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The Missing Piece: The Renewal of Catholic Americanism
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THE RENEWAL OF CATHOLIC AMERICANISM

by DAVID J. O'BRIEN

Marianist Award Lecture
2005

THE UNIVERSITY OF DAYTON
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THE MISSING PIECE: THE RENEWAL OF CATHOLIC AMERICANISM

"I wrote almost all of it in the deepest hope and conviction."

(Rev. John Ames, speaking of his handwritten copies of a lifetime of sermons, 2250 sermons in all, 67,500 pages, in Marilynne Robinson’s novel, Gilead)

Thank you very much, to the University of Dayton, to my many friends here, and to so many people who have supported me over the years. I cannot tell you how honored I am to be included in this list of distinguished recipients of the Marianist Award, so many of whom were, and are, my mentors and friends. I am grateful beyond words to have had the privilege of those friendships, and to now be included in this community of shared faith and common vocation.

While I will speak broadly about the American Catholic Church, its past and its future, I am not a theologian, but a simple American historian. With that line, denying responsibility for Catholic doctrine, discipline or morals, I have wiggled off many a barbed hook in parish basements and university lecture halls. Unfortunately, there are people listening to and reading this lecture who know me pretty well. When they hear my escape line: "I'm just a simple American historian," they will recall the day an adoring female admirer of FDR told Eleanor Roosevelt that her husband, when questioned about his religious faith, answered with a smile, "I am a simple Christian." With a lifted eyebrow, Eleanor responded: "Yes, Franklin is a very simple Christian."

I am afraid that I have been not only a very simple but a very American Catholic historian of American Catholicism, more American and more Catholic, more political and far less objective, than historians are supposed to be. My talk today is about the politics of my church, my "community of faith and friendship," to use a phrase of John Cardinal Dearden. Nevertheless, I hope that when I am done, those of you in the University of Dayton community who are not Catholic will better understand, even appreciate, the Catholic elements of your University's mission and identity. Our colleges and universities, yours and mine, are not and should not be family firms, where we Catholics are in charge and others are respected collaborators, to use a very loaded term. No, all of us are invited into a community constituted by conversation about basic human questions, including
questions of meaning, mutual obligation and the moral dimensions of learning and teaching, the politics of knowledge if you will, a phrase that may, for better or worse, describe what I will try to talk about this afternoon. I say politics of knowledge because, I fear, the Catholic practice of intellectual and social solidarity is contested, in the highest of high places.  

I fear I will depart a bit from the Marianist tradition of calm, scholarly presentations. My talk today, while I hope it rests on scholarly foundations, will sound more like a stump speech than a university lecture. That is because we meet, I fear, in the midst of the most serious crisis to face the Catholic Church in its American history. I deeply believe in the American Catholic people, and I could list innumerable experiences of grace they have been for me. Our church is indeed blessed in these times as in all others. But, as John Tracy Ellis, one of your honorees, told me when I first met him, the Holy Spirit will guide the church to fulfill its mission, but that does not mean it will flourish in the United States. Remember North Africa, he said, in what I took to be an invitation to combine historical scholarship with responsible discipleship in an American church that has always depended on the free commitment and sharing of responsibility of all its members.

During the early years of the great depression, President Herbert Hoover told the story of a small boy who asked his mother if she recalled that beautiful vase she always said had been passed down from generation to generation. Yes, she replied, looking at her son, surprised. Well, he said sheepishly, this generation just dropped it.  

In this paper, then, I will make three points about whether we drop the vase created for us by those who have gone before.

First, the American Catholic culture wars are over and the conservatives have won, pretty decisively.

Second, one reason for that outcome was the displacement of reformist American stories by calls for counter-cultural resistance to America arising from genuine concern about Catholic identity and integrity.

Third, a renewed Catholic Americanism, with an emphasis on a politics of shared responsibility, in as well as out of church, would be a very good idea.

**Part One: Catholic Politics, American Style**

The Church has a politics. In fact most of what happens in the church results from politics, broadly understood, as historians of the church well know. Power is
the ability to act. In the church, as in every organization, some people have more ability to act, more freedom, more knowledge; more capacity, more resources, than others. In the church as in society power is sometimes celebrated, sometimes feared, sometimes denied, and, hard as it may be to believe, often actively pursued. In that pursuit of power, ideas about modernity and its perils, ideas like those of Charles Taylor and his dialogue partners in a remarkable book of Marianist lectures, such ideas can be, often are, weapons.6

In the eighteenth century, supposedly sacred states controlled most Catholic churches, and government officials made most decisions about church policy and personnel. When revolutionary forces exploded in France and elsewhere, they swept aside both secular and religious rulers, seen as two sides of one corrupt coin. Catholic reformers, disgusted by politics, then contended for power in order to renew the church by making it more independent, better able to act on its religious message and meet its pastoral responsibilities. After a genuine political struggle at all levels of the church, including an ecumenical council, ultramontane advocates of papal monarchy and counter-cultural resistance to modernity defeated liberal Catholics more interested in freedom, dialogue and shared responsibility. The winners then did their best to banish the losers and take total control of Catholic politics and policy.

The second Vatican Council was as much a political event as the first. In his Marianist Award lecture, Judge John Noonan recalls visiting Rome during the Council expecting to find a prayerful assembly of spiritual leaders, and instead he found something resembling the Massachusetts state legislature.7 After World War II, networks of reformers challenged ultramontane domination. At Vatican II, aided by Pope John XXIII, reformers, hardly Professor Taylor's "boosters" of modernity, succeeded, at least temporarily, in shifting the direction of the church to positions long associated with what was then known as liberal Catholicism. In the nineteenth century the ultramontane church made a fundamental option for itself, locating the church as the center and end of human history. It did so for the sake of the church's unity and integrity. On the basis of a hard-headed assessment of the historical situation, Vatican II reformers made a different fundamental option, this time relocating the church as a friend of the human family. They made this option for the sake of the church's mission and ministry to a broken world. It was a choice less for knocking or boosting modernity than accompaniment and reflective solidarity: "The joys and the hopes, the griefs and anxieties, of the men and women of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these too are the joys and the hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ."8
That once-accepted reading of Vatican II is now, of course, contested. But all would agree, I think, that behind Vatican II and its reception, across the globe, was a generation of internal dialogue, networking, and politics among theologians, pastoral leaders and apostolic movements. To take one example: in 1958 the Liturgical Conference held its annual convention in Worcester. Joseph Greemillion, a reform-minded young priest from Louisiana, after talking with Fr. John Egan of Chicago, wrote Bishop John Wright asking whether it might be a good idea to invite a number of priests interested in the role of the laity in the church to stay on after the conference, to exchange ideas and get to know each other. Wright thought it was a good idea, and the list of those attending the three-day retreat reads like a who's who of Vatican II American Catholicism.9 Discover that episode, and all those stories of strategizing in Rome and at home begin to make sense. Like those creative American progressives who labored in the wilderness in the 1920s but were ready with needed proposals when the depression exploded, lots of people were ready when Pope John threw open those windows. They made history.

Years later I had many opportunities to witness the role that such political networking played in influencing church decisions. For example, when the Call to Action Conference, the American church's only national convention, was held in Detroit in 1976, John Cardinal Dearden held an opening day press conference. Al Matt, editor of The Wanderer, a very conservative Catholic newspaper, asked the Cardinal whether this was a truly representative assembly. The day before, he said, he stood near Monsignor Egan watching the 1400 delegates sign in. Egan seemed to know everybody while Matt did not recognize a soul.

The Call to Action Conference was the conservative Catholics' Goldwater campaign. Part of the reason was that the winners at Detroit, like the enthusiastic members of Lyndon Johnson's unwieldy 1964 coalition, soon became disenchanted with politics. Disappointed by the Bishops' nervous reaction to the conference's recommendations and increasingly innocent about power in the church, they turned away from reform organizations and from newly developing structures of shared responsibility to pursue their own ministries. They began a retreat from church politics for which they would pay a high price.

Meanwhile the left-out conservatives learned their own version of the old labor slogan: "Don't mourn — organize." The conservative party then and later was composed of Catholics worried about the pace of change and especially worried that the church was losing its integrity, surrendering too much of itself, as it adapted to the requirements of the modern world. Inspired by sympathetic signals from Rome, conservatives set about changing the direction of the American church. They identified vulnerable points in reform theory and practice, they
aligned themselves with Vatican-oriented bishops, and they intensified harassment of moderate reformers. Their efforts were assisted by the arrival of Pope John Paul II and by the leadership of a small but influential and strategically savvy group of Catholic neo-conservatives, early Vatican II supporters now worried that reform had gone too far. A decade after the Call to Action Conference, several progressive bishops came under Vatican investigation over what seemed minor matters; those investigations had a chilling effect on all but the most self-assured of their fellow bishops. 10

As the mood in Rome shifted, important appointments to leadership positions in the American hierarchy transformed the politics of the American church. Each time Pope John Paul II visited the United States, commentators explored increasing divisions between Rome and American Catholics, and among American Catholics themselves.

By the time Peter Steinfels wrote his book, A People Adrift, polarization seemed to paralyze an American church faced with the crisis arising from sexual abuse of children by priests.11 Steinfels shaped his analysis around the legacy of the late Joseph Cardinal Bernardin: Hoping to position himself at the center, like Bernardin, Steinfels even-handedly criticized reformers whose proposals are “usually along the lines of accommodation to secular worldviews” and conservatives who think that only those groups who define themselves sharply in opposition to the “prevailing culture are destined to flourish.” Steinfels, among the most sophisticated of commentators on American religion, seemed surprisingly detached from Catholic politics. But the Bernardin story does provide an important narrative about conservative victory.

First, Bernardin carried on Cardinal Dearden’s commitment to the national episcopal conference as an important expression of collegiality through which the bishops could develop consistent pastoral policies, engage in dialogue with the Vatican and with sister churches across the globe, and speak with a united and effective voice in national affairs. Unfortunately the Vatican decided that such structures had only a limited use, more and more bishops resisted shared responsibility at the national level, and reforms now have sharply limited the conference’s ability to carry out any of those objectives. 12

Second, when leading bishops seemed to lean toward the Republican candidate, incumbent Gerald Ford, during the 1976 election, Bernardin guided the bishops to the development of quadrennial statements on political responsibility, clarifying the trans-partisan role of the church in public life and laying out the positions they supported on a wide range of policy questions. Unfortunately the bishops’ conference had only limited success in utilizing those statements. In 2004, the
conference's balanced statement, "Faithful Citizenship," was overshadowed by individual bishops exercising their right to act independently. In some dioceses, privately prepared election year guides clearly supporting the Republican Party displaced the bishops' official statements.

Third, as the church and the bishops divided over whether they should present abortion as a single, defining issue, allowing no room for dialogue, or continue to speak on a wide variety of moral questions in public life, Bernardin developed the "consistent ethic of life" and actively supported it through his leadership of the Bishops' Committee on Pro-Life Activities. From the start, a number of prominent bishops persisted in a single-issue approach, and, in 2003, the CDF backed this position. In the wake of the 2004 election some bishops and conservative leaders made it clear that they intended to bring about changes at the bishops conference to reflect this new emphasis on the so-called non-negotiable life issues; a list which includes gay marriage but not war, torture or economic justice.

Fourth and best known was Bernardin's remarkable leadership in developing the pastoral letters of the 1980s on nuclear weapons and the American economy. Through a process of widespread consultation and open dialogue, Bernardin succeeded in helping the bishops present a united voice on the nuclear question. The interest that statement generated led to similar interest in a 1986 pastoral on the economy. That effort at open consultation in and out of the church was impressive and effective, but it would mark the end of an era. Vatican concerns about the teaching role of a national conference helped reign in the public role in national affairs. When the bishops initiated a dialogue aimed at a pastoral letter on women's issues, they could not sustain it in the face of opposition from Rome and within their own ranks. By that time divisions were less over the substance of the issue and more over the very idea of open conversation about questions on which church teaching was deemed to be clear.

Finally, in the face of ever sharper divisions that Bernardin thought were poisoning the church from top to bottom, he launched the Catholic Common Ground Initiative. In an unprecedented move at the top of the U.S. church, several important cardinals immediately disassociated themselves from the project, on the grounds that unity, and integrity, were to be found in the teaching of the church as authenticated by the magisterium. Nothing better expressed the change that had taken place in American church politics than labeling the Catholic Common Ground Initiative as a liberal project. Allies of Bernardin, the quintessential moderate (called by friends "old down the middle Joe"), found themselves regarded as liberals in Rome and even in some sectors of the bishops' conference. As one insider put it, the far right had become the right, the right was now the center, the center
was now the left, and the left was off the charts. It sounded funny at the time but no longer.

So it was that conservatives won the American Catholic culture wars. They did so by selectively employing counter-cultural language to strengthen Catholic identity and apparently affirm Catholic integrity. They were strengthened by the recruitment of intelligent neo-conservatives and the appointment to leadership positions of Vatican-oriented bishops. But their victory also came about because reformers more or less surrendered. The evidence is all around us:

—The near total failure of Catholic academic, pastoral and community leaders to take an active role in responding to the sex abuse crisis, the worst scandal in the history of the American church. Of course everyone denounced sin and lamented mismanagement, but reformers chose to leave solutions to the bishops. Many offered formulaic words of encouragement to the lay group, Voice of the Faithful, but very few joined the group or sent in checks; even fewer formed comparable groups to develop public opinion in the church or contest the ground with the now dominant conservatives. Instead of mature efforts at shared responsibility, they succumbed to the politics of the restored ultramontane hierarchy, exemplified by a cover of the liberal magazine *Commonweal* with a huge ear and the words “Are the Bishops Listening?”

In February, 2004, when the remarkably independent National Review Board submitted its reports, no one was ready to use those reports as a basis to demand reforms. Instead there was almost complete disinterest, which continued as the Board was linked more closely to the bishops and their committee. There are some exceptions to this sad pattern of irresponsibility—one thinks of the efforts of Boston College and its remarkable alumnus and benefactor Goeffrey Boisi, and a few short-lived collaborations between a university and Voice of the Faithful, but their limited impact to date simply provides another measure of the completeness of reform defeat. It seems that the same pattern is continuing through the historic waves of payouts, bankruptcies, court interventions and legislative initiatives aimed at insuring ecclesiastical accountability through the civil arm that has not been provided in the church itself. Great harm can be done to church and society by letting these events take their course.

—Another sign of conservative victory came with the 2004 political campaign. As the bishops prepared their quadrennial statement on political responsibility, a formal Vatican instruction insured that abortion would receive priority attention and politicians would be called to account. Republican strategists, including informed and well-networked Catholic political activists, engaged in an unprecedented pursuit of Catholic votes. Their efforts were backed by well-financed Catholic organizations and a handful of media-savvy bishops. All this reinforced
a long standing effort to build a coalition of conservative Catholics and evangelicals to transform the cultural landscape of American politics. The success of that strategy was remarkable. Even more remarkable was the failure of moderate to liberal Catholics to mount an effective counterattack, or, in the wake of defeat, to engage in any serious assessment of the situation. Fortunately a few younger Catholic lay people did mount campaigns, some to promote Catholics for Kerry, others to vindicate the wider understanding of the consistent ethic of life they had learned about in Catholic schools or in social ministry. Few prominent lay people stepped forward to help them.18

One could add to the list:

—The unopposed transformation of the United States Catholic Conference from collegiality, shared responsibility, public engagement and dialogue with the Holy See to a mutual support organization for individual bishops accountable only to Rome.

—The declining numbers and influence of national organizations of priests, religious men and women, and the almost total failure of deacons and lay ministers to organize to claim a voice in pastoral policy and planning.

—The waning public influence of the Catholic peace movement, the failure of reform-minded Catholics to develop organized support for social ministry, and the abandonment of serious reflection and creative pastoral initiatives with the laity as laity.

—Passive acceptance of a national, year-long celebration of the Eucharist clearly aimed at restoring a sense of the distinctive ministry of the priest. As Francis Cardinal George put it: “The relation between the body of Christ which is the Holy Eucharist and the body of Christ which is His Church passes through the sacrament of Holy Orders. A culture founded on the rejection of the sacrament of Holy Orders can grasp neither the Eucharist nor apostolic governance.”19

To sum up church politics, then, the Vatican, through episcopal appointments, management of the hierarchy and occasional interventions, has moved the American church decisively to the right. Modest efforts at dialogue between the U.S. church and the Holy See were resoundingly turned back, several decisive majority votes by the bishops were simply rejected, and moderate bishops were put on the spot to affirm controversial Vatican pronouncements and even to institute policies designed to exclude dissenters from ministry. These moves were all made in the name of strengthening the American church to be the church in the midst of a supposed “culture of death.” The abortion issue, and related life questions, has strengthened the position of those concerned primarily about the integrity of
the American church. The growing coalition around a new seamless garment of “non-negotiable” issues includes key figures in the Vatican, evangelical Catholics, and pro-life Catholics inclined to conservative positions on domestic and foreign policy questions. For those who love their church, counter-cultural advocacy on the life questions becomes an expression of commitment and evidence of integrity. Catholicism in the United States, then, has set about to recover a sense of its difference and distance from others. Americanization went too far, it seems, and Americanists are hard to find.

Part Two: The Church Must be the Church, Isn’t That Right?

Years ago, as I became involved in various Catholic ministries, I wanted to help my community situate itself historically. To do so, I emphasized the intersection in our recent experience of three factors.

First, the social composition and location of the American Catholic population, that is Americanization and its consequences. To put it most simply, the middle-class, Americanized Catholicism that succeeded “the immigrant church” was increasingly without the supportive subculture long central to the Catholic experience. I was convinced that even if there had been no Vatican Council, there would have been enormous pressures for change in the American church. But, and this is important, Americanization was the process, but Americanism, ideas about America, made it seem like good news.

The second factor was the Second Vatican Council which solved some American Catholic problems, especially by affirming at last American principles of religious liberty and church-state separation, and offering at least a provisional affirmation of religious pluralism. But that long awaited change also opened up new questions about personal faith and moral conscience, evident at first in the renewal of vowed religious life, and it raised questions about the nature and mission; the what and the why of the church itself. Indeed this second factor, the Council, made it extremely difficult for the organization of the church to negotiate the changes arising from the first factor, Catholic arrival into the American mainstream.

One impact of conciliar reform, for example, was to emphasize personal faith decisions; perhaps legitimating American religious individualism and its long dreaded partner, religious “indifferentism.” It turned out that middle-class Catholics would come to look a little like American evangelicals, and that should not have been a surprise. Another problem was that the invitation to clergy, religious and lay people to share responsibility for the life and work of the church—“We are the Church”—evoked a communitarian and congregational vision at odds with long-standing practices regarding authority. The organizational conflict
around conscience and community self-governance is often properly associated with the birth-control controversy. But another dramatic example, still too little appreciated, was the Council’s affirmation of conscientious objection to military service and its unequivocal condemnation of the use of weapons of indiscriminate destructive effect. Coming as they did in 1965, as the Vietnam war became a fully American enterprise, these unfamiliar teachings legitimated questions about Catholic integrity in Vietnam-era America, opening a critical distance between Catholic and American loyalties and responsibilities, not just for the church’s leaders but within every American Catholic’s conscience. This experience had an enormous effect on Catholic self-consciousness in the years that followed. Questions of race in the sixties and abortion in the seventies reinforced that process. Integrity became an issue, for everybody.

The third factor, then, was the explosive events in American society—Americanization, the council and the sixties: our setting for Vatican II’s call to aggiornamento. While bishops and priests, sisters and families were inviting one another to religious renewal, the country seemed to be falling apart. It was this factor that gave the era its tone of crisis. It accounts for use of the word “disintegration” by the always judicious Philip Gleason to describe what was happening to American Catholicism.20 The combination of conciliar calls to conscience and American conflicts over race, war and abortion accelerated the collapse of the American Catholic subculture and with it, and here is the crucial point, the death of Catholic Americanism.21

I stand by my argument that the intersection of these three factors—Americanization, the Council and the sixties—best explains the post-conciliar experience of American Catholics. But the title of tonight’s talk suggests I would now place even greater emphasis on the last factor, the impact of the sixties and its most important legacy, the disappearance, hopefully temporary, of Catholic Americanism. Some have credited or, more recently, blamed the Council for the supposed loss of Catholic identity. Others, a growing number, combine that revisionism with a critique of Americanization, as if the Council was interpreted in ways that lent legitimacy to the desire of Catholics for acceptance and belonging. William Portier agrees that the collapse of the American Catholic subculture, the buffer between Catholics and American individualism and pluralism, is the single most important fact of recent U.S. Catholic history.22 But Portier, disenchanted with America, joins the dominant voices in the contemporary church in rejecting Americanist responses and supports the near consensus that the church of the future must be counter-cultural. The reason for that consensus, I suspect, has less to do with theological differences, as Portier supposes, than with the decline of the Americanist impulse that long shaped American Catholic self-consciousness.23
The retreat from Americanism was first evident in a text which for some of us marked a high point of responsible discipleship, the 1983 pastoral letter on nuclear weapons. In that text, the bishops spoke of two styles of teaching, one evident in their theological section where they spoke of the nonviolent Jesus, the other in the long body of the text where they engaged in a process of moral discernment in dialogue with the Pentagon, concluding with a strictly conditioned moral acceptance of nuclear deterrence. Then, in a shocking move that few noticed, they launched into a moral jeremiad against their country not heard from American bishops since the formalistic denunciations of secularism in the 1920s and 1950s. They described the United States as a country dangerously estranged from Christian values; in early drafts they called American society "neo-pagan." Faithful Christians might well expect persecution and martyrdom comparable to the early church. This was an anti-Americanism knocking of modernity with a vengeance. The passages were drawn almost word for word from an essay by theologian, later Cardinal, Avery Dulles, then moving from the reformist to the neo-conservative camp. 24

The decline of Catholic Americanism and the rise to dominance of sub-cultural and counter-cultural language and strategies has drained the foundations of the reform approach set forth so well in Bryan Hehir's Marianist lecture. 25 Disciples of John Courtney Murray, reformers of the Bernardin generation, utilized a bilingual approach that allowed for faithful Christian discipleship and responsible American citizenship. They knew there were critics of that approach, both Catholic advocates of nonviolence and the option for the poor, and conservatives convinced that the church gave up too much when it failed to insist that private moral commitment required serious public expression. Vulnerable on that point, they found themselves on the defensive as the church's leaders identified key moral issues, especially abortion, as definitive for faithful Catholics. At the same time neo-conservatives rediscovered John Courtney Murray as a churchman and a Catholic first, but more inclined to affirm than criticize American institutions and policies. In their hands natural law could be used selectively to validate counter-cultural assaults on questions of sexuality while restraining the critical voice on economic and military questions.

What reformers rarely recognized was a point made by Jesuit John Coleman: for a pluralist democracy to work, it needs more than a language that respects diversity and seeks a public moral consensus: Its citizens must love it. 26 The common good must be a genuine good. The public square is not naked but a common achievement allowing all to flourish. In the absence of Americanism, the bilingualism required of Christians by pluralist democracy becomes simply wishy-washy, impotent and indecisive in the whiplash between civil religion and separatism.
American optimism has so far masked the hard edge of counter-cultural distancing from Americanism. Up till now the Catholic counter-cultural affirmation has had an American style: denounce the culture but don't miss lunch. But we can expect it to take on a more serious tone as its themes square with the vision expressed so clearly by Pope Benedict XVI. Theologian Joseph Komonchak reminds us that for a moment at Vatican II the church turned away from the ultramontane effort to construct a Catholic "countersociety" against modernity. Yet among the Council fathers there was no agreement about how to develop "a more nuanced, critical attitude and set of strategies" for dealing with modernity. Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, he argues, always wanted the church "to pose a real alternative, a set of meanings and values that could stand at a critical and redemptive distance from contemporary culture." Throughout his career the Holy Father has consistently advocated a counter-cultural Catholic strategy. "In [Cardinal] Ratzinger's writings," Komonchak states, "there are very few positive references to intellectual development outside the church; they almost always appear as antithetical to the specifically Christian." 27 If that is right the new Papacy will undoubtedly reinforce the retreat from Americanism. Cardinal Francis George not surprisingly is among the leaders of those realigning the American church in a stance of opposition to American society. He told Pope John Paul II that "the Church in the United States is in grave danger," threatened externally by anti-Catholicism and efforts to limit its freedom and internally by "Catholics shaped by their culture more than by faith." 28

In this climate, in the absence of Americanist voices, Catholic scholars do not know quite what to do with American Catholic history. Jay Dolan's effort to champion a modest Americanism based on dialogue with American culture received almost no scholarly attention. 29 The best recent work, impressive books by John McGreevy, Paul Elie, Leslie Tentler and Peter D'Agostino, turn decisively away from Americanization models to probe the richness and complexity of semi-autonomous Catholic subcultures. 30 Portier along with a number of younger theologians like Michael Baxter and historians like Christopher Shannon and Eugene McCarragher, repudiate Americanist ideologies in favor of one or another form of counter-cultural separatism. 31

More modest readings of the trajectory of U.S. Catholic history have a passive and pessimistic spirit. There are divisions and problems, but no one is at fault and no one can be expected to do much about them. To reliance on the passive voice is added considerable pessimism about the subjects of the study. Chester Gillis, for example, thinks that "Catholics like their Christianity to fulfill their spiritual needs but not at the cost of severely disrupting their life style." 32 Scott Appleby, still attracted at times to Americanist themes, speaks of younger
Catholics in terms once used only by aggrieved conservatives: “Indoctrinated” by their parents with “the principle of religious choice” they now “lack a vocabulary that would help them form a Catholic identity or interpret their Catholic experiences, and they are situational in their ethical thinking.”33 Determined to remain even-handed and equidistant from left and right, Peter Steinfels provides the best survey of contemporary American Catholicism, but he fails to place recent events in historical perspective and thus does not provide a centrist alternative to the counter-cultural vision.34

Americanization without Americanism necessarily foregrounds issues of identity and integrity, and thus plays into the hands of separatists if not restorationists. Determined to be Catholic more than American, suspicious of partisanship and activism, nervous about neo-conservatives and restorationists, and seemingly convinced that Catholicism is about religion, not social justice or peace, Vatican II reformers are unable to find ground for Catholic solidarity or shared purpose, an alternative basis for Catholic politics, civic or ecclesiastical. This is crucially important, for one must recall the theological and spiritual consequences of past sub-cultural strategies. Historians of popular religion notice how the reformed ultramontane church set out systematically to undercut popular devotions or incorporate them into the life of the institutional, clerically controlled church. God, and grace, could ultimately be contacted best through the church and its sacraments. The political consequences of that detachment from public responsibility are evident in modern European history.

There was another piece of that message: that religion is found in church and in those activities outside of church which it endows with religious significance, most notably sex and family life. Experiences outside the subculture, experiences of work, politics, encounter with non-Catholics and other than Catholic cultural symbols, were without religious significance—they were not sites of encounter with God. Thus Catholicism contributed to the very secularization it condemned. In the United States, apart from the Chicago school of Catholic action, the American church could offer no religious meaning to the historic experiences of mobility and liberation. Its resistance to Americanism set the stage for problems that arose when some believed they encountered God in unexpected places, especially when they went public about it in the 1960s.35

The trap moderates cannot escape is the reduction of immigrant aspirations, and thus American Catholic social history, to adaptation. Philip Gleason long argued that Catholic Americanism was designed to justify “the efforts of American Catholics to accommodate themselves to the modern world.” After World War II, a recovery of Americanism preceded and helped set the stage for what Gleason calls the post-Vatican II “acceptance of modernity.”36 But Americanism was not...
only, or even mainly, about accommodation. At its best it arose from experiences of God’s presence outside the Catholic subculture, and it offered an ethic of responsibility as a counterweight to the isolation and occasional self-righteousness of official Catholicism. If its temptation was an emotional American nationalism; and it was, it was no more simply a rationale for middle class belonging than Catholic counter-cultural talk is simply a rationale for Catholic institutional and clerical self-interest. No, there were some very good reasons; especially in the United States, why Catholic Christians might decide to contend with modernity from the inside, as a public work shared with others.

Finally we must remember that Catholics have been here for a long time, taking an active role in American self-making. James Fisher’s work suggests the multiple ways in which popular Catholicism informed urban American life. Even Dorothy Day, often used as a legitimating figure for counter-cultural Catholicism, was a home-grown American radical as well as before her conversion. She loved the church as Christ made visible here, now, in these scruffy parishioners and these often exasperating priests. She worried about an impoverished Catholic imagination about food, clothing, and shelter while she found nourishment in the most Catholic of traditions and spiritualities. Anyone who tries to enlist her, or Thomas Merton, on their side in the culture wars, does so at their peril.

How we Catholics regard America is a crucial question and it remains the missing page. I did not always have that clear, and along with many of my generation I probably repeated a version of Reinhold Neibuhr’s journey from passionate Americanism to disappointed detachment from America to critical reattachment in the face of totalitarian evil. Religion is “what matters,” Robert Orsi once wrote. America and Catholicism both matter, not just Catholicism. Mary Jo Weaver and Scott Appleby helped map American Catholicism in those two books, Being Right and What’s Left? and Mary Jo quipped that the third volume would be called “Who Cares?” That’s exactly it. About what do we really care? What are we to make of, how are we to judge, our amazing religious diversity, our bewildering popular spiritualities, our restless congregations, our ever multiplying religious movements, sects and independent congregations, now having burst well beyond Christian boundaries? Is all this progress or decline? And when all this spills over into our own church, and seizes our people; when they become “cafeteria Catholics,” or Pentecostals, or new age prophets, or enthusiastic devotees of Pope “John Paul the Great,” when they simply start to make up their own minds, then what are we to think and do? Does responsible Americanism preclude serious religious commitment? Does the quest for common ground, and a common good, for all of us preclude serious religious commitment? And how do we feel, really feel, about this people among whom we live?
One answer to such questions is to trust our people and Divine Providence enough to "hang loose" as I suggested many years ago.41 Another is to acknowledge that the church makes choices, and we are responsible for those choices: there is a Catholic politics. And those Catholic choices make a great American difference. Catholic memories and promises of solidarity can, must, enrich American life if our nation's and our family's promise is to be fulfilled. In one of his last publications, a review of my friend William Shea's book about evangelicals and Catholics, Peter D'Agostino made a comment about contemporary religious politics that echoes what I have wanted to understand since I wrote The Renewal of American Catholicism: "Conservatives/traditionalists among Catholics, Protestants, Jews and secularists have aligned themselves against their liberal/progressive Catholic, Protestant, Jewish and secular counterparts in a struggle for America's soul."42 The question in 2004 as it was in 1972 is in what ways we Catholics will accept our responsibilities in that struggle for America's soul.

Part Three: "This Land Was Made for You and Me" (Or Was It?)

And so, like it or not, this land is our land. The first thing to say about American society and culture is that they are ours. Catholics, as individuals and as a church, have been participants in the making and remaking of American culture from the beginning. Catholics were here, in large numbers, as Americans experienced the New Deal, World War and Cold War, the sexual revolution and Walmart. Those among us who continually use words like "materialistic," "increasingly secularized," even "neo-pagan" to describe American culture should admit that, if such terms are justified, Catholics and their church must share responsibility. The old "bishops blame society!" headline simply will not do. And now we are here in new ways, at the powerless edges and at the powerful centers of American life. In the struggle to define the terms of American identity and to construct the parameters of public morality, some of us have more power, and therefore more responsibility than others. Inequalities of income, status, and power, including inequalities rooted in class, race and sex, have been and are realities in the United States and in the Catholic church of the United States. Insiders and outsider locations thus are part of our assessment of the Americanist question. Discussion of Catholicism and American culture, therefore, must begin with an admission that there are genuine conflicts and that the outcome of the argument matters, for everybody.

The Americanism of my generation had its roots in the aspirations of many American Catholics themselves. At times people who write about American Catholicism seem to suggest that the changes just happened, or came from outside pressures to conform, or lamentable desires to be accepted. That is wrong on many scores, including religious. Of course we must be ourselves, and Catholic renewal is essential. But for those of us free to choose how to allocate our time,
treasure and talent, the fulfillment of the promise of American Catholic life requires answers to the question “liberation for what”? That means greater attention not only to America and Americans, but to the American part of our church and the American part of ourselves. That is why we need a renewal of Catholic Americanism.

A renewed Americanism might be composed of five elements:

1) a positive reading of U.S. Catholic history anchored in family stories of liberation;

2) a preferential but not exclusive option for the laity; that is, a pastoral theology that enables lay persons to read their lay experience through the eyes of faith and bring to their faith the wisdom gained through lay experience—this would anchor Catholic social and intellectual ministry within the framework of pastoral ministry;

3) a democratic, even populist, ethic of shared responsibility for American society and culture, an ethic informing work and education and lifestyle as well as politics;

4) a new commitment to shared responsibility for and full participation in the life and ministry of the church at all levels; and

5) a long-range vision of a single human family grounded in the changing life of the universal church, the vision of Pope John XXIII and “The Pastoral Constitution on the Church and the Modern World.”

With all this said, I have certainly not fully clarified this Americanist idea. Certainly it is not just a simple celebration of Americanization. I often think that people like Dorothy Day and Daniel and Philip Berrigan, after a lifetime of attacks on national policies and symbols, were more American than their critics. The critics, at almost every fork in the road, choose to accept prevailing definitions of the possible. The radicals, loving America too much perhaps, really believed that their country’s problems were their problems, its sins and graces their own. In any event I have always had reservations about any analysis that ends up encouraging Catholic difference, though I fully understand and do my best to assist with Catholic formation. I guess I would frame the argument, if I could, as one between those who care first for the integrity of the church, and want to emphasize what makes Catholics different, and those who, as Catholics, care passionately about America and its romantic promise, care most about its people, Catholics among them, and with and through them for the people of the world. The question, then, is how we as a Catholic people regard the American people,
and the American side of ourselves. That in the end is the sticking point of everyone’s pluralism, always was, always will be.

I once had the privilege of keynoting a convention of the Catholic Theological Society of America. Asked to speak on the American context of theological reflection, I began and ended my talk with lines from a great American evangelist, Woodie Guthrie. The talk was very Americanist and politely but certainly not enthusiastically received. As I prepared tonight’s talk I was in a far more sober mood than I was twenty years ago, but as I read that talk over I thought this isn’t bad. Our love for our country, like our love for the church, begins with an act of faith that is also an embrace of a real community of people.

This land is your land,
This land is my land.
From California to the New York islands,
From the redwood forests to the Gulf Stream waters,
This land was made for you and me

And it ends, like Gospel faith, with a question; a question in our hearts these last few weeks, a question inevitably linked to faith, both faith and question grounded in solidarity.

In the squares of the city – In the shadow of the steeple
Near the relief office – I see my people
And some are grumbling’ and some are wonderin’
If this land’s still made for you and me.

This is our land, indeed, and these are our people. As a result of our remarkable history, we as people and our church as a community and an institution, can and will choose whether to embrace our American vocation or reconstruct a subculture defined by its distance and difference from the rest of our America. The future is in our hands.
Endnotes


4 See my From the Heart of the American Church: Catholic Higher Education and American Culture (Maryknoll, 1998).


9 Documents in the Papers of Bishop John Wright, Archives, Diocese of Worcester.

10 Kenneth A. Briggs, Holy Siege: The Year that Shook the Catholic Church (San Francisco, 1992).


12 Since this paper was delivered the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has initiated a major reorganization of the conference secretariat, with an almost 40% reduction of budget and personnel.


14 Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Doctrinal Note on Some Questions Regarding the Participation of Catholics in Political Life in Readings on Catholics in Political Life, pp. 95-110.

15 Personal communication from a sympathetic bishop.


17 For Geoffrey Boisi's National Leadership Roundtable on Church Management see National Catholic Reporter, August 12, 2005. Credit for this highly professional but so far unappreciated
initiative must also go to Francis Butler of Foundations and Donors Interested in Catholic Activities. See the group’s excellent web site www.nlrcm.org.

18 I wish to be careful here. Of course political consultants and Republican Party officials approached Catholic issues politically, and many conservative Catholic political figures are sincerely committed to a vitally conservative understanding of the faith. The point here is that there were few confident responses to assaults which blended politics and conservative Catholicism. For example, in a notorious speech in which then Senator Rick Santorum insulted Bostonians, blaming “secular liberalism” in the city for the sex abuse crisis, he went on to praise the “new hierarchy” for confronting “infidelity within the church” and taking on “an array of isms—moral relativism, cultural liberalism—inside and outside the church.” With the help of an aroused laity in such groups as Opus Dei and Regnum Christi they were turning away from “uninspired, watered down versions of our faith by those with deficient seminary training” and to “reclaim our nominally Catholic colleges, schools, hospitals, and social welfare agencies—all the while evangelizing and serving the poor. See Catholicism Online, June 30, 2005, with a reprint of a 2003 talk.

19 Zenit Online June 1, 2004. Subsequent modifications of rules governing Eucharistic rubrics and the role of ministers of communion make clear the intention of restoring distance between clergy and laity.


21 I am making an argument about the public life of the U.S. Catholic Church, but the Americanism question is of course far wider than that. Conservative resurgence dominated post-1960s America, not just in politics but in many areas of American life. A full assessment of the death and needed recovery of Catholic Americanism would have to pay close attention to that wider context. See Michael Kazin and Joseph McCartin, editors, Americanism: New Perspectives on the History of an Idea (Chapel Hill, 2006).

22 Especially “Here Come the Evangelical Catholics,” Communio, XXXI (Spring 2004), 35-66.

23 William Portier’s “Here Come the Evangelical Catholics” shares a great deal of my analysis of the importance of the breakdown of the Catholic subculture and the impact of American voluntarism. He recognizes that the heart of the matter is “the story of Catholics learning how to be truly Catholic (the integrity question) in American pluralism without a subculture.” The peril for Catholicism is the possible loss of a sense that “salvation in Christ is ecclesial” and the church is “one and universal.” Portier then speaks of “the end of Americanism” because natural law, which he regards as an essential instrument of Americanism, no longer serves the interests of Catholic insiders but actually threatens their status. He thinks the American church needs an infusion of theological energy. What’s missing in Portier’s analysis are the pressing demands of common life, national and global. In the absence of Americanism or its equivalent, the only choices will involve some combination of religious privatization and/or sectarianism.


28 Zenit Online, June 1, 2004.


31 See, for example, Christopher Shannon, *A World Made Safe For Difference* (New York, 2000) and Eugene McCarraher, *Christian Critics: The Impasse of Modern American Social Thought* (Ithaca, 2000). It should be added that moves toward an historiography which emphasizes Catholic difference and deemphasizes American themes reflects wider currents in American culture and American historiography. The public interest staggers under identity politics and the American narrative fragments around identity history. Peter Novick describes the process as “every group its own historian” in *That Noble Dream: The Objectivity Question* and the *American Historical Profession* (Cambridge, 1988), chapter 14.


33. This is taken from Appleby’s 2001 Catholic Daughters of America Lecture at Catholic University of America: “In Pursuit of Coherence: Catholic Formation, 1950-2000” (in my possession).


35 The argument here would require revisiting the 1899 condemnation of Americanism and its pastoral consequences. See the last chapter and epilogue of my *Isaac Hecker: An American Catholic* (New York, 1988).


38 Many years ago in a talk at Holy Cross the late William Hutchison argued that Neibuhr brought to American theology a skepticism about history, politics and human nature, and a
renewed emphasis on historic Christian doctrines of sin and grace, themes associated with neo-orthodoxy in Europe, but he had done so without retreat from the message of social and political responsibility associated with the American social gospel. Hutchison thought Neibuhr provided not a repudiation but a “course correction” for Protestant liberalism. At about the same time James Smylie spoke of Neibuhr’s initial Americanism, his post World War I disenchantment with America as the result of the war and race riots and mass production in Henry Ford’s Detroit. But, when the fight against fascism took center stage, Neibuhr recovered a chastened, mature, and responsible Americanism that guided his constructive theology in his later years. Perhaps in similar fashion we American Catholics loved our America too much in the Cold War years, stood too far back from it in our post-sixties disenchantment, and badly need to recover not just a sense of responsibility but a love for America comparable to that of Neibuhr and one of his critical disciples, Martin Luther King.


40 Scott Appleby and Mary Jo Weaver, editors, *Being Right: Conservative Catholics in America* (Bloomington, 1995) and Mary Jo Weaver, editor, *What’s Left: Liberal American Catholics* (Bloomington, 1999).


44 http://www.arlo.net/resources/lyrics/this-land.shtml.
Each year the University of Dayton presents the Marianist Award to a Roman Catholic distinguished for achievement in scholarship and the intellectual life.

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