2003

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Peter Steinfels

*Marianist Award Lectures/2003*

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by Margaret O’Brien Steinfels

LIBERAL CATHOLICISM REEXAMINED
by Peter Steinfels

Marianist Award Lectures
2003

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Margaret O'Brien Steinfels was editor of *Commonweal* magazine from 1988 until the end of 2002. Leading one of the most influential journals in U.S. Catholicism, Margaret Steinfels has become a force in the U.S. Church and religious media for dialogue, inquiry, critical thought and the honoring of tradition. She was one of two leading lay Catholics asked to address the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops in Dallas in June 2002 on the issue of sexual abuse.

With a bachelor's degree from Loyola University, Chicago, and a Master's degree in American History from New York University, Steinfels, a Chicago native born in 1941, entered the world of books, editing and journalism. In rapid succession, she published a book on daycare in America, *Who's Minding the Children?*, and became editor first of the *Hastings Center Report* and then social editor for Basic Books. Other editorial posts followed at *Christianity and Crisis*, *Church*, and the National Pastoral Life Center.

She has shown an uncommon skill at bringing together a great respect for and knowledge of Catholic intellectual tradition with a contemporary resoluteness that this tradition speak to and be affected by the urgent events of our days, from Kosovo, terrorism, and sexual abuse, to welfare and politics. She is married to Peter Steinfels. They have two grown children and one grandchild.

Peter Steinfels was born in Chicago in 1941, graduated from Loyola University there and earned a Ph.D. in European history at Columbia University. He served as editor of Commonweal from 1984 to 1988, in addition to earlier service as editorial assistant, associate editor, long-time columnist and executive editor. He has also been editor of The Hastings Center Report and has taught at the University of Notre Dame.

A Visiting Professor of History at Georgetown from 1997 to 2001, he is recently co-directed a major three-year research project on American Catholics in the Public Square, funded by the Pew Charitable Trust.

Peter Steinfels has written over 2,000 articles for scores of journals on topics ranging from international affairs to medical ethics. His 1979 book, The Neoconservatives, was a pioneering analysis of a major political current. He has for many years written and spoken influentially on religion in the United States, especially on Catholicism, encompassing such topics as the identity of Catholic universities, liberal democracy and secularization, Catholic-Jewish dialogue, health care, and religion and the media.
The following lectures were given at the University of Dayton on the occasion of the presentation of the 2003 Marianist Award to Margaret O'Brien Steinfels and to Peter Steinfels, September 3, 2003.
My Life as a “Woman”: Editing the World

Margaret O’Brien Steinfels

A Very Brief History of Recent Times

The history of our time is a history of change, really of revolutionary change. Revolutions in the sciences, in weaponry, in international relations, in agriculture, in cooking, in relations between men and women, in gender identity, in child-rearing. The essential measures of our earthly existence, time and space, we understand in far more complex ways that we did even twenty years ago. Furthermore, all such changes themselves become the springboard for ever greater change, what the British sociologist Anthony Giddens calls, “institutional reflexivity.” By that he means “the regularized use of knowledge about circumstances of social life as a constitutive element in its organization and transformation” (Modernity and Identity, p. 20). By this definition, it is not true that the more we change the more we stay the same. No, the more we change the more we are subject to further change.

Not only do we live through change, in a matter of five years change becomes the stuff of history, and in ten years the stuff of revisionist history (consider the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1990, and the variety of theories we now entertain about its cause or causes), to say nothing of political science, sociology, psychology, and biology: The business of such scholarship and academic specialization is generalization that spills over into theory making. This in turn spills over into more popular generalizing in the Science section of the New York Times, diet books, op-ed pieces on U.S. foreign policy, self-help books, or child nutrition (50 years ago many American children suffered severe forms of malnutrition, now, they suffer from obesity). And, that quintessential American research tool, the opinion poll, speeds up the pace of change ever more rapidly.

It is true that human beings offer various forms of resistance to this modern propensity for revolutionary change. We are too lazy, too critical, too busy, too skeptical, we don’t answer opinion polls, we don’t watch television and have stopped reading the newspaper. Still, we all recognize that individual lives are, willy-nilly affected by these changes. Sometimes those lives become major players in revolutionary change (Catholics, whether in favor or opposed, have had to respond to the changes brought on by Vatican II). Sometimes individuals are caught up in revolutions not of their own making (the family farm is almost extinct, and with it...
millions of jobs; blue-collar jobs are fast disappearing into cheaper labor markets; high school educations no longer prepare young women or men for good jobs. Some people live lives parallel to vast changes and seem to be unaffected by them (Only contrast our current first lady, Laura Bush, with our previous one, Hillary Rodham Clinton; What is Mrs. Bush's family name?). Sometimes lives are unexpected catalysts for change (My fellow graduates of St. Scholastica High School, 1959, did not expect to be part of a revolution in women's lives, yet here we are). Sometimes lives move counter to the main thrust of change (whether or not the family farm is a relic, the Amish go right on running them). And because revolutions unfold over time, however brief, sometimes many of these possibilities are at play in a given life.

Recently I had to read more than a dozen books on women and Catholicism for a book review. There were personal narratives, scholarly works, efforts at reappropriation (Catherine of Siena and Joan of Arc as feminist models) or theological invention (Mary Magdalene is proposed to be the first apostle). Of course, these volumes are written in light of the revolution in women's lives. And no surprise—it is a precarious business reconceiving history and creating narratives about the vast and multilayered changes that have affected women's lives, in fact, the lives of everyone—men and children as well as women—over the last half century, lives that are still in play. These books that I have been reading have their own conceptual frameworks and often a strongly stated thesis (why, some even have ideological spin). Nonetheless, I suspect that they diverge from the lived experiences of most women, indeed, perhaps of the author herself or himself.

So my first point: Life is not an ideology nor a political agenda nor a conceptual framework but a continuing set of relationships and responsibilities that shape our response to revolutionary change. At the end of a day on the barricades everyone still has to go home and eat their dinner.

The women's revolution is a complicated matter, having its origins in many sources (recall, for example, that the contraceptive pill was developed by Dr. John Rock, a Catholic doctor, who firmly believed that his pill would meet the strictures of the Catholic sexual ethic), and drawing its strategies from many corners of political thought—anarchist, reformist, sexual liberationist, liberal, and reactionary. Despite this complexity, there is in the United States a uniform, even rigid, narrative about the revolution in women's lives. In its popular form it begins in 1963 with the publication of The Feminine Mystique by Betty Friedan—I was given a copy on my 23rd birthday by the radical feminist, Peter Steinfels. Over the years since, this revolution has had its triumphs in equal opportunity laws, successful sexual harassment suits, and women in elected office; its cultural triumph in Title IX funding for women's college athletics, which has resulted in brilliant
soccer and basketball teams fielded by women, and in many firsts for women,\textsuperscript{1} first Supreme Court Justice, first secretary of state, first president of an Ivy League school, first CEO of a Fortune 500 company.

For reasons somewhat accidental to this revolution, state abortion laws in the United States were stricken down in 1973. And despite so many other notable achievements, political and social, that Supreme Court decision has become the talisman of the official woman's movement. \textit{Roe v. Wade} is the sole litmus test by which politicians, judges, regulators, businesses, and women themselves are judged to be in favor, or not, of this vast revolution in the lives of all of us; it is the funding standard for Emily's List—the country's largest political action fund for women. Needless to say, there are other feminist scenarios, Mary Kenny, the Irish journalist tells a different story about the women's movement in that nation, and about the views of Ireland's woman president (its second woman president!) Mary McAleese; she is pro-life and pro-ordination of women.

Reading these recent books put me in mind of my own trajectory through what can legitimately be called a world historical shift—or at least that's what we call it in our house—of women's lives and prospects. The women's revolution is a world historical shift like the shift from hunting and gathering to settled agricultural life thousands of years ago. Or, like the shift in North America and Europe from agricultural to industrial economies, which began in the nineteenth century and continues to this very day in Eastern Europe, Central Asia, Africa, and Latin America. This is a shift that is changing the lives of millions of women in and of itself, quite apart from the women's revolution. Like these earlier revolutions, the women's revolution moves across the world in fits and starts. Unlike these earlier revolutions, the pace is faster, and almost certainly inexorable.

I mention all of this to lay the groundwork for distinguishing among what the books and studies and popular mythology say has happened to women, what each of us says about our self in the midst of this revolution, and what actually has happened, if that can ever be fully determined.

\textbf{My Life as A "Woman"}

What I am about to recount is itself a narrative, one that may seem as elusive or unlikely as the conjecture that Mary Magdalene was the first apostle. Like that story there are possibly false or forgotten memories (to say nothing of false consciousness), texts are lost or never existed, anecdotes that I often tell about myself are sometimes claimed to be the property of Peter, my husband, or our children. Anthony Giddens has these perceptive words about personal narrative, and I offer
them to confirm the skeptical: "The individual's biography, if she is to maintain regular interaction with others in the day-to-day world, cannot be wholly fictive. It must continually integrate events which occur in the external world, and sort them into the ongoing 'story' of the self."

I cannot say that my life as a woman has been of much interest to me or to anyone else. I am not radical—or reactionary—enough. The only "first" on my C.V. is being Commonweal's first woman editor-in-chief (but not its first woman editor: that was Helen Walker, who was a founding member of the staff in 1924). Being a woman has not been a major subject in my writing, nor does it loom large in my editorializing, or my thinking. In fact, one of the great achievements of the women's movement is that at last women are not limited to writing about women and children. I have been able to write about war and peace, Bosnia, Kosovo, and Iraq, about politics and bioethics, about cloning, about liturgy, clergy, and church politics, about civil rights, international law, and the movies. That doesn't mean I haven't pontificated at the dining room table, or read books on the subject, which occupy several of my bookshelves. And, of course, I recognize that it is only because I am a woman that people sometimes ask me what I think about matters Catholic. Earlier in the summer a reporter asked for an interview about Pope John Paul II's twenty-five years in office. "Why me?" I asked. He hesitated for a nanosecond, and said, "Well, you're a woman." One must have a woman!

In any case, the narrative you are about to hear, is one I have constructed partly in light of having had to read all of those books over the last three months. In that short time, this narrative has had different titles. Once it was called "A Life: History Notwithstanding." (That was a take-off on Hillary Clinton's Living History). For a while this narrative was called the "Princess and the Pea" (in recognition of my editorial propensity to get at that one last lump in the prose, just like the princess in Hans Christian Anderson's story who felt the pea under twenty mattresses and eiderdown comforters). But today it's called, "My Life as a 'Woman,'" because as I read over those fifteen books, I realized that it had been a long time since I had given much thought to "my life as a woman," and here I was being asked on the occasion of the Marianist Award to speak about my faith and my life, particularly my work.

This narrative is subtitled: "Editing the World" because that's what I've been doing all my life, and that is what I am doing as I speak. This subject like any other certainly requires editing. It will always require editing.

Point two: Great social and cultural changes show up only incrementally in the lives of most individuals. Large-scale ideations, collections of ideas that try to explain the world, whether of Plato, Sigmund Freud, Karl Marx, Karol Wojtyla, 

/10
Erma Brombeck, Betty Friedan, or Mary Daly are always ambiguous, sometimes useless, in explaining our actual lives. That is; they don’t necessarily explain to us what has happened to us. Betty Freidan diagnosed “the problem without a name,” a problem for some white, college-educated, middle class women raising children in the American suburbs of the 1950s.

Karol Wojtyla has used the word complementarity to describe the relationship between men and women, even though we see that the distinctive character traits of men and women the theory requires are dispersed over the range of human behavior, whether male or female. At least in modern times, it is nurture and culture more than nature and biology that develop in human persons the qualities they need to flourish. If reproduction once sharply defined the roles and behaviors of men and women, it no longer does, certainly not over a life-span of 75-80 years, and not in the last fifty years.

Point three: For revolutions to take off, there must be people ready for it. American Catholics, perhaps women especially, were more than ready for the revolution in women’s lives, in the way we think about women, in the way we think about how the world would work if only we had a say in the running of it. There are a number of reasons for this. Let me offer three.

First, women religious were examples of alternative lives, not because they weren’t married, but because they founded, organized, and maintained great institutions and systems. These included parish schools, hospitals, and social service centers; day-care centers, high schools, and colleges (and as many biographies and institutional histories show they sometimes built and worked in contest rather than cooperation with the bishop or parish priest). They passed on these traits of independence and enterprise to millions of Catholic boys and girls.

Second, American Catholics were ready for the revolution in women’s lives because of social class. There is nothing like an immigrant and/or working class upbringing in the United States to make men and women energetic and ambitious for themselves and their children (as we see today with immigrants from ever more diverse cultures).

Third, Catholics in the United States, though not complete outsiders to the Protestant culture of the nineteen forties, fifties, and sixties, had an establishment of their own. The throw weight of Catholics, demographically, politically, and institutionally, was more than sufficient to catapult us forward into the mainstream of American life, women as well as men—a leap commonly symbolized by the election of John F. Kennedy in 1960.
Some examples of Catholic readiness from my family: Paid employment is thought to be a great change in the lives of American women. But I grew up in a family where most of the women always worked outside their homes as well as in them. My mother worked as a bookkeeper and an executive assistant, the kind of office fixer that makes everything work everywhere (no doubt, in this university too), my grandmother was a private duty nurse, and my aunts were secretaries, office managers, telephone operators, political fixers, the kind that kept Chicago working. They didn’t talk about their jobs; they didn’t speak of careers. Did they want an existence apart from their families? They never said so. Was staying at home, like Friedan’s suburban wives, a luxury that they couldn’t afford, or a domestic confinement they didn’t want? Like the men, they worked to support their families. Some supported themselves. Everyone wanted their children to have a Catholic education, and worked to pay for that goal.

I was the first beneficiary in my family of a college education—at Loyola University in Chicago. I was expected to contribute my part by being a good student and having a job. I was a good student and I worked, at part-time jobs from the time I was in seventh grade. This was also educational: I learned something important about both work and money.

At a relatively young age, I was able to make these elementary observations: work was hard, sometimes boring, and that for most people work was not an end in itself. Certainly you did not enjoy your work, and if you did, you didn’t talk about it. Work might have some side benefits, friendships, improving working conditions, being active in a union, gossiping about the petty claims of authority by idiot bosses (I grew up in a family where bosses were always idiots, their motives always suspect. And having been a boss myself for fifteen years, I can see why they thought that). I also learned that money was important, but not all-important. Having money, making money was not an end in itself (a penny saved was a penny earned); there was such a thing as having enough money. You didn’t have to go into law or investment banking to make money or have enough of it.

As a college student, also working part-time, I came to the conviction that it would be a good idea to have work that I liked, that was not boring, and not deadening to the human spirit, in other words, a job that involved reading and writing. I think I have succeeded in finding that kind of work, not by pulling myself up by my own bootstraps as the national myth has it, but through the generous tutelage and mentoring of others.

American Catholics stand on the shoulders of giants, many of them women. Because of the Catholic Church everybody in my family was safely delivered at birth, baptized and blest, taught to pray, prepared for First Communion, and
given terrific educations and a purpose in life. The Catholic sub-culture of pre-Vatican II days has come in for its lumps (the 1979 play, "Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All," sexual repression, the 2002 Irish movie, "The Magdalene Sisters," etc.), but the record in my personal archive is overwhelmingly positive. On the other hand, sufficient time has passed that those years have acquired for many people, who mostly weren't there, a deep rich patina of nostalgia, especially about the Latin Mass and the Baltimore Catechism. My experience: Nothing wrong with them, until you have experienced something better.

But the Catholic Church isn't the only institution that suffers distopian memories. We all know, don't we, that before the women's movement began, on or about 1963, the publication date of The Feminine Mystique, women suffered discrimination, even oppression—legal, social, cultural, and political—at the hands of a patriarchal ideology. In their families, preference was given to men, and women spent their lives in kitchen drudgery. The Catholic Church was run by men ergo it was the worst of the lot; along with Catholic families, who had too many children anyway. Everyone forgets the sisters who actually ran most of the Catholic Church. We all talk about the decline in the number of priests, we all lament it. What about the decline in the number of women religious? We all talk about the needs of retired sisters, yet women's religious congregations remain a place where authority and influence still reside in truly gifted women. I think of some of those women: Sister Sharon Euart, Sister Doris Gottemoeller, and the late Sister Margaret Cafferty, women of authority. And add, Sister Sandra Schneiders who is the author of one of those fifteen books I read, With Oil in Their Lamps, a fair-minded, intelligent brief, and comprehensive state of the question about Faith, Feminism and the Future, the book's subtitle.

Point four: When I went to Loyola University, I found that men were my allies, indeed, the allies of any women student who was serious about studying. Not that I knew what I needed allies for, or what I was going to study. What I did know was that I was in a place where I could read and write and where the life of the mind and a life of action were given fertile soil. I had landed in an agonistic culture, a culture of contest and disputation (I didn't know the word "agon" until some years later, when I read Walter Ong's brilliant book, Fighting for Life). This was a culture that valued intellectual contest, rhetorical play, the pursuit of ideas, and politics with a small "p". The Jesuits created an atmosphere geared to the development of little anti-authoritarians of all genders. The university administration was the equivalent of all the bosses my family made fun of for petty authoritarianism. Some of the more imaginative moments in student life involved getting around the rules and thwarting orders from on high (but perhaps that was the pedagogic function of student life—those Jesuits can be clever).
Of course, there were among these men generous teachers and administrators, of whom the distinguished scripture scholar, John L. McKenzie, then S.J., was among the most brilliant and idiosyncratic. A Hoosier, he called himself a Taft Republican in a city where no one had ever voted for a Taft and hardly anyone had ever voted for a Republican. In reality, he was a political anarchist who believed the great error of ancient Israel, in the decline of civilization, was installing a monarchy—it has been all downhill since. John McKenzie was one of those scripture scholars silenced in the 1950s by the Vatican, which only increased the dim view of authority that he seems to have been born with. When he was finally allowed to teach at Loyola in 1961, he turned the full force of his brain power, knowledge, and love of learning on us undergraduates. It was bracing for a twenty year old history major (and it was in the history, not theology, department that he taught) to be thrown into layers of text, layers of history, layers of the history of texts, and made to come to grips with the reality of what was for a young Catholic the almost mythological nature of the Hebrew Scriptures, then called the Old Testament.

I will not go on with the male ally theme except to mention my fellow students, Peter Steinfels and Barry Hillenbrand, living examples of the power of contest and ideas, who introduced me to the thrills of student journalism. And to add, that later in life Robert Hoyt at the National Catholic Reporter, Daniel Callahan at The Hastings Center, Philip Murnion at the National Pastoral Life Center, and James O'Gara at Commonweal all gave me the wherewithal and the space to become a writer, editor, and journalist.

But who you might ask, gave me the chutzpah? When young, I was not as cheeky as I have become (I lived in fear of being caught doing something that was against the rules). A sterling example was set for me in 1963 when two of my classmates, women, decided to test racial equality at the Catholic Women's Club swimming pool, supposedly open to all women university students. African-American Mickey Leaner (then a Negro) was refused an application for admission; Nancy Amidei (then and now a white girl) was not. The two seemed to me exceptionally courageous in trying out this novel tactic of the civil rights movement in Chicago, and exposing the university's own hidden corner of segregation. The student newspaper reported it, of course. And shortly thereafter, nuns, Franciscans I believe, in habit picketed—a first for women in habits.

Point five: Catholics and Catholic women were ready for revolution in women's lives. And if the revolution we are living through isn't exactly the one we want; it is the one we have taken advantage of and the one that, in many respects, has served us well. It is also one that could use some serious Catholic correctives about
abortion, about community, and about the permanent responsibility of marital relationships.

But if some American Catholics, women and men, nuns and priests, were ready for the women's revolution, the Catholic Church it turns out was not. On or about October 15, 1976, the Catholic Church shifted from being merely a patriarchal institution of a somewhat absent-minded, even unconscious kind, no worse than most institutions—no worse than Harvard, Harvard Law School, the Democratic party, the AFL-CIO, the FBI, the Supreme Court of the United States, the United Nations, the French Republic, the National Council of Churches. After all, in the American Catholic Church, women actually had influence and authority; some even had power.

On October 15, 1976 the Catholic Church made itself a sexist institution bent on excluding women from the priesthood and thereby from decision making and governance responsibilities. “The Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith judges it necessary to recall that the Church, in fidelity to the example of the Lord, does not consider herself authorized to admit women to priestly ordination….It is a position which will perhaps cause pain but whose positive value will become apparent in the long run, since it can be of help in deepening understanding of the respective roles of men and of women” (*Inter insigniores*). Since then, at its highest levels, the Catholic Church has systematically excluded from episcopal office anyone who publicly advocates the ordination of women. Theologians have been disciplined for raising the question and denied teaching posts in pontifical schools. The pope has frowned at public mention of it.

Well, perhaps the prohibition on ordaining women has been divinely revealed. But then, why all the litmus tests? Is it because the theological claims have failed to convince most Catholics, men and women, nuns and priests, probably even some bishops? Perhaps there are anthropological questions about women's ordination that should give us pause, but then shouldn't these be the subject of vigorous discussion and debate? In fact, most women don't want to be priests—neither do most Catholic men; and at this sad and perplexing moment in our history, most women probably don't want their sons or daughters to be priests either. Certainly I don't expect to see a woman priest on a Catholic altar in my lifetime. Yet once again, in 1994 (in *Ordinato sacerdotalis*), Pope John Paul II considered it necessary to repeat the ban and reinforce the claim, “I declare that the church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women and that this judgment is to be definitively held by all the church's faithful.” Why has the Vatican felt it necessary to construct what will prove to be a Maginot line? I think because it has no credible arguments. Despite all of the fine words about the importance of women and the role of women by this pope and other Vatican officials, indeed,
in the very documents I just quoted, the Catholic Church at its highest levels fears women (Who me? Who us?). Or so I conclude.

What then to make then of the positive and benign narrative I have offered about my own experience as a Catholic and a woman. Well, it is American, and it is generational; it reflects the American Catholic Church of the 1940s, 50s, and 60s, in Chicago, which was able to read the signs of the times. It is true that young Catholics today live in a church that has opened doors for women in academia, in chancery offices, in parishes. But no woman in parish, diocesan, or Vatican jobs is welcome in more than an advisory role and barred from decision making or governance of the Catholic Church, and will be for the foreseeable future, since ordination is required. And if women cannot help to govern the church now, even perhaps as papal electors (a job that Jesus did not institute), will that hold true in the lifetime of my children, my grandchildren, great-grandchildren? What a pity! But who would be surprised? Will there be any Catholic women left?

**Editing the World**

Let me conclude with some editorial notes dated August 31, 2003:

This narrative by Margaret O’Brien Steinfels may strike some listeners as pol­lyannish. What about the *sturm und drang* of adolescence, of young motherhood; the *sturm und drang* of learning German? What about the arguments and debates with her mother and father about quitting that college education course, which would have made her a teacher—and given her the security of a civil service job? What if she had interviewed her own children—and her daughter reported the terrible argument they had on or about September 1985 over whether to take a course on the Black Death (a critical turning point in Western history) or Japanese Monuments (not a major historical issue, even for the Japanese)? What about all of the arguments she has had with those men she counted as allies, including the one she deeply loves and is married to? And the many more arguments with men who were not her allies? What about her reflexive antipathy to those converts to Catholicism, mostly men, who wage their battles against modernity and against women from the battlements they are constructing around the Catholic Church into which she was so happily born? And what does she really think about ordaining women? Should she have mentioned that the appointment of Madeleine Albright as Secretary of State was the occasion for more thought than she is likely to give the ordination of the first woman, which as she says is not likely to happen in her lifetime.
Can the author of this narrative be relied upon?
What kind of woman is she?

Well consider this: whatever kind of woman she turns out to be, she's still a practicing Catholic, and she needs a lot more practice.

As they say on the Fox News Network: We Report. You decide.

Notes

I often think it's comical
How Nature always does contrive
That every boy and every gal,
That's born into the world alive,
Is either a little Liberal,
Or else a little Conservative!
(Iolanthe, act 2)

I was born into the world a liberal Catholic. Exhibit A: My liturgically oriented parents sent out not the standard birth announcement but a card with simple religious symbols and the wording,

“The Lord of life has visited Margaret and Melville Steinfels with a child Peter Francis
born a child of Adam on July 15, 1941
reborn of water and the Holy Ghost a child of God on July 27, 1941.”

In 1941, this kind of announcement was enough to cause a stir. One irreverent wag in the family wrote back “Who is this fellow Adam? And does Mel know about him?”

I was born into the world, as I said, a liberal Catholic. Which is to say that, contrary to W. S. Gilbert, I was not either a little liberal or else a little conservative. I was, and I remain, both a little bit liberal and a little bit conservative. Nothing better illustrates the Catholic tendency toward both/and instead of either/or than liberal Catholicism.

How can one define liberal Catholicism? One way is that it is what the Syllabus of Errors had in mind when, in its famous final salvo, it condemned the idea that “the Roman pontiff can and ought to reconcile and harmonize himself with progress, with liberalism, and with modern civilization.”

Another way to define it is that liberal Catholicism is simply papal teaching a hundred years too soon.

Liberal Catholicism is, in fact, a controverted and approximate label. It was applied, often pejoratively, to 19th-century figures like Lamennais, Lacordaire.
Montalembert, Bishop Dupanloup, and Marc Sangnier in France, to John Henry Newman and Lord Acton in England, to Daniel O'Connell in Ireland, to Isaac Hecker and John Ireland in America, and to a host of other thinkers and leaders in Belgium, Italy, Poland, and Germany. Its history overlaps with that of Christian Democracy, social Catholicism, and modernism.

But it is important to note that liberal Catholicism was rooted in Romanticism more than in the Enlightenment. Its rebellion against the old alliance of throne and altar, and its eventual embrace of freedom of religion for all, was restorationist, not revolutionary: it began not with the Enlightenment's desire to free politics from the stranglehold of priestcraft but to free the church, indeed with the papacy at its head, from bankrupt regimes so that the faith might again conquer society through witness and persuasion rather than coercion.2

If those are conservative DNA sequences in liberal Catholicism's genetic constitution, the liberal DNA sequences are perhaps more obvious.

First, liberal Catholicism insisted on discriminating rather than blanket judgments about the French Revolution and the modern liberties and social upheavals the revolution signaled.

Second, liberal Catholicism believed that change and development had become the normal, not the exceptional, state of things, a reality to be embraced as opportunity rather than lamented or denounced as affliction.

Third, liberal Catholicism trusted in the power of truth to prevail if allowed free play on the terrain of free discussion.

Fourth, liberal Catholicism defended the relative autonomy of distinct spheres of human activity, whether of politics or religion or science or art and literature; each field has its independent criteria that must be scrupulously respected, although ultimately the formed conscience must make moral judgments.

Finally, liberal Catholicism, despite its protagonists' piety and papal loyalties, found it impossible to separate its project of evangelizing society from issues of internal church reform.

None of this was taught me in a liberal Catholic version of the Baltimore Catechism. My parents just read Commonweal and the Catholic Worker and novels by Mauriac and Bernanos. Our bookshelves carried lots of books published by Sheed & Ward, indeed lots of books written by Frank Sheed and Maisie Ward.3 My father belonged to a generation of artists that hoped to rescue liturgical art from the mass-produced images and statuary of the religious goods companies. The family
entertained the idea, then verging on heresy, as I found out when I voiced it at St. Paul of the Cross school, that the Mass ought to be celebrated in the people's own language, as it had been in the early days of the church.

Liberal Catholicism was the air I breathed, matter for my college and graduate studies, and something I guess I later perpetrated at Commonweal. Four years ago, I gave a kind of State of the Union address on liberal Catholicism for that magazine's 75th anniversary. It was published in the November 19, 1999 issue.4

I

The genesis of that talk was the claim, advanced in a homily almost two years earlier by Archbishop, soon to be Cardinal, Francis George of Chicago. "Liberal Catholicism is an exhausted project," he said. "Essentially a critique, even a necessary critique at one point in our history, it is now parasitical on a substance that no longer exists. It has shown itself unable to pass on the faith in its integrity and inadequate, therefore, in fostering the joyful self-surrender called for in Christian marriage, in consecrated life, in ordained priesthood. It no longer gives life."

The remedy, he went on, was not to be found in a type of obsessively conservative Catholicism either. "The answer is simply Catholicism, in all its fullness and depth."

It was just Cardinal George's luck that one of the people in the pews that evening was Margaret O'Brien Steinfels. Not the sort to let such remarks float by unnoticed, she raised questions in person and then in print about these characterizations of both liberal Catholicism and "simply Catholicism"—and she invited the Cardinal to respond.

Ultimately he very generously did—at a forum, held in Chicago, for that 75th anniversary. My own analysis, prepared without any exact knowledge of how he would expand on his earlier claims, followed. I did not consider liberal Catholicism at all an exhausted project in the sense of being no longer needed. Quite the contrary. But I did fear it ran the risk of exhaustion, in the sense of beaten down, thrown into disarray, assailed by forces both secular and religious, on both right and left.

Prominent leaders in Rome and self-declared "orthodox" Catholics in the U.S. increasingly seemed determined to brand liberal Catholicism disloyal and root it out. In American politics and culture, liberal Catholicism had few friends now that abortion had become the critical litmus test for secular liberalism, and tax cuts, market solutions, and military assertiveness become de rigueur for conservatism.
Finally, liberal Catholicism found itself allied, entangled, and sometimes eclipsed in a complicated relationship with what has come to be labeled the Catholic left. It was to this latter topic that I devoted a large part of my talk. As the Holy Cross historian David O'Brien has explained, in the years after Second Vatican Council a Catholic left was born out of liberal Catholicism but quite consciously defined itself over against it. "The use of the phrase left," he wrote in the 1999 book called *What's Left?*, edited by Mary Jo Weaver, "raises the question: left of what? The Catholic left emerging from the sixties had a ready answer: left of liberal Catholicism."5

The line of demarcation, alas, is very blurry. I have suggested that *America* and *Commonweal* stand on the liberal Catholic side of the line, and the left begins with the *National Catholic Reporter* and runs through *Pax Christi* and *Call to Action* and *Dignity* perhaps to Catholics for a Free Choice. Yet one could even trace the boundary between different bylines in the *National Catholic Reporter*. Much academic moral and systematic theology, Biblical scholarship, liturgical studies, and catechetics belong in liberal Catholic territory, but not all; and some feminist thought and liberation theology are indisputably to the left.

O'Brien stresses the differing styles of these clusters. Liberal Catholics affirm the positive values of the culture and its democratic institutions; they stress dialogue, mediation, compromise, and gradualism. It is a style more incarnational than countercultural and grounded in the lay experience of work, family, and politics. It is rooted, I would add, in the European church's struggles with liberty, the Enlightenment, totalitarianism, and secularization, all forming the background to Vatican II.

The Catholic left's style, O'Brien says, is more evangelical, perhaps as some would have it more prophetic, or perhaps, as others would say, more sectarian. It measures church, society, and culture starkly against gospel standards. It is a style rooted in the dramatic appeals and confrontational tactics of the 1960s and more linked to the third-world liberation movement than to 19th and 20th century European experiences.

As O'Brien states and the book *What's Left?* amply illustrated, the Catholic left has become largely defined by internal church questions of gender, sexuality, ecclesiology, worship and spirituality, a near rejection of hierarchy, and a consistently political style of lobbying and mobilization organized around the demands of various special constituencies more than any sense of the whole. If one were to name concrete objectives — for example, regarding women in the church, collaborative decision-making, or a rethinking of sexuality — one might conclude that
they are broadly shared by this Catholic left and by liberal Catholicism. If one looks to fundamental convictions and attitudes in a larger sense, the gap between the two neighboring camps is far more significant.

For myself, both liberal Catholicism and the Catholic left faced additional problems, each of which I analyzed at some length. One was a lack of irony about unanticipated consequences, indeed a culpable innocence of the modern historical record of idealistic causes bent to tragic and even criminal outcomes. A second was a creeping anti-intellectualism, rooted in the partisan spirit rampant in the church but also rooted in the recognition of experience as material for religious reflection. Certainly on the Catholic left and to a considerable extent within liberal Catholicism, personal experience, witness, and testimony have become the dominant mode of approaching issues. Conversion and sacrifice are in the foreground. Systematic analysis of causes and effects, of underlying principles, of relationships to a web of other evidence, or most importantly to a heritage of theory, doctrine, and wisdom is minimized. Third and finally I proposed that inclusiveness had become a dangerous fetish, inhibiting serious examination of issues of Catholic identity.

These weaknesses afflicted both liberal Catholicism and the Catholic left, I argued, and each camp would have to address them in its own way. That task was made more difficult by the fact that common origins, working alliances, and public perception led the two camps, even in their own eyes, to be practically identified. In practice, I said, many liberal Catholics go their own rather more moderate way, but without challenging this identification or articulating any public criticism of the Catholic left. But could liberal Catholicism maintain this discreet silence? Wouldn't it be obliged, in some cases, not only to engage in self-criticism itself but also to call the Catholic left to account?

My talk was an effort to do both those things and to encourage others to do them as well. No such luck. To say that it stirred even a ripple of response among either liberal or left Catholics would border on exaggeration.

In the end, the most substantial challenges remained Cardinal George's argument that liberal Catholicism was an exhausted project and a more recent critique by Richard John Neuhaus, arguing that liberal Catholicism had not only been led seriously astray by its "dubious allies" on the left but even more fundamentally by its failure to come to terms with the requirement for Catholics of obedience.

II

These are serious arguments. Both, I believe, are badly flawed. Both raise issues, however, that liberal Catholicism can only benefit by confronting.
Cardinal George and Father Neuhaus describe liberal Catholicism in terms similar to mine. For Cardinal George, the liberal Catholic project was a response to the Enlightenment, which he equates with modernity.

“The challenge for the church,” he said, “lay in distinguishing the erroneous aspects of modernity from those that were compatible with, and even developments of, the Christian faith.” Unfortunately, the trauma of the French Revolution for the church would subject the Enlightenment project to a century of condemnations.

“In the midst of the controversy, a group now known as the ‘liberal Catholics’ began to distinguish and assess the various aspects of modernity,” he noted. These liberal Catholics rejected cultural aspects like materialism, secularism, moral relativism, and individualism, but they urged the adoption of certain political and economic aspects that would equip the church better to redeem the culture. “The church’s engagement with the modern world it had both resisted and helped create eventually resulted in the endorsement of a free society found in Dignitatis Humanae, Gaudium et Spes, and Centesimus Annus.”

Father Neuhaus was even more affirming of my description of liberal Catholicism, at least at first glance. If this is liberal Catholicism, he stated, “we should all want to call ourselves liberal Catholics.” And then he added, “Which is another way of saying that, although Mr. Steinfels and others may have problems with this, we should be John Paul II Catholics.”

I cannot speak for others. For me, the problem is not some link between liberal Catholicism and the present pope. As I said, one definition of liberal Catholicism is simply papal teaching a hundred years too soon. For me, the problem is the extraordinary leap, made by Cardinal George and Father Neuhaus alike, over all the painful, even tragic, history in between.

It is well and good to declare that we are all liberal Catholics today. What about being a liberal Catholic in the 1830s, 1850s, or 1890s, when, as I documented in my talk, liberalism was being portrayed by popes and papal champions as “the evil of evils”—“the offspring of Satan”—“a greater sin than blasphemy, theft, adultery, homicide, or any other violation of the law of God.” And liberal Catholics were a particularly dangerous “monstrosity”—“less excusable than those liberals who have never been within the pale of the church.”

For Pius IX, liberal Catholicism was “pernicious,” “perfidious,” “pervasive,” a “virus.” “I have always condemned liberal Catholicism,” he told a delegation of French Catholics in 1871, “and I will condemn it again forty times over if it be necessary.” “Liberal Catholics are wolves in sheep’s clothing,” wrote the future...
Pius X when patriarch of Venice. Their very piety, religious zeal, and charity disguised their venom.

If we welcome the fruits of liberal Catholicism a century later as nothing less than conciliar and papal teaching, were liberal Catholics right to persist in the efforts that produced such fruits, challenging papal authority at one moment, then burrowing underground, withstanding Vatican displeasure, or parrying official condemnations? Aren’t we obliged to ask what those episodes teach us about the workings of the papacy, the magisterium, dissent, and the development of doctrine?

And is it sufficient to celebrate the church’s embrace of liberal Catholicism’s insights after 150 years of struggle, saying “all’s well that ends well”? Whatever the costs of that delay to disappointed and denounced individuals, the costs to the church’s integrity and mission were far graver. As I noted in my talk, in principle the late 19th century and early 20th century church opposed aggressive nationalism, militarism, Darwinism, irrationalism, anti-Semitism and, above all, racist neo-paganism. Yet absent a robust liberal Catholicism, in nation after nation, Catholicism either aligned itself with many of these anti-liberal forces or risked their triumph rather than join hands with liberals or parliamentary socialists.

Neither Cardinal George nor Father Neuhaus confronts the dark side of this history, nor has John Paul II or Cardinal Ratzinger, as far as I know. It has almost become a cliché to cast the church’s witness to human dignity and truth in a dramatic light by counterposing that witness to the bloody century of totalitarianisms left and right, especially as symbolized by martyred individuals or by the figure of Karol Wojtyla, struggling through Nazi and Soviet domination of Poland. Left in the shadows is the question why, when faced with the germination and birth of those terrors, whether in Germany, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Poland, Austria, or Slovakia, the church’s witness proved so ineffective or ambiguous or even sometimes complicit.

In Father Neuhaus’s case, the evasion of history is particularly puzzling. He claims to welcome as “wise and courageous” my analysis of liberal Catholicism, in which this history plays a major part. Yet he performs radical cosmetic surgery on that analysis, cutting away major features of the argument and adjusting other parts to resemble his own visage.

Father Neuhaus echoed, just as Cardinal George had anticipated, some of the weaknesses that I espied among liberal Catholics and their kin to the left. Cardinal George complained, for instance, that contemporary liberal Catholicism failed to develop authentic theological warrants rather than only liberal cultural
grounds for proposed ecclesial changes. My worries about a slackening of intellec-
tual rigor covered much the same ground. For Father Neuhaus, my notice of the
1960s roots of the Catholic left's style and my concern that reflexive homage to
inclusiveness was eclipsing legitimate issues of Catholic identity provided spring-
boards for his own jeremiad.

From my concerns about inattention to Catholic identity, Father Neuhaus
launched a riff on the "astonishing insouciance" of "cradle Catholics of a left-
liberal bent" about "the solidity and perdurance of Catholicism" and the serious
harm that can be "done by unbounded criticism, conflict, and contradiction. . . .
the harm of souls misled—and possibly lost—of intellectual and artistic trad-
tions trashed, and of innumerable persons denied the high adventure of Catholic
fidelity."

I would not want to back away from my points about Catholic identity for
fear that it is being enlisted in a case lacking the nuance I tried to introduce. I
agree with Father Neuhaus about the danger of such insouciance and about the
corrosive effects on souls and traditions of "unbounded criticism, conflict, and
contradiction." One of the more depressing duties in my life is a regular reading
of the Letters pages in the National Catholic Reporter.

But it is startling to encounter the suggestion that such harsh and sweeping
denunciations are a specialty of cradle Catholics of a left-liberal bent. Does Father
Neuhaus watch EWTN, or peruse the columns of any number of self-declared
"orthodox" publications with which he seems to be on friendly terms, or even re-
fect on the monthly scoldings he administers in his own journal? Does he register
the tone of all too many Vatican documents? Does he worry about souls misled,
constricted, repelled, alienated, or embittered by the anathemas found in those
sources, or about the thinkers and scholarship caricatured, disdained, dismissed,
or slandered?

It is equally startling to find this "reckless confidence" attributed to an indiffer-
ence "to the incarnational reality of a Church subject to the trials, testings, distor-
tions, inspirations, and mistakes of history." It is precisely liberal-left sensitivity
to the incarnational character of a church subject to trials, testings, distortions,
inspirations, and mistakes that has so often distinguished it from the reckless
confidence of an ultramontane triumphalism that sees the church, the "perfect
society," floating above history and human weakness.

That history did not end with Vatican II or John Paul II. What Cardinal George
formulated as the task of "distinguishing the erroneous aspects of modernity from
those that were compatible with, and even developments of, the Christian faith"
could also be put another way: the task of distinguishing, sometimes with the help of modernity, inadequate or erroneous aspects of church teaching from what remains compatible with a developing Christian faith. Even after 1965 or after 1978, it is possible for popes, despite the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to fall into tragic error, and indeed, as I said, many liberal Catholics believe that “was probably the case in the 1968 issuance of *Humanae Vitae* and cannot be ruled out in the refusal of ordination to women.”

To which Father Neuhaus briskly replies “of course this pope can and has made mistakes.” When an author writes “of course,” it often signals a pivotal point in the argument that he or she hopes to jam into place without further examination. Are we surprised to find that the author does not specify any of those “mistakes,” nor does he indicate what a committed Catholic is to do about them? Instead, as already indicated, he launches a broad attack on liberal Catholicism and its Catholic left allies for refusing “to honestly receive the teaching of Vatican II as authoritatively interpreted by the Magisterium, and not least by the pontificate of John Paul II”—in sum, John Paul’s “bold proposal of renewal.”

The indictment is sweeping, but once again the crux turns out to be dissent from *Humanae Vitae*, which leads Father Neuhaus into “the question of obedience.”

Although the idea of intellectual obedience may be “a scandalous one in our time,” Father Neuhaus wrote, it is “an inseparable part of what it means to be Catholic.”

With that I do not disagree, nor with much of the exposition that followed, about Peter, bishops, apostolic leadership, and the need to think with the church. Nor do I disagree that beyond those matters stands the relationship between freedom and truth or, further, the relationship between freely belonging and freely being bound—bound by truth, bound by love for the truth, and bound by a Catholic understanding of how the truth is made known. Finally, I do not disagree with the criticism of the modern secular liberal ideal—impossible and delusory—of the autonomous, untethered, unencumbered self.

“Given a decision between what I think the Church should teach and what the Church in fact does teach, I decide for the Church,” Father Neuhaus declares. “I decide freely and rationally—because God has promised the apostolic leadership of the Church guidance and charisms that he has not promised me; because I think the Magisterium just may understand some things that I don’t; because I know for sure that, in the larger picture of history, the witness of the Catholic Church is immeasurably more important than anything I might think or say. In short, I obey.”
As far as it goes, this is all persuasive and, even if a little self-dramatizing, moving. Here is a man standing beneath the arches and vaults and carvings of a great cathedral, understandably awestruck, lifted up in the cloud of witnesses or maybe just hearing the still small voice. Like Job, he bows to the tremendum.

What is disconcerting, as so often, is less what is said than what goes unsaid. Nothing is said, for instance, about the limits to this obedience or checks against its abuse. If “intellectual obedience is a scandalous idea in our time,” by no means are the reasons trivial. Pitched in such abstract and general terms—“Peter among us,” Jesus’ words, “He who hears you hears me,” infallibility, Magisterium, “the witness of the Church,” freedom, truth, being bound, being “bound to be free”—there is no link in the argument that would not have served Pius IX or shackled the tongues and pens of the liberal Catholic thinkers whom Father Neuhaus, like Cardinal George, now embraces and celebrates.

What has become of the incarnational church now? The one with trials, testings, distortions, and mistakes? It is our fate to know that behind abstractions like “Peter” and “Magisterium” and “witness of the church” there are real individuals, saintly or petty, ambitious or serene, thoughtful or obdurate. There are committees, factions, agendas, drafts and revisions, bargains, compromises, blacklists.

It is ironic that Father Neuhaus, pointing up the consequences of liberalism’s ideal of the unencumbered, autonomous self, should include the now familiar specter of “blind submission to totalitarian doctrines that present themselves as surrogates for the truth that makes us free.” It seems only decent to mention that neither of the two great totalitarian doctrines of the last century had much use for liberalism or for the unencumbered, autonomous self, whatever its distance from reality. In the shadow of those doctrines, of the submission of all too many intellectuals, and of their self-denigrating confessions and recantations, there is an unsettling ring to Father Neuhaus’s affirmation, “I know for sure that, in the larger picture of history, the witness of the Catholic Church is immeasurably more important than anything I might think or say. In short, I obey.”

Similarly surprising and unsettling in the light of that history is Father Neuhaus’s unabashed and seemingly uncritical focus on one man. All the ambiguities of Vatican II and the many questions it barely opened or left for the future have been authoritatively and definitively resolved by John Paul II. I had mentioned five areas where an effective church’s witness would surely demand the continuing contribution of liberal Catholicism—human sexuality, technological control over genes and the mind, relations among world religions, quantum leaps in historical consciousness and cultural pluralism, and a worldwide revolution of individual freedom and democracy. Each of them, Father Neuhaus responds, has
been addressed by John Paul II, "comprehensively, repeatedly, with formidable intelligence and persuasive force." If his teaching has not been received, it is only because of recalcitrant hearers, including "liberal Catholics who incessantly pit Vatican II against the living magisterium of the Church."

Father Neuhaus wisely reminds us that the word obedience, from *ob-audire*, contains the Latin root for "listen" or "hear." Obedience thus "means to give ear to, to listen to, to follow guidance." Is it the Catholic understanding that this process of giving ear to works only from the top down, or that one can be disobedient only from the bottom up? Can popes and bishops be disobedient by not giving ear to, not listening to lay women and men, priests, theologians, or even the secular world, by not listening to the poor, the afflicted, the vulnerable, and the excluded? And if so, what then?

Isn't obedience a matter of giving ear to, of listening to, of being guided by, many voices? The voices of God in Jesus and the Scriptures (the many voices of the Scriptures), in the sacraments and the saints, as well as the voices of pontiffs and prelates, encyclicals, catechisms, and canon law. That Catholic witness which I obey because it "is immeasurably more important than anything I might think or say" is in reality a chorus, not a single voice, and sometimes a chorus that verges on cacophony. Yes, there are rules and dispositions for listening to these voices and for authenticating them or weighing them when they appear to differ. Central to these judgments is the hierarchical authority, including the Petrine office, that God has given the church. But that authority does not operate mechanically. When I hear it, I hear its overtones and undertones, its chords and dissonances. I hear its unanimity or its deep differences, its free exchanges or its constrained silences, its receptiveness or its defensiveness. My obedience in the faith is responsiveness, not reflex.

I believe Father Neuhaus knows this. At the conclusion of his essay, he pleads for "a conversion to *ob-audire*—to responsive listening, to lively engagement, to trustful following, to the form of reflective faith that is obedience." Liberal Catholicism would not put it differently. In principle or, I believe, in practice. Where the difference lies is, first, in liberal Catholics' conviction that, contrary to the implication of Father Neuhaus's preceding pages, this definition is compatible with serious disagreements with the papacy, including the current papacy; and, second, that Rome is no less in need of this kind of conversion than the rest of us.

Thus far, I have addressed what I think are flawed objections to liberal Catholicism in Cardinal George’s original account and in Father Neuhaus’s more recent critique. They both evade history. They reap where they did not sow. They wel-
come the incorporation of liberal Catholic stances in today’s church but skirt the implications of how that came about.

Cardinal George erects a sharp wall between a liberal culture, described as incompatible with Catholicism, and liberal political and economic institutions, detachable, it seems, from that inimicable culture in the past and valuable for secular society but no longer detachable in the present or valuable for ecclesial society.

Father Neuhaus indicts liberal Catholicism, in effect, for ecclesiastical draft dodging. His criticism rests on a fervent rendering of obedience but one that is abstract, incomplete and inconsistent with his own professed endorsement of the liberal Catholic legacy, one in which the post-totalitarian reader searches unavailingly for the dividing line between “thinking with the church,” “lively engagement,” or “reflective faith,” on the one hand, and irresponsible abnegation or acquiescence, on the other.

III

I do not want to conclude on these notes. Four years ago, I reflected on liberal Catholicism not in the spirit of defense but of critical self-examination. In that spirit, the spirit of ob-audire, if you will, I would like to underscore several themes from Cardinal George and Father Neuhaus that liberal Catholicism, along with the other challenges I previously outlined, could fruitfully hear.

One is the theme of heroism. For all the intellectual gifts of Pope John Paul II, what has resonated in his papacy, what resonates with the young people who will never read Veritatis Splendor or Fides et Ratio, is a call to heroism. It is a heroism rooted in Karol Wojtyla’s Polish Catholicism and its romantic literature—a heroism perhaps clearer to our world of images and politics when a vigorous voyager-pope was aligned with Solidarity’s bold challenge to Soviet domination than today, when a physically enfeebled man struggles with his speeches or stamps his approval on edicts. It is a heroism nonetheless that rings through Father Neuhaus’s acclamation of the Pope and consequent paean to obedience, sacrifice, Magisterium, and absorption of the individual in the larger vision.

Heroism is a tricky business. After Solidarity and the Velvet Revolution come parliamentary politics and normal existence, precisely what all those self-consciously heroic totalitarian movements scorned. The history of liberalism and of liberal Catholicism is filled with heroes and heroic moments. Yet in some ways both liberalism and liberal Catholicism are anti-heroic. They are sensible, balanced, practical, everyday, Appolonian rather than Dionysian. The heroic is more often celebrated on the Catholic left, among the allies I criticized rather extensively, than among liberal Catholics.
Liberal Catholicism must have a more comprehending attitude toward the heroic. That is my first theme.

The second is joy. Nothing in Cardinal George's original remarks, to which my wife responded, made me gasp as much as his declaration that liberal Catholicism had proven inadequate in "fostering the joyful self-surrender called for in Christian marriage, in consecrated life, in ordained priesthood." On what empirical basis did the archbishop generalize about joyful self-surrender in liberal Catholic marriages? Were there statistics measuring liberal Catholic self-surrender rates, or even divorce rates? I myself had known of some conservative Catholic marriages where whatever self-surrendering went on gave every sign of being pretty unjoyful, if not destructively bitter. In truth my puny sample regarding such a private, mysterious matter, just like my address book of joyfully self-sacrificing liberal Catholic priests and religious, provided no grounds whatsoever for generalizing, and I couldn't imagine doing so. Wasn't this a classic case of Catholic a priori reasoning? Liberal Catholics had notoriously rejected the condemnation of contraceptive sex in marriage. Only non-contraceptive sex in marriage could be joyful self-surrender. Ergo....

I cannot say that my reaction to his assertions has changed. But liberal Catholicism should nonetheless take to its heart his underscoring of joy and joyfulness. Liberal Catholicism has not been notable, certainly in embattled recent years, for joyfulness. I am not sure who has. But it has every reason to see itself in one of the phrases Cardinal George used to describe "simply Catholicism": "a faith joyful in all the gifts Christ wants to give us and open to the whole world he died to save."

Finally, I want to retain the theme of obedience—giving ear to, responsive listening, lively engagement, trustful following, reflective faith, all the phrases Father Neuhaus happily contributed. An embattled state is as little conducive to these as to joy.

Yet embattled we are. The framework for a healthy heroism, a sustaining joyfulness, and a receptive listening will not be found in a restored emphasis on following orders, personal abnegation, or intellectual disavowal. It will be found, I suggest, in a zone of daily prayer, sacramental habits, household rituals, continuing study, and physical reminders and expressions of our faith—something like the apparently dreaded Catholic subculture of recent memory but stressing affirmations of what we are rather than negations of what others are. Within such a zone, the heroism of everyday life can be made manifest, the springs of joy can be refreshed, and the voices of authority can be heard and engaged in security. There would be
sufficient shelter for the play of irony, the exertion of intellectual struggle, and the negotiation of identity I have previously urged on liberal Catholicism.

These are only a few light strokes sketching the goal of a different kind of Catholic subculture, positive not punitive, structured but permeable, defined but not defensive. A little liberal, if you will, but also a little conservative. Perhaps it cannot be created. If it can be, only liberal Catholicism will do it.

Notes

1 Pope Pius IX. Syllabus of Errors (December 8, 1864). Paragraph 80.

2 The analysis of liberal Catholicism here is developed further in my essay, “The Failed Encounter: the Catholic Church and Liberalism in the Nineteenth Century,” in R. Bruce Douglass and David Hollenbach, editors, Catholicism and Liberalism (Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 19-44, and rest on the references given there.

3 Founded in 1926 by Australian lawyer Francis Joseph Sheed and his British wife Maisie Ward, Sheed & Ward is one of the most eminent Catholic publishing houses in the world today. In its now 77-year old history, Sheed & Ward have published some of the most prominent names in Catholic thought. It is currently under the ownership of Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.


6 As a Lutheran clergyman, Father Neuhaus was for 17 years senior pastor of a low-income African-American parish in Brooklyn, New York. Father Neuhaus has played a leadership role in organizations dealing with civil rights, international justice, and ecumenism. In September 1991, he was ordained a priest of the Archdiocese of New York. Father Neuhaus serves as President of The Institute on Religion and Public Life, a non

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