support.

The second challenge is much more difficult and has barely been begun. It is known by the umbrella term of “inculturation,” which is the double process of incarnating the already culture-laden Gospel into the various cultures and of bringing the cultures into the Gospel whereby both the Gospel and the cultures are transformed and enriched. Concretely, this inculturation in the American Catholic church involves the interplay of five components: the message of the Gospel itself (divine revelation), the cultures (e.g., Semitic, Hellenistic, Roman, Germanic, etc.) in which the Gospel has been transmitted (the Christian Tradition), the American culture (mainly White, Anglo-Saxon, Enlightenment-inspired), the culture—predominantly pre-modern—of a specific ethnic group (e.g., the Vietnamese), and the cultures of other ethnic groups (e.g., Black, Mexican, Cuban, etc.). The areas in which inculturation takes place include all aspects of church life: liturgy, catechesis, spirituality, ministerial formation, and theology. Of special importance for inculturation in all of these areas is what is known as popular piety or devotions or popular Catholicism.
It is impossible to foretell what the American Catholic church will look like if its ministry of inculturation is taken seriously. However, one thing is certain: the church will be very different from what it is now, if the resources of other cultures are marshaled to reconceptualize the whole gamut of the church’s beliefs, liturgy, moral practices, and prayers. What if the God the church worships is depicted as a multi-ethnic, multi-racial, multi-colored, gender-inclusive Deity? What if Jesus is presented as the Buddha, the Guru, the Sage, the Ancestor, the Eldest Son par excellence? What if the Holy Spirit is conceived in terms of the Cosmic Breath and Power enlivening the whole creation and all religions and cultures? What if the church is lived as an extended family or a tribe? What if the sacramental celebrations connected with birth, growth, communion, reconciliation, sickness, marriage, and leadership incorporate the cultural traditions and customs that the immigrants celebrate on these occasions? What if Western monasticism adopts the spiritual practices of non-Western monastic traditions?

The Church Journeying with Other Believers: Interreligious Dialogue

The last example brings us to the third feature of the new American context, namely, religious pluralism. Until recently, the religious landscape of America was occupied almost exclusively by churches (Catholic and Protestant) and synagogues. Now it is dotted, even in its heartlands, by temples, pagodas, mosques, and gurdwaras. Of course, America is still overwhelmingly Christian; a little over 80 percent of the population profess the Christian faith, and its public symbols are overtly Christian. Nevertheless, the subtitle of Diana L. Eck’s book (2001), How a “Christian Country” Has Now Become the World’s Most Religiously Diverse Nation, which attempts to alert Americans of the new phenomenon of religious diversity in their midst, is not far from the truth. Despite their numerical minority, the new non-Christian immigrants strongly and loudly insist that they will continue to practice, publicly and proudly, their religious faiths—particularly Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism—and refuse to be subsumed into some kind of civic religion or Christianity.

For the Catholic Church, especially after Vatican II and in the light of Pope John Paul II’s teaching and activities, religious diversity is not a curse but a blessing. More than the United States, the church has at its disposal vast philosophical and theological resources to deal with not only the mere fact of religious diversity but also the new theologies of religious pluralism. It does not regard religious differences as “a clash of civilizations” and as a threat to its identity nor does it limit itself to polite tolerance, which is at bottom disguised intolerance. Rather, the church views other religious faiths with respect and admiration and enters into dialogue with them in order to be enriched by them.
This does not mean of course that interreligious dialogue is not an arduous challenge for the American Catholic church. Because religion and politics are inextricably intertwined, and because, as mentioned above, the American Catholic church is embedded in the United States, dialogue between the American Catholic church and the followers of other religions, in particular Muslims, is fraught with suspicion, given the current conflict between the United States and many Islamic countries. Fortunately, with its longstanding tradition of religious freedom and nonestablishment and its considerable religious diversity, the United States can be a fertile laboratory for interfaith dialogue. Hence, notwithstanding significant difficulties, the American Catholic church enjoys a unique advantage in carrying out such a dialogue. It can demonstrate that religious diversity need not and should not lead to violence, as it has done in many other countries.

According to official church teaching (Dialogue and Proclamation, no. 42), this dialogue has a fourfold form. First, “dialogue of life”: it requires that American Catholics maintain friendly relationships and, where feasible, share their life as good neighbors with the followers of other religions. Second, “dialogue of action”: Christians should collaborate with other believers in working for justice, peace, and the integrity of creation. Third, “dialogue of theological exchange”: both Christians and other believers must work to remove mutual misunderstandings and prejudices and to appreciate one another’s spiritual riches. Fourthly, “dialogue of religious experience”: followers of different religions should come together to pray and even to pray together.

It may be urged that given the overwhelmingly Christian majority in the United States, interreligious dialogue is not, or at least not yet, an immediate priority for the church’s ministry, as it is in Asia, for example. While this may be true, nevertheless, the increasing frequency of interfaith marriages among Americans poses serious challenges to the church’s ministry, which so far has done practically nothing to assist interfaith couples to cope with the difficulties of their marriages and to live out their different faiths in a mutually enriching way. In addition to this pastoral need, the church will also be required through interreligious dialogue to rethink some of its fundamental beliefs such as the uniqueness and universality of Christ’s mediation and the necessity of the church as the sacrament of salvation. In the process the church will have to consider whether it is theologically possible to affirm non-Christian religions as ways of salvation in God’s eternal plan, the nature of revelation, the modalities of the Holy Spirit’s presence in history, the revelatory status of non-Christian

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sacred scriptures, the spiritual fruitfulness of non-Christian rituals and prayers (in particular, popular religiosity), and so on.

A New Way of Being Church

Perhaps the decisive question facing the Catholic Church as it enters its third millennium is not so much the future direction of its ministry as a fundamentally new way of being church. Searching for newfangled methods or even eye-catching gimmicks of doing ministry, such as liturgical hip hop or new rules to highlight the distinction between clergy and laity in the celebration of the Eucharist, before examining the foundational question of how to be church in the globalized and postmodern context of the twenty-first century is putting the cart before the horse. It has been said that, whereas during its first millennium the ecclesial paradigm was bearing faithful witness to the apostolic tradition with collegiality as the modus operandi, in the second millennium the paradigm shifted to that of actively shaping the church tradition by means of a monarchical papal supremacy (Pottmeyer, 1998:25–33). In spite of the fact that Vatican II officially made communion ecclesiology its central vision, in the post-conciliar years, the minority group with its centralization of power in the papacy and the Roman Curia has gained the upper hand and has successfully prevented the implementation of collegial structures.

The challenge then for the church of the third millennium is both to retrieve the ecclesial paradigm of its first millennium and retain the best features of the ecclesial paradigm of its second millennium shorn of its paranoia of conciliarism, Gallicanism, control by the state, and modernity. The way to achieve this goal is to devise and implement effective structures of communion, solidarity, and dialogue through the development of local churches. And it is precisely through the threefold ministry of liberation, inculturation, and interreligious dialogue that local churches are formed. In this way, a new way of being church is achieved through a triple dialogue with the poor, with cultures, and with religions. Hence, ministry is not merely something the church does but constitutes what the church is. Only by doing ministry can the church become what it must be.

References


