The Beliefs and Practices of American Catholics

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When we compare rates of participation in the Catholic community in the 1950s and the present, there is both good news and bad news. The good news is that many small Christian communities have sprung up in recent years (Lee and D’Antonio, 2000), and there are increasing numbers of permanent deacons and lay ministers serving in parishes and dioceses around the country (DeRego and Davidson, 1998; Murnion, 1992; Murnion and DeLambo, 1999). The bad news is that there has been an overall decline in church participation. For example, in the 1950s, 75 percent of Catholics went to Mass weekly; now only 37 percent do. Eighty percent used to go to confession at least once a year; now less than half do. Interfaith marriages are increasing, and more marriages (even marriages involving two Catholics) are taking place outside the Church (D’Antonio et al., 2001). Catholics do not give as much of their income to the Church as they used to (Zech, 2000). They also are not choosing to become priests, brothers, and sisters at the rate they did in the 1950s (Schoenherr and Young, 1993; Froehle and Gautier, 2000).

There also were very high levels of doctrinal orthodoxy in the 1950s (Lenski, 1963). Laypeople certainly did not agree with the Church on everything (Fichter, 1951), but whatever disagreement there was took place in an overall context of
conformity with church teachings. As we all know, there is a great deal more autonomy and disagreement in today’s Church (Davidson and others, 1997; D’Antonio and others, 2001). Indeed, some people wonder if there is anything that Catholics agree on anymore. The answer is “yes.” Today’s Catholics are making a distinction between beliefs they think are at the core of the faith, and ones they think are optional or peripheral. In their view the core is rooted in God’s law, the Nicene Creed, and the Church’s concern for the poor. It includes belief in the Trinity, Incarnation, Resurrection, Mary as the Mother of God, Christ’s Real Presence in the Eucharist, charity and social justice. The periphery includes church laws and teachings the laity believe make sense at some times more than others and in some places more than others. It includes church norms limiting the priesthood to celibate men, opposing artificial birth control, opposing capital punishment, and supporting unions (Davidson, 1998; D’Antonio and others, 2001; Hoge and others, 2001).

There is far more conformity on beliefs laypeople consider core elements of the faith than there is on matters they view as peripheral. There has been some decline on core beliefs, but the majority of Catholics still believe in Incarnation and Resurrection, that Mary is the Mother of God, and that Jesus is really present in the Eucharist (Davidson, 2001). The steepest declines are on beliefs that laypeople think of as optional or peripheral. A majority of Catholics now disagree with the Church on most sexual and reproductive issues, capital punishment, and access to ordination.

Reflecting the trends of the last 50 years, there are important differences between generations of American Catholics. Members of the pre-Vatican II generation (born in or before 1940) are highest in participation and orthodoxy. Members of the Vatican II generation (born between 1941 and 1960) are less active in the Church and more autonomous in their thinking about issues of faith and morals. And members of the post-Vatican II generation (born between 1961 and 1981) are least involved in the Church and most likely to disagree with church teachings. For example, 57 percent of pre-Vatican II Catholics attend Mass weekly, compared to 39 percent of Vatican II Catholics and only 20 percent of post-Vatican II Catholics. Ninety-four percent of pre-Vatican II Catholics who are married to Catholics were married in the Church. That number declines to 83 percent among Vatican II Catholics and 71 percent among post-Vatican II Catholics. Ninety percent of pre-Vatican II Catholics say that sacraments such as Eucharist...
and marriage are important to them. That number drops to 84 percent of Vatican II Catholics, and 73 percent of post-Vatican II Catholics. Eighty-three percent of pre-Vatican II Catholics say it is important to believe that Mary is the Mother of God; 72 percent of Vatican II Catholics and 62 percent of post-Vatican II Catholics say that. For data on other beliefs and practices, see Davidson and others (1997), Davidson (1998), and D’Antonio and others (2001).

Explaining Trends

One view is that these trends are part of a larger societal trend toward secularization. Another view is that they signal the demise of the Catholic Church. I do not subscribe to either of these views, believing instead that American Catholics are simply forging new ways of being Catholic in response to two changes that are taking place in American society and four that are taking place in the Church.

Societal Influences

Declining participation and conformity are the natural result of the changing relationship between Protestants and Catholics. Our society was founded, and largely shaped, by Protestants, especially Episcopalians, Presbyterians, and Congregationalists (Pyle and Davidson, 2003). Viewing themselves as religious insiders, competing with other groups for scarce resources such as land and public office, and having enough power to gain the upper hand over other religions, these Protestants became the nation’s religious elite, or what came to be called the Protestant Establishment. As the number of Catholics increased during the nineteenth century, they were excluded from participation in core social institutions and forced to live and work in what became known as the Catholic ghetto (Herberg, 1960; Cogley and Van Allen, 1986). Protestant hegemony marginalized Catholics and fostered high levels of Catholic solidarity that persisted well into the twentieth century.

However, as Protestants came to terms with the fact that America was becoming a religiously pluralistic nation, and as Catholics increasingly demonstrated their willingness to embrace American culture, anti-Catholicism declined. As it did, Catholics’ access to core institutions increased and the need for the Catholic ghetto declined. As Catholics moved from the margins to the middle of American society, the theological boundaries between religious insiders and outsiders also became fuzzier (Albanese 1999; Roof and McKinney 1987). The Catholic Church’s traditional view of modern society as an evil place that Catholics should avoid gave way to the post-Vatican II view that the world is God’s creation and that Catholics should be fully involved in it. The Church no longer confines Catholics
to the Catholic ghetto the way it once did, and no longer discourages Catholics from participating in formerly all-Protestant organizations. It does not stress the theological differences between Protestants and Catholics as much as it used to. Catholics have responded to these changes by choosing to be more involved in society at large and less involved in the Catholic community (D'Antonio and others, 2001).

Rooted as it is in Protestantism, American culture has a natural tendency to give primacy to the individual (Myers, 2000). It gives higher priority to individuals than it does to institutions, stresses institutions' responsibilities to individuals more than it stresses individuals' responsibilities to institutions, and puts more emphasis on personal freedom than it does on social accountability. This cultural orientation was very pronounced during the nineteenth century and the Roaring '20s. It was muted during the economic depression of the 1930s and World War II, when Americans needed one another and institutions, such as government, to survive. This phase of muted individualism lasted through the 1950s, but then unraveled (Howe, 1981). Since then, we have seen a cultural shift away from obligation toward voluntarism, away from duty toward freedom, and away from conformity toward autonomy (Bellah and others, 1985; Roof and McKinney, 1987; Myers, 2000; Hoge and others, 2001).

With the decline of the Catholic ghetto in the 1950s and '60s, Catholics were more exposed than ever to American culture, including its emphasis on individualism. This exposure is one reason why Catholics (especially members of the post-Vatican II generation) are increasingly inclined to distinguish between church-based religiosity (which they tend to view negatively) and personal spirituality (which they think of more positively). It also has contributed to Catholics' view that religious participation is a personal decision (not an obligation) and that the individual is free to form his or her own views on matters of faith and morals, even if they differ from church teachings (Alwin 1984, 1986).

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**The Catholic Church**

With regard to church influences, I highlight four changes that are producing lower levels of participation and higher levels of autonomy in the Church.
Declining Legitimacy of Episcopal Authority. In the wake of Vatican I, there was a clear and well-documented trend toward the centralization of authority in the Church (worldwide as well as in the U.S.). With the approval of lower echelons in the Church, the hierarchy employed an elaborate system of rewards and punishments to produce compliance with church teachings and codes of conduct. These rewards and punishments were often severe and manipulative, but were effective because they were seen as the legitimate actions of episcopal authorities. Not surprisingly, they produced high levels of participation and conformity with church teachings.

This situation continued well into the 1950s. Although the centralization of episcopal authority continues in the worldwide Church, there has been a marked trend toward decentralization in American dioceses and parishes. Moreover, there has been the growing tendency for clergy and laypeople to question episcopal authority (Greeley 1977, 35; Varacalli 2001, 80; Gamm, 2001). In our 1999 survey (D’Antonio and others, 2001), for example, only 30 percent of post-Vatican II Catholics said the hierarchy’s teaching authority is “very important” to them personally (45 percent of Vatican II Catholics and 64 percent of pre-Vatican II Catholics said it is important). Another recent survey shows that nearly two-thirds of American Catholics believe church leaders have handled the problem of sexual abuse of young people by Catholic priests poorly and that “the church should be made more accountable on issues such as finances” (FADICA, 2002). As a result, church leaders have less control over the thoughts and actions of the laity. They are no longer able to produce the high levels of participation and conformity that prevailed in the 1950s.

Catholic Culture. In some respects, Catholic culture has not changed much at all. The Church continues to emphasize core teachings, such as the Trinity, Incarnation, Resurrection, Mary’s role as the Mother of God, and Christ’s Real Presence in the Eucharist as much as it did one hundred years ago. However, many other aspects of Catholic culture have changed dramatically. While the older image of God as a harsh, punitive, and judgmental God persists, the Church has championed a new image of God as loving, merciful, and kind. Although the uniform liturgies of the 1950s continue in some places, the Church has emphasized new, more culturally diverse, forms of liturgy. Traditional practices such as the

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Thus, the clear and coherent pre-Vatican II culture no longer unites all Catholics. Many Catholics (of all ages) complain about not knowing what the rules are any more. This is important because it is a sociological truism that people are most likely to abide by organizational norms and values when they are clearly understood; they are least likely to do so when the norms and values are unclear. But, underneath these complaints is another reality: an older pre-Vatican II culture exists along side a dramatically different post-Vatican II culture. Older Catholics still feel an obligation to attend Mass, receive Holy Communion every week, and abide by church teachings. Younger Catholics feel no such obligation, which is reflected in their lower rates of church attendance and increased levels of disagreement with Church teachings.

Laity’s Attributes. In one of the country’s great success stories, Catholics have risen from the bottom of American society to the top. They have gone from limited education, blue-collar jobs, and very modest income to being among the nation’s most highly educated, white-collar, and prosperous religious groups.

This trend is a mixed blessing. On the one hand, it is partly responsible for the growing number of permanent deacons and lay ecclesial ministers. Many lay men and women now have the academic credentials and professional skills to serve in ministries that were once reserved for priests and sisters. On the other hand, Catholics are now more highly involved in all aspects of civic life, and the Church is only one of many commitments they make. As a result, levels of participation in the Church have declined. With higher levels of education, laypeople also have been taught to think for themselves, and they are exercising more autonomy in their thinking about issues of faith and morals (Alwin, 1984, 1986).

Conflict. The Catholic Church always has been home to competing interest groups. At the beginning of the twentieth century, for example, liberals and conservatives fought over the extent to which American Catholics should embrace or reject American culture. These differences were muted in 1930s, ’40s, and ’50s, due in part to the centralization of authority, the uniformity of Catholic culture, and the limited resources of the laity.

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Things have changed since then. During Vatican II, liberal bishops, cardinals, and theologians triumphed over, and in some notable cases converted, their conservative rivals (Seidler and Meyer, 1989; Pogorelc, 2002). The conflict between liberals and conservatives gained momentum during the 1960s, ’70s, and ’80s, with battle lines drawn between conservative clergy and laypeople who wanted to protect the traditional Catholic culture of the pre-Vatican II era and liberal clergy and laypeople who wanted to implement a new Catholic culture reflecting the spirit of Vatican II and American culture. On the conservative side, one finds groups such as Opus Dei, Legionaries of Christ, EWTN, Catholics United for the Faith, the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights, Franciscan University, the University of Dallas, the Society of Catholic Social Scientists, and The Wanderer (Weaver and Appleby, 1995; Varacalli, 2001). On the liberal side, there are groups such as Call to Action, Catholics for a Free Choice, the Women’s Ordination Conference, Dignity, CORPUS, and The National Catholic Reporter (Dillon, 1999; Weaver, 1999).

As the struggle between liberals and conservatives has evolved, the parties have solidified their own ranks and tried to persuade middle-of-the-road Catholics to choose one view or the other. In the process, they have demonized one another and delegitimated episcopal authority. Liberal groups rail against the Vatican and American bishops, whom they see as obstacles standing in the way of the full implementation of Vatican II (Pogorelc, 2002). Conservative organizations usually grant legitimacy to the pope, but see American bishops as weak-kneed Americanists who have forsaken many of the Church’s most cherished teachings (Varacalli, 2001).

This conflict has contributed to the decline in religious participation and conformity. Some Catholics are simply walking away from the fray, believing that such conflict does not belong in the Church, that the combatants are being unchristian in their relationships with one another, and/or that the Church will never change. This is especially true of young adult Catholics, who prefer to see the Church as a place of peace, not war, and are more likely to focus on core issues of faith than on the issues that tend to divide liberals and conservatives. Others are hanging in there, but are not as active and are exercising more and more autonomy in their views of faith and morals.

**Looking to the Future**

When I look to the future, I see a continuation of the conditions that are fostering lower levels of participation and increased levels of autonomy. There is no reason to believe that anti-Catholicism will rear its ugly head and that Catholics once again will be confined to a segregated world of their own. I also do not foresee a decline in individualism. Especially in the wake of
most recent scandal relating to sexual and episcopal misconduct, I do not see episcopal authority regaining the high levels of legitimacy it once enjoyed. I am not optimistic that Catholic culture will be much clearer and more coherent in the near future. There is almost no chance that Catholics will return to lower levels of socio-economic status. Finally, though most Catholics, especially those who are located in the middle of the liberal-conservative continuum, would like to see a reduction in the fighting, I do not see that happening.

If I am right, we should get used to low levels of participation and high levels of autonomy. However, that does not mean we cannot do anything to increase participation and to see that church teachings (especially core teachings) are passed on to the next generation. We can, and should, pursue both of these goals at all times.

**Anti-Catholicism**

The Church should respond appreciatively to the relatively newfound openness of American society, especially among American Protestants who have overcome the religious animosities of their parents and grandparents. We Catholics should get over our own religious animosities and participate in ecumenical activities. In our efforts to be ecumenical, however, Catholics should not surrender the distinctiveness of the Catholic heritage and our pride in being Catholic. We can be ecumenical and still celebrate the core beliefs and practices that make us different from people in other faith groups. We also can do more than we have in recent years to make the Church special to everyone, especially post-Vatican II Catholics. We should tell young adults about the Church’s great intellectual heritage, contributions to art, long tradition of concern for the poor, and many spiritual traditions. We also should explain the Church’s history of women’s leadership in orphanages, hospitals, and schools—long before the modern-day women’s movement. We can build pride in the Church without returning to the religious animosities of earlier times.

**Individualism**

The Church needs to come to terms with individualism and see how individual freedom fits into a traditional Catholic worldview. That worldview includes a well-developed appreciation of institutions, human interdependence, and the common good. This heritage is found in many Catholic organizations such as Catholic grade schools and high schools, Catholic colleges and universities, Catholic social service agencies such as Catholic Charities, and Catholic human justice agencies such as the Catholic Campaign for Human Development. With this heritage and infrastructure, the Church can and should speak prophetically about excessive individualism in our society, especially the tendency to suspect large-scale social institutions, including organized religion.


**Episcopal Authority**

Clergy and laity should discuss issues such as the historical nature of authority in the Church, changing conditions in the Church (such as the increased resourcefulness of laypeople), how these changes affect conceptions of authority, and ways of achieving legitimate authority in today’s Church. We should also clarify the domains where the hierarchy has legitimate authority and the areas where laypeople have at least as much, if not more, authority. We should embrace the Church’s historical understanding that some truths are more important than others and engage one another in a dialogue over the relative importance of specific issues and the reasoning behind these rankings. For this dialogue to occur, clergy and laypeople should be careful not to make unwarranted and unkind generalizations about one another. It is one thing for the hierarchy to disagree with the laity on particular issues; it is quite another to ignore laypeople or to oppose dialogue with them. Likewise, it is one thing for priests and laypeople to disagree with Rome and the bishops on particular issues; it is quite another to discredit authority altogether and to be unchristian in what we say about religious leaders.

**Catholic Culture**

We should celebrate the fact that there is considerable agreement on core teachings. Catholic parents, catechists, and others in the Church have done a better job in passing on the faith than many people realize. As we look to the future, we also need to make sure the core of the faith is in the foreground of our plans. As we negotiate the ambiguities and contradictions in Catholic norms and values, we need to remember what Ludwig said in his book *Reconstructing Catholicism*: “The heart of any spiritual tradition is the experience of God. . . . Within Catholicism,” he says, “there are four key aspects to the experience of God: the Jesus experience, the experience of grace, the experience of sacramental community, and the experience of personal and social liberation (Ludwig, 55).” Young people and others who are only loosely connected to the Church are not dying to hear more about ecclesiastical rules and regulations they consider peripheral. But, they are eager to experience God and are willing to learn how the Church can help them achieve that goal.

**Laity’s Attributes**

Today’s Catholics are the most highly educated and most resourceful Catholics in the history of the Church. Their high levels of education, prestigious jobs, and economic prosperity impose some limits on episcopal authority, cultural unanimity, and harmony in the Church. As Catholics use the intelligence God has given them, they are bound to question religious authorities, reach some conclusions that are different from church teachings, and come into conflict with people who think differently. We have to accept and respect these consequences. But, the
laity’s resourcefulness also has many benefits. For example, many highly educated and prosperous Catholics are assuming leadership roles in the Church. They are leaders of small Christian communities, lay ministers, and permanent deacons. They will play a disproportionate role in the formation of future generations of Catholics.

However, other Catholics are not as actively involved in the Church, especially African-Americans, Hispanics, divorced Catholics, people who are below average in education and income, Catholics involved in interfaith marriages, members of the post-Vatican II generation, and single people (Davidson et al, 1997). Since these Catholics are not terribly active in the Church, church leaders need to find out where they are and what their needs are, then try to meet these needs.

Conflict

Finally, conflict is a natural part of group life, and we should not be too quick to stomp it out in the Church. However, conflict becomes problematic when it threatens to destroy a group. One way to avoid that scenario in the Church is for liberal and conservative groups to remember that, in addition to their differences, they also have much in common. And, what they have in common is often more important than the things they disagree on. Another way is for liberals and conservatives to remember that the Church is a church and not a sect. By nature, a sect is exclusive, believes its members are saints, believes in immediate conversion, and believes that people who are not in full agreement with the group should be expelled. A church is inclusive, believes its members are sinners, believes that conversion is a gradual process that will come about on God’s terms not ours, and believes that, in the meantime, we all have a home in the Church. Both liberals and conservatives need to guard against the sectarian impulse to expel the other side from the Church. Both parties must remember that the Church is a big tent and that there is room enough for everybody.

References


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