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TRENDS IN THE LIFE OF THE
CATHOLIC CHURCH IN THE
UNITED STATES


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A Review of the Principal Trends in the Life of the Catholic Church in the United States

National Conference of Catholic Bishops
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The word "malaise" is often used to describe the current state of U.S. society in general and, in particular, the condition of organized religion in the United States. Many observers find in both the secular and religious spheres a disturbing degree of polarization, confusion, self-doubt and uncertainty about fundamental values and purposes. The more optimistic view this as the necessary prelude to a new era of committed purposefulness, or, as they might say, the birth pangs of a "new consciousness." The more pessimistic hold that the current situation reflects decadence and portends collapse.

It is not the purpose of this paper to suggest that either of these viewpoints is entirely true or entirely false. If history is any guide, it seems possible that both will be proved right to some extent and wrong to some extent. Both secular society and organized religion are passing through a time of rapid and dramatic change. It is probable that both will be different in significant ways in the future. At the same time, many areas of continuity with the past are likely to remain. The present era of change does not represent a total sloughing off of tradition but rather a winnowing process in which some values and institutions may be discarded but others will be reaffirmed and strengthened.

The problems of secular society in the United States and the problems of organized religion are not identical. At the same time it is impossible to dichotomize the "secular" and "religious," particularly when attempting to reflect on the state of mind of individuals, who themselves do not experience their lives as dichotomized. Certainly many issues in the "secular" sphere have

“religious” dimensions, and vice versa. Problems in one area tend to reinforce and aggravate those in the other.

1. *Secular society*

Many elements enter into the current malaise of secular society in the United States. Only a few can be mentioned here.

It is obvious that the deep divisions caused by U.S. military involvement in Southeast Asia have not been healed. Fundamental questions of conscience raised by the Vietnam war remain unanswered. Considered in this context, the current political crisis in the United States has occurred at the worst possible moment for the well being of the nation. With the end of active U.S. military involvement in Southeast Asia the American people stood urgently in need of political leadership which would help them achieve reconciliation and regain consensus. Instead disclosures of wrongdoing by public figures have contributed to divisiveness and, worst of all, to feelings of cynicism and disgust with regard to the entire political process. There is evidence that many Americans simply no longer trust their public institutions, and that among these institutions government is trusted least of all.

One result of the weakening of public consensus has been to reinforce the selfish tendencies of groups and individuals. Deep-seated social problems such as poverty and racism seem little closer to solution than they were a decade ago; worse still, in some sectors talk of poverty is regarded as a bore, and racial separatism is advocated as a positive good. The current energy crisis raises additional questions about American altruism and willingness to sacrifice. There is fear that the burdens of the energy shortage will be shifted to those least able to bear them and least able to raise an effective protest: the poor and lower-income individuals and families. Neo-isolationism, following on the Vietnam war and reinforced by the energy crisis, has caused many Americans to ignore or discount the imperatives of international social justice.

Radical changes in individual moral values have also occurred in recent years and are continuing to occur. Whether or not it is accurate to speak of a “sexual revolution,” it is clear that many people now regard sex primarily as an instrument of individual gratification rather than a means for the expression of mutual love

and commitment between husband and wife, fundamentally oriented to the begetting of new life. Changing attitudes toward sex, toward the roles of men and women, and toward relationships among members of different generations have subjected family life to unusual strain. Divorce is widely accepted and divorce rates are extremely high; it is not farfetched to suppose that the easy availability and social acceptability of divorce encourage a "divorce mentality." There is now widespread, although by no means universal, acceptance of abortion on grounds of convenience. The right of each woman to exercise control over her body is frequently advanced as a total and self-evident justification for the destruction of unborn life. Similarly self-centered and individualistic attitudes underlie the growing movement for legalized euthanasia. Although "humane" arguments are generally put forward in favor of euthanasia, the reality is that many people now accept the idea that persons whose age, illness or incapacity renders them burdensome, have thereby forfeited the right to life.

Many tend to blame communications media for the deterioration of traditional moral values in American society. To some extent this is unfair, since to a significant degree the media simply reflect what is happening in society. However, it is apparent that the media experience great difficulty—some would say unwillingness—in exercising self-control in their depiction of violence, sexual permissiveness, and the pursuit of materialistic values.

2. *The state of organized religion*

Much of the confusion and uncertainty apparent in American society in general is mirrored, in one way or another, in organized religion. Granted that there are few reliable empirical indicators of religiosity (which makes it difficult if not impossible to generalize about the state of religion considered as a matter of individual experience), the fact remains that the churches as institutions seem in many instances to be ailing.

Some describe the current difficulties of organized religion in the United States as a "crisis of faith." Whether or not such a crisis exists only God—literally—can say. Beyond question, however, in the United States at the present time transcendent religious belief finds itself engaged in direct contestation with a secularistic, humanistic worldview which rejects supernatural religion and absolute moral values.

The difficulties of organized religion express themselves in such ways as declining membership, declining church attendance, and declining contributions. To be sure, a "church" is not constituted by entries in a ledger. Nevertheless the statistics point to basic problems. The churches themselves are in some cases experiencing a crisis of self-identity. The social activism of the 1960s (identified with such causes as civil rights, anti-poverty efforts, and the anti-war movement) has declined and is regarded as passé in some quarters. At the same time many sectors of organized religion have found nothing to take its place. The quest for religious "relevance" continues, but there is little agreement as to what now constitutes relevance. Religious fads come and go with regularity.

Simultaneously, however, the other phenomena of quite a different sort have begun to appear. Some ultra-conservative, fundamentalist churches report all-time high memberships and financial contributions. Pentecostalism and the Jesus Movement continue to attract adherents. There is strong, although in many instances obviously superficial, interest in Eastern religions and the occult. It is extremely difficult to interpret these phenomena with much certainty; perhaps it does them an injustice to lump them together. Nevertheless one may hypothesize that, to some extent at least, each represents in its own way a reaction against socially oriented religion and a retreat to a more individualistic approach.

It is generally recognized that the positive influence of organized religion on public policy and public morality has declined sharply in the United States in recent years. Court decisions interpreting separation of church and state along narrowly absolutist lines have excluded religious observance and, for all practical purposes, religious education from the public schools. Many parents, church leaders and others are justifiably concerned about both the immediate and longrange implications of this situation for the religious and moral formation of the young and, therefore, the religious and moral bases of American society in the future. It is perfectly true that perfunctory and *pro forma* religious activities in the classroom are unlikely to accomplish much. The special tragedy is that even the perfunctory and *pro forma* are now regarded as beyond the pale of constitutionality.

3. *The state of the Catholic Church*

It has been customary in recent years to discuss tensions within the Catholic Church in the United States in terms of conflict between "conservatives" and "liberals." It may be, however, that the time has come to cast such discussions in different terms. The emerging question for the Catholic community in the United States may well be whether it will in the future, as in the past, derive its fundamental beliefs and attitudes from the traditional value system of Catholic Christianity, or whether its beliefs and attitudes will be drawn more and more from the secularistic, humanistic value system of the society around it.

Historically, the Catholic community in the United States until recent years lived in a certain isolation from attitudes and values which prevailed in the larger society. This is not to say that Catholics were uninfluenced by the experience of living within American society—something which would have been both undesirable and impossible to effect. It is to say that the Catholic community was relatively isolated and homogeneous, and that in a host of different ways, ranging from the trivial to the urgently important, the distinctiveness of "Catholic" beliefs, "Catholic" values, and "Catholic" practices was affirmed and reinforced.

This state of affairs has changed markedly in the last fifteen years and with increasing rapidity since the end of Vatican Council II. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the reasons for this change, although no doubt some are to be found in the internal life of the Catholic Church during this period while others are due to social trends and forces at work in secular society. In any case, and leaving aside the question of what has caused the change, the pertinent issue now is whether Catholics in the United States are more powerfully formed and influenced by the Church or by secular society. At the very least, many would say that for a large number of Catholics, the influence of secular society—and all that implies, for good as well as ill—counts more heavily than the influence of the Church.

Viewed in this light, it comes as no surprise that the Catholic Church in the U.S. has many of the same problems as the rest of organized religion. Polarization and ferment are widespread in the Church, not least in the religious life. The shortage of vocations to the priesthood and religious life remains a serious problem.

The reaffirmation of clerical celibacy by the 1971 Synod has helped reduce confrontation on that issue; yet departures from the active ministry continue at a disturbingly high rate. There is even evidence that weekly Mass attendance has begun to decline significantly among some Catholics. This is particularly striking since very high rates of weekly attendance at religious services have up to now been one of the distinguishing traits of the Catholic community. Evidence of the same tendency—toward assimilation of the values and attitudes dominant in the general society—appears in data indicating that many Catholics are tolerant of abortion in at least some circumstances, reject official Church teaching on means of family limitation, have a divorce rate not markedly different from that of other Americans, and regard most social issues very much as their non-Catholic countrymen do. It would be an exaggeration at the present time to say that such Catholics have rejected the Church. There is no reason to think they have; for the most part they continue to perceive themselves as Catholics. But Catholic beliefs and values no longer occupy the same central place in their lives that they did in the lives of their parents and grandparents—and may have done in their own lives in years gone by. And their attitude toward the Magisterium is ambivalent at best.

This is, however, only part of the story of the contemporary Catholic community in the United States. The situation is considerably different for that other segment of the community for whom Catholic beliefs and attitudes do continue to hold a position of centrality.

The experience of these Catholics has not been particularly happy in recent years. Increasingly they have found themselves at odds with dominant trends and values in the society in which they live. Their discomfort has reached the point at which it now is described by some as “alienation.” Two events of 1973 dramatized and exacerbated such alienation in an especially acute way: the January decisions of the U.S. Supreme Court legalizing abortion on demand and the June decisions of the same Court apparently closing off most avenues of new and substantial public assistance to nonpublic schools and nonpublic school children and their parents. The January decisions on abortion were a flat contradiction of traditional Catholic attitudes concerning the right to life of the unborn child, as well as traditional Catholic beliefs

concerning the role of law and public policy. The June decisions on educational aid were perceived by many Catholics as a callous repudiation, with some anti-Catholic overtones, of their claim to equitable treatment and full, unimpeded participation in the American educational enterprise.

It is extremely risky to attempt to predict the future course of events as far as the Catholic community in the U.S. is concerned. The tendencies noted here have become pronounced only recently and with surprising speed. It is possible that a new change of direction will occur with equal suddenness, but it would be presumptuous to assume that such a change will take place. A simple return to the past seems out of the question in any case.

It would be a mistake, however, to conclude that the current condition of the Church in the United States can be adequately summarized by cataloging problems. The problems described here are real, but they do not exhaust the reality of U.S. Catholicism today.

Many observers feel that a profound spiritual renewal is now taking place among many American Catholics. Centers and movements for the study and practice of spirituality among priests, religious and laity are springing up in many places. There is a deep and growing interest in prayer. Although comprehensive data are lacking, there is reason to believe that the practice of frequent confession is growing again after several years of decline. Many young people, as well as their elders, are active participants in charismatic groups. Spiritually-oriented movements for married couples are attracting increasing numbers of husbands and wives. After a period of transition, liturgical reforms are now widely accepted and working well.

The spread of parish and diocesan councils has involved more people than ever before in the exercise of shared responsibility. Many priests and religious, after a period of uncertainty and confusion, manifest renewed and selfless dedication to the mission of the Church. The Holy Year theme of renewal and reconciliation has been welcomed with interest and enthusiasm, and many dioceses and parishes are now involved in Holy Year programs.

There is a strong and healthy interest in the future of religious education, which in recent years has already been much enriched

in both Catholic schools and out-of-school programs. Well planned efforts are underway at many levels to develop or strengthen programs in which fidelity to the teaching of the Church is combined with the best in contemporary educational methodology. The bishops have given leadership to this movement by their collective pastoral on Catholic education, *To Teach as Jesus Did* (1972) and the document *Basic Teachings for Catholic Religious Education* (1973), as well as by their plan for a national Catechetical Directory. There are many new and successful programs for the continuing education of clergy and religious, as well as lay persons. National organizations and dioceses manifest a heightened awareness of the social dimensions of the Church's mission to minority and ethnic groups and a greater sensitivity to such issues as women's rights. Ethical and moral abuses, such as legally sanctioned permissiveness concerning abortion, have helped create a renewed sense of unity among concerned Catholics and have awakened them to their responsibility to be a positive force for good in the nation's life.

In short, the Catholic Church in the United States faces many difficult problems at the present time, but along with the problems there are also many signs of underlying strength and vitality. American Catholicism is changing, not collapsing, and while a period of change is not a time for complacency, neither is it a time for gloom.

4. Conclusion

In seeking to influence change positively, the Catholic Church in the United States cannot pretend to have easy or failure-proof answers to the problems outlined here, whether of secular society, organized religion, or the Catholic community. In a sense the message of Christ is the "answer" to them all. But in nearly 2000 years of trying, the Church has not been consistently successful in communicating this message. There is no reason to suppose it will discover a panacea in 1974; yet certain avenues to improved performance are well worth exploring.

As far as the transmission of values from generation to generation is concerned, the role of parents is crucial. The Church could perform a significant service by increasing its direct assistance to parents who are engaged in this vital task. Supportive efforts by the Church are now more essential than ever, since society at

large not only no longer offers such assistance to Catholic parents but in many ways fosters values which directly contradict those they wish to transmit to their children. This calls for strengthening Catholic schools and other educational programs in all ways possible. At the same time, however, it must be recognized that, important as these are, they can only reinforce the parental effort; they cannot substitute for it where it is lacking or deficient, nor do they really constitute “direct assistance” to parents themselves. Serious thought should therefore be given to what forms “direct” assistance to parents might take in the future to help them in the task of transmitting values to their children. Efforts to involve parents directly in the religious and moral education of their children, already underway in many programs, should be fostered, and new means and media should be explored for reaching both parents and children.

Many of the ills now apparent in secular society (and reflected in one way or another in the religious sphere) are manifestations of an almost atomistic individualism. Yet paradoxically, to judge from popular literature and rhetoric the quest for “community” has never been more urgent and widespread. It may be, of course, that many are now seeking community precisely because they have lost it or never experienced it. The Church could play a crucial role of reconciliation in society by speaking movingly to men and today of the community envisioned and brought into being by Jesus. To do this, however, it must become much more of a loving community—and be perceived as such—than it is now.

Effective evangelization lies at the heart of what is needed now. In order to evangelize effectively in the modern world, the Church must do at least two things. First, it must achieve a clear understanding of what evangelization means in the contemporary context. Second, it needs to assess all means of evangelization now at its disposal (and perhaps some which are not now at its disposal but which potentially could be) in order to determine which can best reach and touch minds and hearts today. The pastoral reflections of the Synod can be of inestimable value in responding to these two pressing needs.

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