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# Confessions of a Fractured Catholic Theologian

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# EDITORIAL ESSAY

## CONFESSIONS OF A FRACTURED CATHOLIC THEOLOGIAN

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In the *Divine Milieu*, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin talked about the “passive diminishments” that accompany the passage of time. But often time’s passing also brings a growing desire to look back, to reflect, and to try to see things whole. Recently I have found myself reflecting on U.S. Catholicism, Catholic theology in the United States, and myself as an historical theologian at the University of Dayton. My reflections assess the past, address the present, and look to the future.

### *I. U.S. Catholicism*

I begin with U.S. Catholicism. The story I want to tell about it has a threefold lesson and I will state it very generally. First, as embodied mortals with immortal longings, we are rooted in particular times and places in the world. German philosophers sometimes call this our “historicity.” Second, whether we are aware of it or not, our historical sites or locations provide the forms and terms of our coming to know God. It was in Tenaflly, New Jersey, for example, that my mother taught me to pray. Third, if we remain unmindful of the second lesson, we risk mistaking historical forms and terms for God. In biblical language, this would be idolatry. And finally, if my Catholic story is not your own, I ask you to allow it to stand as a figure or a type of the particular sited story you have to tell.

The Catholic Church and modern governments have generally had a rocky relationship. As the most modern of nations, the United States has often puzzled church authorities. The Vatican, for example, initially filed American church documents under the Canary Islands. The second Vatican Council in the 1960s brought a degree of reconciliation between Catholicism and modernity. But even after Vatican II, questions linger about being good Catholics and good Americans at the

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same time. If that sounds overstated, just think of the controversy during the 2004 presidential campaign over candidate John Kerry's standing as a Catholic communicant.

In a report to Rome in 1783, six years before he became the first American bishop, John Carroll described the "Religious system" of the United States as having "undergone a revolution, if possible, more extraordinary, than our political one." About the same time, as if to illustrate Carroll's point, Pope Pius VI's nuncio in Paris, indirectly through Benjamin Franklin, sought advice from Congress on how best to administer the church in the new republic. Should there be a bishop? Who should it be? From Philadelphia came the reply that Congress regarded the subject of Franklin's inquiry as "purely spiritual." It was, therefore, "outside the jurisdiction and powers of Congress who have no authority to permit or refuse it . . ."<sup>1</sup>

The Vatican had never met a modern government that did not wish to appoint bishops. Recently Rowan Williams, the eminent Anglican theologian from Wales, became Archbishop of Canterbury. Tony Blair nominated Williams and Queen Elizabeth II chose him as Archbishop. This is how eighteenth and nineteenth-century sovereigns preferred the situation. At mortal odds with Napoleon over just such matters, Pope Pius VI eventually died as the Emperor's prisoner. But for Waterloo and the Congress of Vienna, Pope Pius VII would have met the same fate. He refused to cede the Papal States to France. Stung by conflicts with Italian nationalists over the same Papal States and by the assassination of his prime minister, Pope Pius IX lashed back in 1864 with his *Syllabus of Errors*. In it he famously condemned the proposition that popes ought to accommodate themselves to progress, liberalism, and modern civilization.

Over the next century, U.S. Catholic intellectuals scurried to contrast the godless French Revolution of 1789 with the godly American Revolution of 1776. American exceptionalism, the notion of the United States as Non-European and unique among modern nations, reigned as the interpretive principle for Vatican condemnations of liberalism prior to Vatican II. In other words, these censures did not apply to us. But in 1960 presidential candidate John F. Kennedy was *still* responding to questions about the *Syllabus*. They were put to rest, at least temporarily, with the Second Vatican Council's 1965 Declaration on Religious Liberty, *Dignitatis Humanae*.

<sup>1</sup>Both of these citations are taken from James Hennesey, S.J., *American Catholics* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 68, 71.

## *II. Catholic Theology in the United States*

Though the United States presented the church with unique *political* circumstances, church people generally assumed that *theology* was the same everywhere. Much like modern philosophers, anointed with the spirit of geometry, eighteenth and nineteenth-century theologians generally presented their clear and distinct ideas in thesis form in manuals written in Latin, the Western Church's universal language. My own scholarship has been devoted to studying the exceptions to this generalization, figures who tried to bring the particularities of Catholic life in the United States to theological reflection. But historical and local particularities do not fit well with eighteenth-century norms. An embattled Vatican made no distinction between nineteenth-century church thinkers who emphasized the historical and the local and anti-clerical European nationalists dedicated to crushing any trans-national or "catholic" church. This explains the fate of the "Americanists" of the 1890s and the "modernists" who came after them early in the twentieth century.

Theologians who tried during this period to put history and "experience" at the heart of Catholic thought elicited from Pope Pius X a massive reassertion of eighteenth-century norms. In 1907 he condemned "modernism" as the "synthesis of all heresies." Contemporary historians and theologians rightly underscore the disastrous effects this condemnation had on Catholic biblical scholarship and theology in the United States. But it had other ironic, even providential, effects. It freed Catholic thinkers to pursue the local and the particular, albeit outside the recognized boundaries of theology. As a result, the period between 1907 and the second Vatican Council was, from an intellectual point of view, extraordinarily fruitful, but, at least on the surface, untheological. Redeeming that time for theology is a key item on my present research agenda.

During the first half of the twentieth century, Catholic intellectuals reflected on the particulars of Catholic life in the United States in at least three areas: history, social ethics, and Protestant-Catholic relations. In the first area, historians such as John Tracy Ellis at The Catholic University of America and Thomas T. McAvoy at The University of Notre Dame set the discipline of American Catholic history on a sound scholarly footing. In the second area, an impressive group of pioneer social scientists, primarily at The Catholic University, but also at Notre Dame, engaged with American culture in theologically informed ways that flew beneath the radar of official theology. Today we might call what they did "social ethics."

Paul Hanly Furfey, for example, argued that a sociology forgetful of our final end could do little to help the poor. Furfey presumed that helping the poor was a chief purpose of social science. His student and colleague, Mary Elizabeth Walsh, made the saints the model for social work and tested her theories in the neighborhood houses she and Furfey founded and staffed with graduate students and seminarians. During the summer of 1967, I was privileged to work in one of these houses. John A. Ryan in Economics, John Montgomery Cooper in Religious Education and his student and colleague, Regina Flannery Herzfeld, in Anthropology, and Thomas Verner Moore in Psychology pursued similar religiously engaged research. They were culturally bilingual. Rooted in Catholic soil, they branched out to entwine with secular colleagues in their disciplines. Third, to be a Catholic intellectual in the United States always meant either looking over your shoulder at or engaging, often in argument, with the theological and social thought of the Protestant majority.

During the 1960s, most of this religiously-sited Catholic engagement with American culture was swept away and replaced by modes of engagement that seemed to take rationality as a neutral rather than a communally-sited activity. With its insistence on our final end, life's ultimate purpose in God, Furfey's "supernatural sociology" became a quaint embarrassment. Most commentators attribute this sea change to the second Vatican Council. I would argue to the contrary that it is better attributed to the dissolution of the American Catholic subculture. By the dissolution of the subculture I mean the demographic point, some time in the mid-1960s, at which immigrant Catholics finally became statistically indistinguishable from other Americans. This and not the council is the defining event of twentieth-century American Catholic history. The dissolution of the subculture is the context for the reception of Vatican II in the United States. And it is the dissolution of the subculture that spells the end of the kind of Catholic-specific engagements with American culture briefly mentioned above.

We began to call the networks of Catholic schools and organizations a "ghetto," and decided that such things as "Catholic sociology" were parochial leftovers of an immigrant past. And doubtless in some respects they were. We wanted to join the mainstream and be legitimate. Unfortunately, we did this at just the time when others—women, African-Americans, Latino/as—were discovering the need for sited inquiry. But now, mainstreamed and legitimate, chastened perhaps, American Catholics are in position to find their own epistemological groove. People from other religious groups may hear echoes of their own stories here.

*III. Catholic Theology in the United States, Two Local Stories:  
My Own and the University of Dayton's*

I know about the dissolution of the subculture because it is the point at which I entered the story. I began M.A. studies in theology in the fall of 1968, a few weeks after the appearance of Pope Paul VI's encyclical on birth control, *Humanae Vitae*. Hungry and just barely alive, I emerged from graduate school with a Ph.D. in 1980. Between 1968 and 1980, Catholic theology in North America was awash in a sea of Europeans. A colonial phenomenon, we were not as far removed as we thought from eighteenth-century norms. Karl Rahner was the king of Catholic theology. Martin Heidegger lurked in the shadows. But if you did not like German, Canadian Bernard Lonergan offered "transcendental Thomism" for Anglo-Americans.

We never realized the extent to which Rahner's theological anthropology was about post-war Germans, Yves Congar's ecclesiology was about the church in France, or Lonergan's method was about going to school in a Western university. Of course that is not all they were about. But, in hindsight, both they and we seemed disturbingly unaware of how local our thinking really was. Perhaps such reflexive knowledge would have been too much to ask at the time. Ironically, we all, professors and students, went on about "historicity" and "historical consciousness," but always in the abstract.

Protesting our own lack of local awareness, Canadians used to call people from the United States "USAers." Studying in Canada in the 1970s helped me to realize what a USAer I was. One day in Toronto while reading Isaac Hecker for a paper on "Americanism," it hit me that "U.S." and "Catholic" defined the particular forms and terms in which I had and would come to know God. U.S. Catholicism was the site, the location or standpoint, from which I would think theologically. It was now my job to bring this location to reflection, or risk mistaking the forms and terms for God.

The problem was that the discipline of theology was not set up for this kind of thinking. Feminist theology and Latin American liberation theology were emerging but still peripheral. In 1972 I wrote an M.A. thesis on Black Theology, trying to find in it a model for the kind of theology I was looking for. But, in spite of these exceptions, disciplinary boundaries and practices still encourage theologians to work in eighteenth-century style, as if theology were a supra-regional activity that anyone can do. My *vita* reflects this fractured state. It has two parts, one for systematic theology and one for historical theology. People ask me if I am an historian or a theologian. I usually say that I am an historical theologian. Can there be any other kind?

So imagine my delight when I learned that a group of geniuses in

the mid-west had put together a Ph.D. program in theology with a focus on something called “the U.S. Catholic experience.” Talk about historical consciousness. Bernard Lonergan, eat your heart out! And they wanted to pay me to come and help make this program work. Because of the time and manner of my training, the fracture in my theological bones between the American and the Catholic will probably never knit completely.

But it will not be so, I hope, for our students. Reflecting the great generational shift that comes with the dissolution of the subculture, most of our students will be lay women and men. They, rather than religious and priests, will be the church’s future intellectual and often pastoral leaders. Instead of just passing on eighteenth-century theological norms to them, I hope we teach them to use “funky methodologies,” to think in interdisciplinary ways as local voices in a universal church. European voices are part of the universal church, but we need no longer be a theological colony.

In Part II I mentioned three areas in which U.S. Catholics in the first half of the twentieth century tried to think in local ways. These areas were history, social ethics, and Protestant-Catholic relations. A focus on the “U.S. Catholic experience” makes it possible to revisit these areas in a post-subculture mode that avoids both triumphalism and self-loathing. In ways closed to our predecessors, we can reconnect to these areas *theologically*: first, through the recovery of American Catholic stories as sites for theologies; second, through religiously located social ethics, free to care *directly* about the poor and about supernatural ends; third, through creative theological engagement with Protestant Christians, similarly sited in their own locations.

To put it simply, it is okay to think and speak as Catholics, presuming that others will also think and speak as themselves. Trying to speak a third or neutral language re-locates all speakers and consigns them to places where they do not really want to be. Religious people are often told that when we think and act as ourselves, religious strife inevitably results. Of all people, Christian theologians ought to be suspicious of such a claim.

A focus on the U.S. Catholic experience requires neither a closed Catholic fortress nor a cheap consumer church. To begin locally, to begin from identity thickly narrated is to begin from difference. It is to privilege the ad hoc over the theoretical. But it is also to expect and even demand without violence that interlocutors do the same. Who knows what will happen then? Beginning locally is a compelling alternative to beginning neutrally, as if from nowhere, or beginning universally, as if from everywhere. “We” are neither everywhere nor nowhere but here in this place and time. It is important to be honest about that and to be honest about the “we.”