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# Americanized Catholicism? A Response to Thomas Schärtl

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### **Americanized Catholicism? A Response to Thomas Schärfl**

I stand in fundamental agreement with what Thomas Schärfl has said in his article describing recent trends in US Catholicism. I am a lifelong Catholic and a lifelong Democrat. I felt personally distressed and discouraged by the support given to Mitt Romney and the Republicans by some leading US Catholic bishops. Most of this support may have technically passed the legal test of being nonpartisan, but undeniably it functioned in a partisan manner, as did the attacks launched on President Obama in the midst of a campaign to defend religious liberty. Schärfl's analysis of these trends as reflecting marketing strategies focused on protecting brand identity markers yields worthwhile insights. It helps to explain why some bishops preached simplistic messages focused on a narrow range of moral issues, why they acted (perhaps opportunistically) in unison with far-right conservative Christians, and why they at times appeared to cast all disagreement within the church as disloyalty, and all disagreement beyond the church as apostasy. It also helps to explain the presence within the US Catholic Church of modes of piety that seem to reflect not only needs fulfillment but perhaps also a type of needs creation.

Schärfl's article rightly describes and prophetically names disturbing trends in US Catholicism. His article has its own legitimate but pointed focus. Still, I must ask, are there additional frames of reference that can yield further insights? Is there a bigger picture here that needs to be filled in? Can the bishops and the Evangelical Catholics be approached more sympathetically in a way that tries to honor more their motivations and intentions? By exploring these questions, I do not mean to soften in any way my basic appreciation for the insights that Schärfl shares.

What is missing from this picture? Schärfl speaks about the continued existence of what might be called a Catholic liberal perspective found in many parishes, universities, and religious orders. He does not, however, bring out how the number and strength of those holding a Catholic liberal perspective is sufficient ground for talking not about the dominance of one group, but of an existing polarization. This point may help to explain now, in hindsight, how it is that Obama won reelection with 50 percent of the Catholic vote (versus 48 percent for Romney).<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> See The Pew Forum, "How the Faithful Voted: 2012 Preliminary Analysis," November 7, 2012, <http://www.pewforum.org/Politics-and-Elections/How-the-Faithful-Voted-2012-Preliminary-Exit-Poll-Analysis.aspx>.

An even more important factor, though, is the existence of yet larger numbers of Catholics who tend to shy away from political extremes, many of whom are annoyed by loud voices coming from either direction. Along with the 50 percent who voted for Obama, 56 percent of Catholics not long before the election also expressed their support for the bishops in their campaign to defend religious liberty.<sup>14</sup> These numbers might seem contradictory and confusing if polarization told the whole story. It is more likely, however, that in the middle there are large numbers of Catholics who both want as much as possible to support their bishops and who also supported Obama for president. They are not ideologues, and they do not appreciate having their faith reduced to partisan politics. Perhaps a more telling figure is the 40-some percent (one poll says 51 percent) of US Catholics who say they favor Obama's position on gay rights.

Are the bishops themselves united in their political views? It is quite apparent to me as an interested observer that the US bishops have done an excellent job in recent years of staying on the same page in public. They rarely contradict each other, and, if they do, they will take it back by the next day. In the months leading up to the presidential election, however, there was one notable change in the message of many of the leading conservative bishops. Instead of just focusing on abortion and same-sex marriage, they would also often mention a consistent ethic of life, Catholic social teaching, and issues such as poverty and immigration. My educated guess is that somewhere along the line, perhaps in their meeting of March 2012, the bishops decided behind closed doors that their message needed to have a wider range and reach. The message shifted somewhat beyond one or two issues to including a consistent ethic of life. Some of this shift may have been tied in with the bishop-sponsored Fortnight for Freedom, which took place over the two weeks leading up to July 4. On the one hand, the Fortnight was directly connected with the health-care mandate, and thus with birth control and abortion. On the other hand, in "Our First, Most Cherished Liberty," the bishops' Ad Hoc Committee for Religious Liberty tried to broaden the issues in order to highlight the importance of the basic underlying principle regarding freedom:

Religious liberty is not only about our ability to go to Mass on Sunday or pray the Rosary at home. It is about whether we can make our contribution to the common good of all Americans. Can we do the good works our faith calls us to do, without having to compromise that very same faith? Without

<sup>14</sup> The Pew Forum, "Catholics Share Bishops' Concerns about Religious Liberty," August 1, 2012, <http://www.pewforum.org/Politics-and-Elections/Catholics-Share-Bishops-Concerns-about-Religious-Liberty.aspx>.

religious liberty properly understood, all Americans suffer, deprived of the essential contribution in education, health care, feeding the hungry, civil rights, and social services that religious Americans make every day, both here at home and overseas.<sup>15</sup>

This public emphasis on a broadening of concerns began to take place not long after Schärfl wrote his article.

Schärfl's use of critical tools drawn from social and cultural methods yields a type of analysis that does not address directly what the immediate motivations and intentions of the leading conservative bishops are. A bigger picture requires that we consider what might be driving them on a conscious level. A moderate bishop recently told me that he thinks that many of the cultural warriors among the bishops have abortion as their main concern. Some of my more progressive Catholic friends argue against this claim based on an inconsistency of focus and on the independence of other Republican-appearing causes that these bishops seem to support more passionately. Still, I think there is something to be said for the opinion of my bishop friend. A core generating motivation need not be expressed with total consistency. Despite my own concerns about one-issue politics, I find here a motivation that I respect and that cannot be reduced to marketing or branding.

I also have more than a little sympathy with the bishops in their support of traditional family values, whether or not I think that their political strategies represent the most effective means of support. For the previous four years, more than 40 percent of babies in the United States were born to single mothers.<sup>16</sup> This already high figure rises dramatically when one focuses on urban areas. One does not have to be a persecutor of nontraditional families in order to believe that a child is better off having both a mother and a father and thus to find the present statistics disturbing. I believe that the current culture wars tend to force a choice between support for traditional family arrangements and embracing all families of all kinds as of inestimable value. Wherever one comes out on this issue, however, the bishops' support for traditional family values cannot be exhaustively described using the lens of consumer marketing. I do not think that Schärfl in any way implied that it could, but I also think that an explicit statement to this effect helps to fill out the bigger picture.

<sup>15</sup> USCCB, Ad Hoc Committee for Religious Liberty, "Our First, Most Cherished Liberty," April 12, 2012, <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/religious-liberty/our-first-most-cherished-liberty.cfm>.

<sup>16</sup> Child Trends DataBank, November 2012, <http://www.childtrendsdatabank.org/?q=node/196>.

Finally, the collusion of leading conservative bishops with politicians who want to seriously limit the size and power of the federal government reflects their concern that there looms now a secular core that puts itself over and above private interests, including religious groups, as the final arbiter of human values. They would prefer a secular core that stresses its own limitations and that serves instead as a facilitator of the ability of religious and other private interest groups to live freely and in accordance with their own values and visions. Such a view may have its own severe limitations, but it is a sincere approach to a serious issue that cannot be reduced to an identity-protecting market strategy.

Social theory and cultural theory are not meant to seek out personal motivations and individual intentions simply according to the self-understanding of those being studied. In fact, such studies often intend to reveal patterns and results that can be in tension with what is intentionally envisioned. In *Insight: A Study in Human Understanding*, Bernard Lonergan argued that whereas modern statistical theory and more traditional classical theory will clash at times, ultimately they represent perspectives that need to be treated as complementary.<sup>17</sup> A contemporary critical analysis can always be enriched by a perspective that addresses less critically grounded concerns. I consider my quest for a bigger picture as in no way contradicting Schartl's views, but rather as supplementing them.

The same is true of Schärtl's take on the willingness of Catholic bishops to become strange bedfellows with right-wing Christians in order to defeat same-sex marriage initiatives. I do not object to his portrait. Still, I think it worthwhile to consider Evangelical and Pentecostal approaches and their influence on Catholics, particularly on younger Catholics, from a different, more appreciative angle. I do not want our negative reactions to the contemporary political circus to override our answer to the call for spiritual ecumenism issued in Vatican II's *Decree on Ecumenism*. For his purposes in this particular article, Schärtl is in his own way doing something he accuses the bishops of doing: emphasizing what is distinctively Catholic over against other Christian traditions. And yes, it is true that, relative to some other Christians, we Catholics are not so pessimistic or moralistic: we want to put reason and

<sup>17</sup> Bernard Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1957), 103–39. What Lonergan applies directly to the relationship between statistical and classical theoretical approaches (and later also to the relationship between theory and common sense) is something I am applying analogously to the relationship between social theory and more classical approaches. Put simply, a social or cultural analysis that reveals negative patterns can, in the big picture, fit together with an approach that takes seriously the positive self-conscious motivations that also drive the decisions of individuals and groups.

faith together, and we try to avoid pitting what is divine over against what is human. When we join forces with some of the more extreme countercultural groups of Christians, we have to be careful as to exactly what we, either explicitly or implicitly, are signing up for.

I want to complement these legitimate concerns by discussing a way of implementing Vatican II's spiritual ecumenism that I call the "Ronald Knox Principle." Spiritual ecumenism calls us to be humble and self-critical; to thirst and pray for Christian unity; to study and learn about the other; and to realize that the best thing we can do ecumenically is to be open to changing ourselves as individuals and as communities. In his 1950 book *Enthusiasm*, Knox argued that throughout history, when religious groups separate from the Catholic Church, they are usually seeking things that legitimately belong to the tradition but that are being severely underemphasized by the Catholic Church in their time.<sup>18</sup> In the tensions that precede and accompany a split, Catholics can even tend toward a reactionary rejection of elements that legitimately belong to Christianity. In reacting against enthusiasts, we might tend to look with suspicion on an entire range of charisms. In reacting against the Donatists, we might so emphasize that a sacrament is valid whether a minister is holy or not that we forget that it is quite to our advantage if our ministers are indeed holy.

What is it that these young Evangelical Catholics and Charismatic Catholics want? Do they have spiritual desires that transcend the consumer realm?<sup>19</sup> The ones with whom I speak do not really seem all that interested in returning to the time before the council, although some of the older Catholics who encourage them might wish for this. These young Catholics were not even born until long after the council ended. They may appear to some college professors as wanting unrealistic immediacy, false certainty, moral rigidity, and self-righteous exclusivism. But do these professors also look at the conventional Catholic Church and Catholic academy and see dry bones that cry out to be brought back to life? Could it be this life that the young Evangelical and Charismatic Catholics seek, while in the meantime they settle for the quick fixes listed above? Spiritual ecumenism calls us to reach out to the other both within and outside the Catholic Church.

The picture that Schärfl paints of Catholic storms across the US landscape is frightening and basically true. It is, however, neither the whole picture nor

<sup>18</sup> Ronald Knox, *Enthusiasm: A Chapter in the History of Religion, with Special Reference to the XVII and XVIII Centuries* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1950; reprint, South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994).

<sup>19</sup> For a sympathetic analysis of the needs and desires of this group, see William L. Portier, "Here Come the Evangelical Catholics," *Communio* 31 (Spring 2004): 35-66.

the whole truth (nor does he claim it to be). The problems to which he points run deep, but hopefully so do the currents that signal potential hope and renewal.

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