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## *From Ghetto to Suburbs: The Decline of Devotional Catholicism*

History is the structuration of events in time and space through the continual interplay of agency and structure, the interconnection of the mundane nature of day-to-day life with institutional forms stretching over immense spans of time and space.<sup>1</sup>

In *The Company of Women*, novelist Mary Gordon introduces Father Cyprian, whose strong personality and convictions made him a kind of spiritual center for the five women forming the book's central characters. His retreats, his Masses, his spiritual advice flowed from a man sure of himself and his universe, convinced that while "Protestants had nature . . . Catholics have the word of God."<sup>2</sup> He knew each of the women almost better than they knew themselves, recognizing distinctive strengths and weaknesses. His firm guidance was reassuring and sustaining.

All those years he had not failed her. He had kept her on the path. He had reminded her of the love of God which was beyond her understanding. He told her God had chosen her for a special trial and that she might be, without knowing it, a channel of extraordinary graces.<sup>3</sup>

Father Cyprian visualized "the whole sewer of the modern world, the great dark stink of it . . . only this remnant was left to him: women whose lives had gone bad in one way or another, who came to him in times of crisis. He was there, wearing the great distinction of his priesthood like a cloak cut big to hide the body."<sup>4</sup>

The novel succeeds grandly in portraying the certain world inhabited by American Catholics of the pre-Vatican II era, a world not only of respected priestly authority but one in which to be Catholic meant being other, set apart, and expected to conduct one's life differently from one's Protestant and Jewish neighbors. Indeed, Mary Gordon stands in a long

tradition of American Catholic writers who knew this world intimately and portrayed it unforgettably. James T. Farrell immortalized Studs Lonigan, who despite his youthful waywardness, never found himself outside the reach of his parish church and what it represented:

Studs muttered the words of the Act of Contrition over and over again. He wished last night undone, like he had almost never wished for anything. The bell, the sudden feeling of change in everyone at Mass, the knowledge that he was to witness the greatest of mysteries, the changing of bread and water into the body and blood of Jesus Christ, the memories of other masses, other Christmas days, catechism lessons, all converged in him. He was lonesome, and contrite, and adoring. He felt himself a part of the great and powerful Catholic Church, built upon the rock of Peter, a member, however unworthy, and he vowed to be more worthy.<sup>5</sup>

In *Memoirs of a Catholic Girlhood* Mary McCarthy evoked this atmosphere of certainty by recalling her teenage challenge to church teaching. Confronting a Jesuit retreat master whom the nun-teachers had summoned to talk to her, McCarthy felt the force of his closing admonitions:

The priest shook his head sorrowfully. "I cannot tell you my child . . . I cannot open eyes that blindly refuse to see. Can inert matter give birth to spirit? Did inert matter give you your conscience?" His hollow voice reverberated as if he were addressing a whole dockful of secular philosophers, arraigned in a corner of the room. "Oh, my child," he concluded, rising, "give up reading that atheistic filth. Pray to God for faith and make a good confession." He left the room swiftly, his cassock swelling behind him."<sup>6</sup>

Perceptive outsiders felt this same sense of envelopment in a distinctive world. Theologian Harvey Cox remembers boyhood brushes with the Catholic Church in his Pennsylvania home town:

In the Catholic Church thirteen-year-old boys must absorb a lot about the mystery of the Mass, the power of gesture and sacrament, the objective *otherness* of the holy, by serving as altar boys and acolytes. The Catholic religious sensibility includes, from very early on, the feeling of being *part* of a vast, ancient, and relatively fixed reality. Like the grace that was promised to me in those sermons, the church itself, for Catholics, was not something you had to do anything about. It just *was*, and all you had to do was accept it. I could sense that even in my Catholic cousins and playmates.<sup>7</sup> (emphasis in original).

No wonder that Catholic writers of the post-Vatican II era sounded nostalgic even as they voiced approval of Council changes in Church worship and authority. John Cogley in *Catholic America* referred to the "ghetto culture" of American Catholicism in the 1940s and 1950s, a culture "often at odds with powerful currents of American life."<sup>8</sup> Catholics were content to inhabit "the one true church" and to regard Protestant neighbors, some the closest of friends, as "invincibly ignorant" and "victims of an erroneous system of theological thought."<sup>9</sup> Priests were generally forbidden to participate in anything smacking of "ecumenical" discussions with clergy of other denominations. For Cogley, the pre-Vatican II Catholicism he knew was a closed world in many ways. But it was also a richly evocative universe perhaps nowhere better captured in retrospect than by Gary Wills in *Bare Ruined Choirs*, his 1972 reflection on how it used to be:

The habits of childhood are tenacious, and Catholicism was first experienced by us as a vast set of intermeshed childhood habits—prayers offered, heads ducked in unison, crossing, chants, christenings, grace at meals, beads, altar, incense, candles; nuns in the classroom alternately too sweet and too severe, priests garbed black on the street and brilliant at the altar; churches lit and darkened, clothed and stripped, to the rhythm of liturgical recurrences; the crib in winter, purple Februaries, and lilies in spring; confession as intimidation and comfort (comfort, if nothing else, that the intimidation was survived), communion as revery and discomfort; faith as a creed, and the creed as catechism, Latin responses, salvation by rote, all things going to a rhythm, memorized, old things always returning, eternal in that sense, no matter how transitory."<sup>10</sup>

Not that all writers took things so seriously, of course. Novelist John R. Powers could look back upon the Catholic universe of pre-Vatican II days and find a lot to laugh about. In 1973 he treated his readers to a delightful remembrance of his eight years in a Chicago parochial elementary school complete with references to a Catholic life revolving around the parish church. *The Last Catholic in America* adds a funny touch to the motif seen above: a world of clearly defined and, for the most part, unquestioned obligations and expectations:

Lent was a time of "give ups." At the beginning of the forty days, fathers would give up smoking and swearing, mothers would give up nagging, and children would give up sweets. A few more weeks and we'd all give up. . . . About the only people who kind of looked forward to Lent were the fat Catholics. Throughout the Lenten period, everyone between the ages of twenty-one and fifty-nine was allowed to

eat meat only once a day. Snacks between meals were also prohibited. In addition, two of the three daily meals could not equal in size the main daily meal. Of course, if you ate like a madman at your main meal, you could still manage, within the rules, to gorge yourself two more times a day and still remain in good standing with the Church.<sup>11</sup>

While the novelists and essayists sketched a Catholicism of clear and clean definition, the social scientists focused a different lens upon American Catholics. Second- and third-generation Catholics in the 1950s seemed well on their way out of the “ghetto” and on up the ladder of socioeconomic mobility. Post-World War II America bestowed its prosperity on the sons and daughters of immigrants; many a Catholic veteran was the first in his family to attend college under the GI Bill. “Assimilation” was a key theme, raising the question of whether Catholics were remaining distinctive from their non-Catholic neighbors. Not all social scientists answered this question in the same way.

### *Catholic Assimilation: An Earlier View from Social Science*

#### *Joseph Fichter*

The first systematic portraits of American Catholics emerged in the 1950s. Father Joseph Fichter, Jesuit priest-sociologist, published *Southern Parish* in 1951, based on field work he did from 1949 to 1950. Fichter wrote a subsequent reflection on this study in 1954, *Social Relations in the Urban Parish*. He then shifted to Chicago for another field study, publishing *Parochial School* in 1958. Fichter’s books, taken together, give us a detailed picture and analysis of everyday Catholicism as mirrored in the lives of lay people, priests, and nuns of early post-World War II America. Catholics remained distinctive, Fichter would conclude, but the assimilative pull of postwar America seemed irresistible.

In his 1954 reflections on *Southern Parish*, Fichter stated a theme echoed by other observers of the decade: American Catholics were feeling the pull of the larger American society. They were surging into middle-class status, helped in no little way by the opportunities offered World War II veterans in education, housing, and employment. The great upward movement of the sons and daughters of the immigrant generation was under full steam. Fichter pointed out, for example, that in the Louisiana parish he studied, parishioners’ Catholicism was not the principal factor either in attitudes or in social relationships. Thus, in recreational pursuits like bowling, bridge, poker, and athletic teams, personal associations easily crossed parochial and “Catholic” lines, having little or nothing to do with religious affiliation. Nor were Catholics immune to the ethos of the business

world. "The Catholic's proximate conformity to the role demands and vocational values of the business institution may imply his growing distance from the ideals of the religious institution. His economic role may have little integration with his familial role and even less with his religious role."<sup>12</sup> Fichter pointed especially to "marginal Catholics," those barely performing their religious duties who, he felt, were "being pulled toward the center of one or more other institutions."<sup>13</sup> The modern urban parish, then, no longer resembled the ethnic-centered solidaristic community one thinks of in early twentieth-century Chicago of Philadelphia or Boston of New York. Other institutions play a larger role:

This seems especially true in the so-called leisure time activities of urban Catholics. Radio and television, the picture magazines, commercial movies, sports and dances, are now enjoyed outside the context of the parish. They are also generally outside (or at least indifferent to) the system of typical religious values.<sup>14</sup>

In other words, the weight and pull of "secular" American institutions involved pressures to change, change which, as Fichter saw it, moved "away from religious patterns toward secular patterns of behavior."<sup>15</sup> Catholics were strongly affected by these trends; resistance was difficult. Voluntary organizations were becoming increasingly prominent in American life, and Catholics were feeling this attraction and finding themselves through them in increasingly close contact with Americans of other outlooks and beliefs.<sup>16</sup>

In *Parochial School*, Fichter pursued this theme of assimilation in tension with American values. Demographic data signaled major trends under way. By mid-decade, increasing proportions of Chicago Catholics were native-born. Less than 5 percent of the school children's parents were foreign-born; almost three-quarters of families had parents of different ethnic backgrounds as intermarriage took place. Finally, a large majority of the children themselves were already fourth-generation Americans. The ethnic cultures—German, Irish, Italian, Polish, and Bohemian—that had contributed to a distinctive Catholic subculture were eroding. St Luke's appeared to Fichter as "the Catholic parish of the future," which meant

the acceptance of American cultural values and behavior patterns, the continued urbanization of life, the tendency to intermarry, the pursuit of American economic and political goals, are removing these people further and further from their immigrant ethnic background. The urban parish has reached a point of assimilation at which the dominant cultural influence is the American urban influence.<sup>17</sup>

Fichter was among the first, then, to notice the rapid postwar upward

mobility of Catholics and to assess its significance for maintaining a distinctive Catholic subculture. Evidence of change seemed to lie all about him. Compared to males of the same age group in Chicago (ages 30 to 44), the fathers of St. Luke's students had more schooling, and more went to college. Few had only an elementary school education. Fichter even surveyed public school youngsters using the same items with which he queried the parochial school students, discovering that both sets of children "share . . . in the same cultural milieu the popular choices of movie stars and of television programs" and nominate "exactly the same great historical persons in the same order as did the public school children."<sup>18</sup> St. Luke's indeed inculcated distinctive Catholic attitudes and practices and was notably successful in doing so. But Fichter could still conclude that "St. Luke's is clearly part of the stream of culture which gets into the molding of the middle-class consciousness, the broad attitudinal basis of the American urban democracy."<sup>19</sup>

### *Will Herberg*

Perhaps the most widely read sociological portrait of American religious communities in the 1950s was Herberg's *Protestant-Catholic-Jew*. Herberg was forthright: American Catholicism had witnessed a transformation from "a group socially and culturally alien into a thoroughly American religious community."<sup>20</sup> He noted the "revision of Catholic thinking on the problem of church and state and to deny that Catholics would tyrannically curtail religious freedom of others were they to become a majority."<sup>21</sup> America was seen by its Catholic citizens, lay and clerical, as "intrinsically pluralist." An earlier separatism had been forsaken. Irish Catholics had led the church in achieving this change. Bishop Fulton Sheen symbolized, in his large television audience, the arrival of the American Catholic Church as an accepted, even respected, institution. Tensions between Catholics and Protestants continued to crop up from time to time, Herberg acknowledged, but American Catholicism was now part of Herberg's "American Way of Life."<sup>22</sup>

Herberg's basic thesis, of course, was that all three great religious traditions expressed in the book's title had become so domesticated within the larger American culture, so caught up in celebrating "prosperity, success, and advancement," along with peace of mind, that they had lost their prophetic voices. Assimilation with a vengeance seemed to be the chief outcome of post-World War II booming America. Americans—and Herberg did not except Catholics—were becoming church members and attending church in greater numbers than ever before but were simultaneously more secularist in the sense of "the practice of the absence of God in the affairs of life."<sup>23</sup> Both secularism and the religious revival of the 1950s were, for

Herberg, generated out of the same social conditions making the American way of life seem natural and overwhelming attractive. Both developments appeared to assure an American of "the essential rightness of everything American, his nation, his culture, and himself."<sup>24</sup>

### Gerhard Lenski

Lenski begins his analysis of the 1958 Detroit Area Study survey, which compared samples of Protestant and Catholic adults, by noting an assertion of Herberg: modern urban living creates in people a need for communal relationships. Urban dwellers find compensation for the impersonality of city life, a feature stressed by classical sociologists like Toennies and Durkheim, in relationships broader than the nuclear family but narrower in scope than the larger society around them. Ethnic and religious subcommunities are examples of groups providing this sense of community belonging.<sup>25</sup>

But Lenski's *The Religious Factor* continues with a broader thesis. Drawing on the legacy of Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Lenski asks whether, given Herberg's thesis that Americans were turning in greater numbers to one of the three major faiths, these allegiances resulted in differing economic and political orientations? Lenski's answer is yes. Catholics and Protestants were different in important ways. Urban residence had *not* melted down different orientations within some common broth of impersonality and anonymity. Both working-class and middle-class Catholics, Lenski discovered, were more "glued" into their communities than their Protestant counterparts. This communal orientation meant that Catholics interviewed were more likely to believe that family connections were of greater importance than striving for success, were less likely to be self-employed, less apt to believe in intellectual independence, and tended to have larger families. The upshot of these findings: being Catholic tended to *hinder* upward mobility; more precisely, strong involvement in a religious subcommunity whether Catholic or Protestant dampened prospects for upward mobility, and Catholics were much more likely than Protestants to be so involved, even when one controlled for social class membership.

In his concluding chapter, Lenski reflected that since the Catholic urban birth rate appeared to be higher than that of Protestants, the future might well be characterized by such trends as declining importance attached to intellectual independence, a shifting of interest from work group to kinship groups, a slowing of the rate of material progress and perhaps even of scientific advance, restrictive attitudes concerning the right of free speech, restraints on Sunday business and divorce and perhaps even birth control, and declining sanctions on gambling and drinking.<sup>26</sup>

In other words, Lenski called into serious question the assimilationist themes implicit in the works of Fichter and Herberg. Detroit Catholics did *not* appear to Lenski to be rapidly blending into some great American way of life. Lenski referred to data showing increasing intermarriage across ethnic lines in the Catholic community (such as the Irish marrying Poles) and believed that the religious subcommunity was gradually replacing the ethnic one as a basic unit "in the system of status groups in American society."<sup>27</sup> And those religious subcommunities looked like they were here to stay. In fact, Lenski continued, American society might well, as the 1960s began, see "heightened tensions between socio-religious groups."<sup>28</sup> Could America possibly be heading toward a "compartmentalized society" like Holland and Lebanon, in which "virtually all the major institutional systems are obliged to take account of socio-religious distinctions" and "political parties, families, sports teams, and even business establishments are generally identified with one or another of the major groups"?<sup>29</sup> Lenski drew back from the praise usually heaped upon the ideal of a "pluralistic society."<sup>30</sup> Suppose pluralism led to increasing loyalty to one's own subcommunity at the expense of a sense of responsibility for "outsiders" and even for the nation as a whole?

But Lenski's findings and interpretations did not go unchallenged. Priest-sociologist Andrew Greeley, drawing upon a national sample of 1961 college graduates, found that Catholics were as likely as Protestants to plan on attending graduate school, to choose an academic career, to major in the natural sciences, and to plan a life of research. Nor was there any evidence of anti-intellectualism or anti-achievement economically among Catholics. Lenski, suggested Greeley, in having no data on ethnic subdivisions within the Detroit community he surveyed, may have been characterizing mainly later-arrival Catholic immigrant groups such as Poles and Italians. A national sample of graduate students cited by Greeley indicated that descendants of earlier-arrival Catholic groups, i.e., British, Irish, and Germans, were more college-oriented and had a higher estimate of their own abilities when they were younger than the graduate students from ethnic groups arriving later.<sup>31</sup>

In his concluding comments, Greeley ponders a theme he himself would elaborate greatly over the next two decades. A major change seemed to be taking place among American Catholics, "a change which has accompanied the emergence of American Catholics as the social, political, and economic equals of their fellow Americans."<sup>32</sup>

### *A Historian's Interpretation*

The social historian's task is to deepen our understanding of major turning points in the trajectories of social institutions. Recall that the social scientists just reviewed above focused their lenses on the changing socioeconomic



status of post-World War II Catholics, asking if assimilating Catholics were beginning to resemble their fellow Americans. Notre Dame historian Jay Dolan's recent book, *The American Catholic Experience*, turns instead to what kept Catholics *distinctive*. He distills for us the major characteristics of the Catholicism described above as a prelude to the post-Vatican II changes he later analyzes. The late nineteenth century saw a worldwide spiritual revival within Roman Catholicism, Dolan tells us, best captured in the phrase "devotional Catholicism." Its four characteristics—authority, sin, ritual, and openness to the miraculous—together "had a major influence in shaping the Catholic worldwide."<sup>33</sup>

*Authority:* Laity and clergy spelled two categories of persons with an unmistakable subordinate relationship of people to priesthood. The local parish priest was this authority's closest and most visible symbol. Through him, Catholics learned the Commandments, the Laws of the Church, and regulations regarding membership. He reminded parishioners of times of fast and abstinence, holy days of obligation, and the importance of regular Mass attendance and sacramental reception, especially of Confession and Holy Communion. In turn, the very centrality of Mass and sacraments, dispensed only by priests, enhanced clerical authority. "Raised in such a culture of authority, Catholics were taught to be docile and submissive."<sup>34</sup>

*Sin:* Catholics scarcely had a monopoly on the concept of sin, shared, of course, by other churches, but resembled Puritans in being thoroughly inculcated with a sense of transgression. It was eased only by the ritual of going to Confession (as Studs Lonigan could testify). Prayer manuals plus devotions such as the Sacred Heart and the Immaculate Conception only reinforced how sinful people were and how sin must be expiated. Parish missions, vividly recalled by many older Catholics today, played a key role in reinforcing the sense of sinfulness, with emphasis on sins of impurity and of drunkenness. Strength to combat these temptations was present in the Mass and sacraments and devotion to the saints, particularly to the Blessed Virgin Mary, symbol of purity and freedom from all sin. Mercy and forgiveness followed and allayed guilt. Dolan is on the mark in observing that "the dominance of sin in the Catholic culture meant that guilt was a very important influence in shaping the minds of people."<sup>35</sup>

*Ritual:* In all their detailed prescriptions and recommendations, as an earlier quotation from Gary Wills suggests, rituals fostered two notable qualities. First, an *individualism* in which personal salvation was the highest goal for the Catholic man and woman, boy and girl, and the Gospel one heard preached from the pulpit carried themes of individual salvation from sin and bondage. Little of social responsibility and corporate evil was present in this culture of an individual before a stern God. Second, the devotions promoted by ritual prescriptions were also "riddled with emotionalism and sentimentalism, qualities identified as feminine," though these characteristics

were perhaps more pronounced in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Catholicism, in which women were the predominant Mass attenders and "clients" of the Church's devotional life.<sup>36</sup>

*Openness to the miraculous:* No one growing up in pre-Vatican II Catholicism escaped exposure to stories of miracles at Lourdes and Fatima. Accounts of supernaturally accomplished cures and healings were a part of the culture. Travellers "knew" that St. Christopher had rescued them from a near accident or that St. Anthony was behind the unexpected finding of a lost ring or wallet or purse. Scapulars and relics in one's possession were especially powerful, particularly if invoked with confident prayer.<sup>37</sup>

In sum, devotional Catholicism bestowed on Catholics a set of beliefs and practices that formed a distinctive worldview and a set of moral boundaries serving to reinforce a sense of cohesion and differentness. Yet, as Fichter's work underlines, Catholics were beginning, by the middle of this century, to move into the American middle class, believing and asserting that they were solidly part of the American mainstream.

Complementing Dolan's portrait of devotional Catholicism is William H. Halsey's analysis of American Catholic intellectual history from 1920 to 1940. The philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas became standard fare in Catholic colleges and universities, a situation lasting well into the mid-1960s, as those of us attending them at the time vividly recall. Halsey notes a stance prevalent among American intellectuals during the interwar years: disillusion with any prospects of rational world order. World War I and the gradual rearmament of western countries in the 1920s and 1930s prompted thinkers like Walter Lippman to bemoan the lack of conviction that mankind could find "security and serenity in the universe."<sup>38</sup> Thomism, on the contrary, bestowed on those Catholics exposed to it, a sense of certitude and rectitude, of "right thinking." Even if *others* despaired of the power of reason, Catholics possessed a system of thought that validated it.

Thomism in the hands of American Catholics did not probe reality but charted it. It paved secure avenues for Catholics to confront the challenges of life . . . it delivered Catholics from the burden of carrying the weight of the universe on their shoulders. It was extremely adaptable to the American desire to get confidently on with life.<sup>39</sup>

Of central importance, Halsey insists, was that Thomism enabled the increasing number of Catholic college-educated laity to reaffirm faith in the "promises of America." Catholics were "sensitive to the charge of being un-American." Armed with a philosophical system emphasizing human ability to discover basic truths, "unearthed through human reason and demonstrated by logic and common sense," Catholics could begin an upward climb toward being comfortable with American culture, optimistic about the

country and their place in it, even if many American intellectuals apparently could not.<sup>40</sup> This "innocent optimism," as Halsey terms it, would last, as we shall see, well into the mid-1950s. It formed an important element in the assimilation of American Catholics. Graduates of a Catholic college in the two decades following World War II could easily assume that faith and patriotism were mutually reinforcing.

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I have drawn from novelists, social scientists, and historians in this chapter to evoke a very powerful and formative tradition familiar to many Catholics. I do so, however, not to summon up nostalgic recollections or bemoan the loss of earlier clarities and securities. Many Catholics, including those of my generation, resonate with John Cogley's view that "ghetto Catholicism" was all too smug, simple, and self-satisfied in conferring a sense that we were blessed with "the true faith," however understandable this smugness may have been. Besides, Catholics of all ages surveyed since 1970 say they like the changes they have seen—Mass in English, altar facing the congregation, more relaxed and easygoing relationships with bishops, priests, sisters, and brothers; faith as personal quest rather than as delivered certitudes, a church readier to identify with the poor and oppressed.

But this is not the whole story. I suspect the assimilative pull of American culture—a trend only intensifying over the last two decades—has continued the effect first postulated by Fichter and Herberg, that is, a diminished sense of being different or distinctive *because* one is Catholic. Is it the case that being a Catholic *makes less difference* both for oneself and in the eyes of others, than it did in times evoked by the writers I have cited? I do not imply that such a change (to the extent it is true) is either good or bad. I am not sure. But I do think this "Catholic sensibility" is very seldom measured or captured in national survey research purporting to tell us how Catholics have changed, and yet it is this diffusely felt shift that strikes Catholics whose memories span the pre- to post-Vatican II decades, at those moments when generational differences surface—a conversation with a daughter or son, a teacher-student exchange, past-present comparisons at a class reunion.

I think there are ways of exploring this shift in sensibility among Catholics, but this exploration must take into account three other major and related transformations receiving recent and extensive commentary, which I see as being joined in a fateful relationship that will characterize American Catholicism for decades to come: (1) theological individualism or "selective Catholicism" (discussed in the following chapter), (2) a diminished Catholic sensibility or sense of distinctiveness, (3) the recent (mid-1980s) initiatives of the American Catholic bishops to invite—and challenge—American Catholics to reflect upon and apply their faith to significant social and

economic problems of American society and to be critical at times of American governmental policies. I refer, of course, to the pastoral letters on war and peace (1983) and on the economy (1986), both the focus of wide media publicity and commentary from Catholics and non-Catholics alike, much of it controversial. I could not agree more with Archbishop Rembert Weakland, chair of the American Bishops' Committee on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy, when he writes,

The Church in the United States is passing through a new and critical phase with regard to two aspects of its life: (1) how its clergy—and especially its bishops—will relate as teachers to its highly trained laity, and (2) how the Church as a whole will enter into the debate in American society on political, social and economic issues. These two questions are intimately related.<sup>41</sup>

I ask whether this “highly trained” and upwardly mobile laity, affected by theological individualism and by a diminished Catholic sensibility, will prove resistant to the American bishops' new initiatives—a resistance perhaps impervious to the impact of Catholic schooling. This question will receive attention in the case study featured in chapters 4 and 5.

As a sociologist, however, I think it important to move beyond descriptions of events and trends toward a broader framework that makes sense out of complex changes. Let me sketch briefly the theoretical perspectives I shall use for interpretation.

### *A Theoretical Focus*

This book deals, in part, with the question of how people negotiate their way through, and sometimes around, the constraints of social institutions. I am less interested, as I have stated, in using up pages to discuss broad institutional change within Roman Catholicism. Others have done that very capably. What *does* interest me is how people find a secure world in tradition, why it is important to them, and how they and their children react and try to make new sense of their lives as that tradition shifts. Instead of viewing these change dynamics under the familiar canopies of modernization, rationalism, individualism, and similar abstractions, I borrow in the following pages from the “structuration” perspective of British theorist Anthony Giddens. I think his approach is helpful in three principal respects.<sup>42</sup>

First, like any social scientist, Giddens is respectful of the “givenness” of social structure in our lives. But he is wary of the conventional functionalist approach that sees structure as really “prior” to human subjects or actors, as though our families, schools, churches, businesses, and

voluntary organizations are "out there first" to be "entered into" by people. In viewing these structures as given *and* constraining and the human actors shaped by them (as indeed we are), functional approaches neglect the creative capacities of human actors in social systems, actors whose reflexive understanding on what Giddens calls "the level of practical consciousness" makes us anything but "puppets" of social structures and institutions. For we human beings are active, knowledgeable agents who, through our day-to-day activities *reproduce* the structural features of social systems. Such features—the four characteristics of devotional Catholicism, for example—exist only insofar as they are chronically reproduced in time and space by their participants. These structures, in turn, "act back" upon participants and influence them, but would not exist at all or *continue* in existence but for the knowledgeable participation of system actors who have a very practical understanding of "how things work" and are thus capable of "projecting" the system forward in time and space.

As we "actors" monitor the flow of daily social activity with the everyday understanding we have of how things work, our actions continually produce consequences we did not intend. Here is a major source of social change. As knowledgeable as we may be about the social structures we "inhabit," our comprehension of the actions we take is bounded or limited. History plus everyday experience testify to the ways in which our actions have unforeseen and unintended consequences. Functionalism regards such consequences as important, but not as principal engines of social change. Robert Merton's essay on manifest and latent (unintended) consequences identifies them as clarifying apparently "irrational" patterns (a rain dance may not produce rain but does reinforce group solidarity), and enabling social scientists to set aside "naive moral judgments" for sounder sociological analysis. Thus, political machines do afford needed services to immigrant groups who might otherwise not receive them, "corrupt" as these machines may appear from a moral or legal standpoint. Sociological understanding is thereby improved and researchers' attention directed to "fruitful fields of inquiry."<sup>43</sup> Structuration theory, on the other hand, gives front billing to unintended consequences as constantly recurring sources of change: a pope summons a worldwide ecumenical council and formally states its mandate. Yet its results several years later were clearly unforeseen and unintended. Ensuing consequences then return to form new conditions of further activity. The importance of a particular "strip" of action or decision-making depends on the strategic placement of an actor in a social system. A pope making a decision will have a greater impact, in all probability, than a lay person in an American parish.

Structuration theory also takes into account time-space contexts of social interaction, since these settings are influential in the sustaining of particular frameworks of meaning. For example, American Catholicism's

principal time-space context is that of being located and operative in an upwardly mobile immigrant-descended population. This contextuality is an element essential to any analysis of change involving American Catholics and American Catholicism as an institution.

Second, tradition and changes that affect tradition are explicitly analyzed within structuration theory. Participants or actors "reproduce" a traditional social system *not* by actively attempting to control and alter the circumstances of its existence: devotional Catholicism confronted believers as something divinely sanctioned, a legacy handed down from age to age beyond the normal processes of change. It was to be accepted, not questioned. Active human intervention for change is a characteristic of post-traditional or modern societies in which social actors are *consciously aware* of how the system works and how they may effect changes in it, making use of knowledge bestowed by social science and historical understanding. The Second Vatican Council, as we shall see, departed from previous church councils in not embracing defense of tradition as its mandate but instead attempted to "update" church teachings and practices in a world changing rapidly and which itself contained developments and trends worthy of praise—a stance departing from a long-standing tendency to condemn the world. By contrast, social actors in *traditional* societies reproduce social structure by habitually entering into the routinized practices, feelings, and thoughts that tradition prescribes. Tradition thus becomes, in Giddens's phrase, both *medium* and *outcome* of their activities. The medium is the fourfold world of devotional Catholicism that constitutes the environment in which the actors go about their lives and act out their socially prescribed roles. This environment is a powerful conditioner of their behavior and viewpoints. The outcome is how they express this "devotional world" in their everyday lives, both in the entire culture (or in this case, subculture) and the structures that "carry" it (such as rituals, schools, and customs) are maintained and pushed forward, so to speak, in time and space. *Time*, in Giddens's framework is "reversible" in traditional contexts; that is, the same events (religious holidays, for example) recur at predictable intervals, helping to create a sense of a universe stable and dependable in its yearly renewal. Whether one decides to continue living in or by this tradition is quite another question, as Mary McCarthy's *Memoirs* suggests. But accepted or rejected, this universe looks and feels fixed and permanently in place to its members. It can be relied on as a secure place to which a Studs Lonigan can return for reassurance and inspiration.

Psychologically, as Giddens indicates, this kind of world, because it *is* routinized, provides a sense of what he calls "ontological security," which is precisely what Dolan and others define as a key feature of devotional Catholicism. The anxiety of believers in a culture often hostile to them (some would say American society remained so until the election to the presidency

of John F. Kennedy in 1960) is allayed by the subculture of devotional (or traditional) Catholicism. The *context* of system reproduction, or as Giddens phrases it, "the contextualities of interaction," involves "time-space boundaries" symbolically marked. The very sacramentalism of devotional Catholicism created a rich symbolic environment whose contents served as behavioral guideposts of Catholics and endowed them with a sense of differentness vis-à-vis fellow Americans who were not Catholic.

Context also involves, as Giddens says in acknowledging his indebtedness to Erving Goffman, actors "in co-presence," using body, gestures, facial expressions, language, and other kinds of face-to-face communications. Social actors are knowledgeable about the systems in which they act out their social identities and use their knowledge to influence and control, if possible, the flow of interaction. In devotional Catholicism, one can point, for example, to the co-presence of laity and clergy, or laity and religious order members (e.g., teaching nuns). Catholic priests, sisters, and brothers rarely experienced any questioning of their authority in the climate of devotional Catholicism, for they alone were the legitimate performers or enactors of the defining practices characterizing Catholicism. This entire sphere of interaction served to confirm or "reproduce" the lines of authority and power.

Giddens's perspective can now be reapplied. Devotional Catholicism constituted a firm and long-standing tradition. It simultaneously reinforced and reproduced Catholics' sense of distinctiveness *and* strengthened and renewed their sense of "second-classness" within the larger Protestant culture. In any case, the panoply of symbols referred to set them apart, a conclusion historians are unanimous in affirming and which finds reinforcement in the contemporary sociology of emotions and ritual expression.

Third, change in tradition, set in motion by the Second Vatican Council (1962 to 1965), is a major theme of this book. The sheer number of books and articles on the Council would fill a good-sized office library. I see no need to tread again over familiar ground, but I do wish to look at the Council's impact on American Catholicism within the specific context of American Catholic upward mobility. Structuration theory pays a good deal of attention to change in tradition in tradition through two basic concepts: *social change* and *deviance*. Both are helpful in understanding how the Second Vatican Council set off far-reaching changes in the tradition we have seen as devotional Catholicism. These changes form the legacy of contemporary young Catholics.

In summoning the bishops worldwide to the Council in 1962, Pope John XXIII proclaimed that the Church was out of date. The Council was to be an important step toward making the Church relevant to the world rather than condemning that world, as had been the traditional stance of papacy and

church for several centuries. In his explanation of this goal, the pope made the fundamental and, as it turned out, fateful distinction between the *truths* of the Catholic faith and their *modes of expression*. As Jesuit author William McSweeney remarks, no Council bishops and certainly not the pope himself were prepared to admit that "the Church might have erred on matters of doctrinal or moral substance."<sup>44</sup> Yet Pope John also charged the assembled bishops with the task of formulating church teaching in ways that would encourage new relationships with non-Catholic Christians and non-Christians. The solution, which forms a dramatic example of *unforeseen consequences* of social action, was a set of eloquent documents laced with ambiguity in formulation, reflecting and bringing into the open the disputes that hitherto had been kept under wraps in theological journals. The very disagreements of the participants were "incorporated into the Council documents themselves and made manifest in the official teaching which that *magisterium* is believed infallibly to express."<sup>45</sup> Those theologians previously held as suspect now found, or thought they found, their viewpoints legitimized in Council documents. Doctrinal and moral teaching were, in consequence, tinged with relativity, their content "never finally captured in any particular form of expression for all times and for all cultures."<sup>46</sup>

In a word, the social change processes just reviewed had a major unforeseen and unintended result: *deviance and its ultimate consequence, relativity, were set loose within a traditional institution*. Dissenting theologians at the Council were not required either to submit or face the choice of leaving the church if they dissented, as was the case in the First Vatican Council in 1870. A coercive strategy was absent a century later, if only because practically the entire Council proceedings took place under intense media coverage. What emerged was a kind of victory for the newer formulations of doctrine and practice, insofar as more traditional views of the nature of the church, relationships with non-Catholics, and so on were deemed "to be neither correct nor erroneous but simply traditional—one perspective among many equally valid."<sup>47</sup> Thus, it was not wrong to hold to the time-honored view of the Church as a hierarchical organization with clear lines of authority from top to bottom, but one had to allow for the acceptability of other views that Council documents elaborated, e.g., the church defined as the People of God. Preservation of tradition is obvious in "People of God," but it does "flatten out" the more rigid hierarchical concepts of traditional ecclesiology.<sup>48</sup>

Let us stand back for a moment and consider the implications of these changes. Tradition, as Giddens emphasizes, involves, as do all social systems, active monitoring by "constituent actors" of the "reproduction of mutually linked role relationships."<sup>49</sup> But in a traditional context, this monitoring is designed to keep things just as they have always been, and



“does not take the form of an active attempt to control or to alter the circumstances of reproduction.”<sup>50</sup> Until the Second Vatican Council, these formulations fit precisely the control strategies of the Roman curia, for whom, indeed, tradition represented “the moral command of ‘what went before’ over the continuity of day-to-day life.”<sup>51</sup>

But Vatican II's context was different. “What went before” had to be reexamined, without loss to doctrinal and moral essentials, in order to make the church more “relevant” to the modern world. In fact, McSweeney terms the outcome “the triumph of relevance.” First of all, the Council documents themselves were ambiguous in many formulations, reflecting the bishops' desire to make room for differing theological concepts. Varying interpretations were thus possible, and were made by theologians following the Council. In this respect, we return to Giddens's first point concerning change in tradition: literacy or the written document gives rise to the possibility of diverse interpretations, a point doubly true considering the ambiguity of Vatican II documents just referred to. Secondly, a kind of reexamination of tradition had gone on in Europe prior to the Council through such social movements as the priest-worker and the liturgical and ecumenical experiments whose thrust was to loosen the grip of tradition in the name of relevance and promote participation from the rank-and-file laity. Aiding this thrust toward a kind of democratization was loss of one of the most effective means of bureaucratic control, secrecy. Information control was rendered extremely difficult because of the massive media presence at the Council. The press, particularly the recently established lay-owned and operated Catholic periodicals such as the *American National Catholic Reporter*, erased for all practical purposes the frontstage-backstage distinction essential for top-down bureaucratic control. Audience and backstage were now linked together as never before; the center's activities and deliberations became visible to observers on the periphery. Furthermore, the traditional Vatican control agency, the Curia, had been nullified in its attempts to intervene by Pope John's sometimes tacit, sometimes explicit support of more “progressive” theologians, again as an example of a “key actor's” importance in situations in which opposing forces are closely matched in power.

Thus, McSweeney does not hesitate to trumpet the “triumph of relevance” in both dogmatic and ethical or moral theology. In the latter case, the findings of social science were often imported to make an argument. For example, *The New Catechism*, published in 1967 under the auspices of the Dutch bishops, in treating of homosexuality, masturbation, contraception, and living together without marriage often cited psychological and social consequences of these actions as among principal reasons for their immorality. A Commission of cardinals appointed in 1968 to review and modify the *Catechism* took issue with such analyses *but*, rather than condemn

what it regarded as erroneous, praised the authors' intentions, indicating only that the authors should have *added* material on the "objective" immorality of these actions.

I find McSweeney's conclusion persuasive: "the legitimation of dissent" was established at the highest authoritative levels, and from now on, dissent would be decidedly more difficult to sanction and control. This "authority to dissent" was a major outcome of the Council and perhaps its most important unintended consequence.<sup>52</sup> For once a plurality of viewpoints or models, e.g., of the nature of the Church, was admitted as legitimate, who and on what authority would draw the boundaries of the permissible?

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In any case, few Catholics would have guessed that in the early 1960s their traditional Church would shortly undertake an epochal self-transformation and that they themselves were entering a decade destined to set off great changes affecting their religious beliefs, practices, and sensibilities. If their own lives were on the move toward comfortable affluence in the great American middle class, as Fichter and Herberg suggested, their church also seemed unchanging and solidly rooted in its long traditions and destined to help keep them "different," as Lenski indicated. Like themselves, their church seemed to be flourishing, for devotional Catholicism constituted a tradition that, in Giddens' framework, reproduced the rules and resources bestowing an "ontological security." It delivered a solid social identity and confidence that "the natural and social worlds are as they appear to be."<sup>53</sup> For the growing numbers of college-educated Catholics, Thomism reinforced a sense of bedrock security, of standing on a dependable base in a relativistic world of shifting ideas and morals. And they were as American as any neighbor on the block. What was right and true seemed clear and in place; what was wrong and out of place was equally apparent. Reinforcements abounded to confirm Catholics' plausibility structures: converts in the 1950s were familiar faces; their accounts echoed the theme of "at last" finding a church that had these securities and traceable credentials leading back to Jesus Christ, the founder. A Catholic school system flourished throughout the United States turning out the "knowledgeable agents" or "competent actors" of structuration theory who could, in considerable measure, give an account of what they believed and practiced and why.

How this confident and secure world shifted into the "selective Catholicism" embraced by many of today's younger Catholics is the burden of the next chapter.