



A Fitting Home for Catholics

Catholicism and the American Context

The Catholic Church is the Mystical Body of Christ, sent by her Lord to preach the Gospel to the entire world. But despite this universal mission, the Church faces very different situations in different countries and continents, for Catholic life has never been led in a vacuum. Even in her earliest days the fact that the Church emerged from a Jewish milieu meant the presence of certain cultural factors that accompanied the preaching of the Gospel. Similarly today in every country the Church is in the midst of a historical situation, favorable or not, which impacts upon her work. The Church very much exists in the world, and she cannot preach the Gospel without taking account of these varying historical circumstances in which she is placed. The task for Catholics will differ, for example, depending on whether the Church is hoping to recover a cultural role she once possessed or, as in this country, to find a way both to exist and to evangelize within a culture that has always been to one degree or another alien. Therefore my remarks apply pretty much exclusively to Catholic life in the United States. How that life will unfold in the coming years and decades of course no one knows, but based on a diagnosis of the present, one may offer, if not a prediction, then at least a hope or a wish of what the future might be.

Catholic life in the United States was shaped by the mass immigration that began in the middle of the 19th century, at first from Ireland and Germany, later from Italy, Poland and other eastern European nations. Because of this rapid influx of new members, the Church, as part of her pastoral care, was forced to focus on the question of the immigrants' adaptation to American life, a life that especially for rural immigrants must have been very different from their life in Europe. In the late 19th century this question of assimilation or Americanization was a major issue in the Church, and both clerical and lay Catholics debated, sometimes fiercely, the role that foreign-language parishes, or even dioceses, should play in the life of the Church in this country. But after the end of mass immigration in the 1920s these debates gradually died down. Today the question of Catholic assimilation into American life no longer seems like much of a live issue, but in fact it forms the background for the present situation of American Catholics. Beginning at least two generations ago Catholics began to feel fully at home in the United States, and there were fewer and fewer voices who questioned whether we really belonged here or could be true Americans. But this seemingly happy rapprochement came about only because Catholics increasingly lost whatever unique cultural identity we once had and conformed to the American cultural tradition rooted in Protestantism and 18th-century deism. The degree to which American culture was alien to Catholic ways of thinking and living was rarely faced in the triumphal march of American Catholics toward full acceptance by their fellow countrymen. Those who had originally raised uncomfortable questions, mostly German-American Catholics, were ignored and marginalized and ultimately forgotten by Catholics bent upon full acceptance as true Americans, regardless of the cost.

In the present historical situation of the United States almost all people, not excluding Catholics, identify, with varying degrees of awareness, with one or the other of our two large cultural-political blocs. That is, with either liberals or conservatives, the left or the right. I say *cultural-political*, not simply *political*, since the divide between these blocs extends far beyond politics, and includes even matters such as choice of food or dress or type of car driven. Unfortunately, neither of these blocs offers a fitting home for a Catholic. Both are fundamentally secular, indeed, part of the centuries-old revolt against Catholic faith

and morals that began in earnest with the rise of Protestantism in the 16th century. The fundamental issue that American Catholics face today is to disengage themselves from their identification as either conservatives or liberals, and try to forge a cultural identity based on Catholic faith and tradition.

Calvinism, Conservatism, and Catholic Social Thought

The tone of the American Church is being increasingly set by conservative Catholics. They rightly criticize those Catholics who support abortion or legalization of same-sex unions, and point out that such positions are in conflict with the Church's teaching. But most of these critics do not perceive that exactly the same kind of criticism can be made of conservative Catholics, who frequently dissent in significant ways from the Church's social doctrine or her teaching on war and peace. Moreover, most conservative Catholics seem to think that if only there were laws against certain of the most egregious evils, such as abortion, all would be well in society. Their vision of the Faith appears to be mostly a negative one; certain evils should be prohibited, but otherwise nothing much need be done at the level of society. The notion that the Catholic faith is meant to entirely transform a social order, to create a culture that values beauty and community above moneymaking and individualism, is foreign to them. In fact, both liberals and conservatives are more united than they realize, in that both in different ways accept the Lockean idea that society exists to further the pursuit of purely individual and this-worldly goals, and that the political community has no place in cultivating virtue and pointing us toward eternal life. Individualism has so colored our thinking that it is hard even to understand the role that the community should play in our lives, that we are all involved with each other and responsible for each other, and that we must consider our own welfare as necessarily linked with the welfare of the community. Indeed, Cardinal George of Chicago stated this at the Synod of Bishops for the Americas in November of 1997 when he said that U.S. citizens "are culturally Calvinist, even those who profess the Catholic faith," that American society "is the civil counterpart of a faith based on private interpretation of Scripture and private experience of God," and he contrasted this understanding of society

with one based on the Catholic Church's teaching of community and a vision of life greater than the individual.

If this is correct, the task for Catholics in the United States is to cultivate a sense of Catholic identity, an identity that goes beyond mere adherence to Catholic teaching on faith and morals—essential as that is—and recognizes that Catholic principles must permeate and change our entire social order. In fact, our task is to create, or perhaps in some degree to recreate, a Catholic culture or subculture. If this were seriously attempted, it would probably prove deeply troubling to most American Catholics, in that some of our most cherished cultural notions would have to be abandoned. The pursuit of individual happiness as the *summum bonum* of life, the measure of all things by their money value, excessive emphasis on rights—all these are matters that will be looked at in a different light by a Catholic culture.

Culture or Compromise?

Too often appeals to revitalize Catholic life in America—most recently George Weigel's "Evangelical Catholicism"—for all its talk about proclaiming "Jesus Christ as the answer to the question that is every human life"—are in reality attempts to shore up the American polity, a polity based on 18th-century deism and which deliberately and explicitly excludes serious consideration of religious truth from public life. Weigel is fundamentally interested in what he thinks is "the true character of America and the nature of freedom," and he welcomes "those allies in the Evangelical Protestant, Mormon and traditional Jewish worlds who ... still hold to [John Courtney] Murray's four foundational truths of American democracy." Weigel states that the challenge is "to give America a new birth of freedom," and it's a bit hard to see what such a political project, or such curious religious allies, has to do with a proclamation of the Catholic faith.

In the late 19th century, in order to escape Protestant charges that we could not be good Americans, Catholics foisted upon themselves a notion of patriotism that pretty much involved an uncritical acceptance of the American project. There were only a few voices that objected, for most Catholics did not see that we could never approve of anything that called itself the *novus ordo seclorum*, as the Great Seal of the United

States puts it, for that phrase rightly applies only to the Church of God, not to any mere political order. We must be patriotic, certainly, but patriotic on our terms and in a Catholic sense. The best thing we could do for our country would be to offer it the authentic Gospel of Jesus Christ, along with an intellectual and cultural tradition of more substance and depth than that inherited from the Enlightenment.

Will something of this sort occur? Will a significant number of Catholics realize that both of the blocs into which American culture is divided are betrayals of Catholic faith and tradition? That obviously is difficult to say and probably futile to speculate. All one can do is again and again to remind Catholics of our duty and responsibility not only to adhere to the teaching of the Church on faith and morals, but to look to Catholic tradition as the fundamental locus of our thinking. This must not be understood as a call to cleave to a past understood merely as a set of rigid conventions or familiar practices. Rather it is an invitation to explore the rich world of Catholic tradition, to appropriate it and to offer what is true and good in it to ourselves and to our contemporaries. It is a past that embodies two millennia of reflection upon the saving truths of Christ's death and resurrection and their application to the human condition. Above all it is a catholic past, in as much as the Faith was given to all mankind and offers not only sacramental gifts of grace but whatever will make life more authentically human. To explore and appropriate this should be an exciting project for any Catholic, to transcend the dreary and ugly culture of materialism and contemplate a new vision both for the social order and for our individual lives. For in fact the question confronting Catholics is not over whether to adopt one set of opinions or another. It is over which culture we will dwell in, after what pattern we will order our thinking, and, as much as possible, our entire lives. Most American Catholics have unwittingly stumbled into one or another culture of secularism, of individualism, of a purely this-worldly concern. If we wish, we can alter that, but only if we are convinced that this is part of our vocation as Catholics. We all necessarily live within some culture. As Catholics, we cannot rightly do less than seek to dwell in a Catholic culture, our only fitting home on this earth.



Thomas Storck has written widely on questions of Catholic culture and social doctrine. His last book was *Christendom and the West: Essays on Culture, Society and History*, available from the American Chesterton Society.