

THE HISTORICAL ROOTS OF OUR PRESENT PREDICAMENT

The subtitle to this pretentious heading should be "Notes on the Margin of *The Renewal of American Catholicism* by David J. O'Brien."¹ He provides my *leitmotiv* in his concluding chapters about political action and Catholics. In his opinion, which I share, the future of Christianity and *a fortiori* of American Catholicism "as a viable moral and religious force in modern society" may well depend on our coming to grips with the problems of the interaction between a corporate faith and action in the public realm, the realm, that is, of politics and power.

A striking component of the current crisis in American Catholicism is the awkwardness and embarrassment that is so evident whenever the question of the Church's bearing on the public domain raises its head. Whether it is a matter of helping to form the nation's educational policies while preserving the parochial school system or of shaping abortion legislation, the Catholic response is not often of any higher order than the recent, intensely disillusioning failure on our part to stand up for human values trodden underfoot by American officials throughout the Vietnam War. While other factors are also at work, this failure of American Catholicism to confront a pressing political-moral issue of overriding significance has contributed to the sense that the Church has nothing to offer any more which could be of interest to idealistic or simply upright souls with a sense of public responsibility. On the other hand, more traditional Catholics find it hard to understand even the few signs of Catholic criticism of America's role in relation to the non-white world. Perhaps the relationship of faith and politics is the very nodal point where the different strands of the current crisis come together.

If we look into the recent practice of Catholics in American life, as O'Brien enables us to do, it becomes evident why we should experience the feeling of being cast adrift without anchor when faced with the

¹(New York: Oxford University Press, 1972).

problem of political action and responsibility as members of the Church. We are unable to accept either of the two models which offer themselves in the precedents. The model of the minority mobilized to fight for its rights no longer seems to fit the case. It could only be justified in the present situation of American Catholicism by the arguments of European-style clerical integralism, which has normally been repugnant to the American Catholic and has now been repudiated by an ecumenical council (in Vatican II's *Declaration on Religious Freedom*). The other prominent model which we can draw from recent history is that of optimistic, pragmatic participation in the democratic process. The name of Kennedy symbolizes the success of this model in the United States. If I maintain that this democratic model is now deficient, it is principally because of two reasons. First, this tradition has proved incapable of warding off "the arrogance of power," since it underwrites the use of American power to the detriment of Third World countries and the use of technological power to the detriment of human values. Second, the relationship of faith to politics seems all too distant and vague, effectively surrendering the field of actual decision to determination by considerations having nothing to do with Christian faith. A famous instance was the speech John Kennedy made to the gathering of ministers in Houston during the campaign of 1960 (O'Brien, p. 166).

It seems we must delve deeper to lay bare an explanation of how the resources of faith should bear on whatever public action we engage in as church people or at least as Christian believers. Instead I have the much more modest intention of drawing up some historical reflections preliminary to such an enterprise. The horizon of responsibility for one's neighbor in the light of "political theology"² seems to make one or two factors in the development of American Catholicism stand out in a new way as possible sources of present dysfunction. It is my hope that these notes will be seen to dovetail with the contributions of Sanks, Donohue, Cabello-Springer, Williams and others in the present

²See J. B. Metz, "Political Theology," *Sacramentum Mundi*, 5:34-38. Further pertinent literature is found in *Concilium* 1 (1965), 36 (1968), 47 (1969), 67 (1971), 73 (1972), 84 (1973), and in Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1973).

volume.

I wish to advance the hypothesis that the increasingly basic role of papal guidance in American Catholic life and thought in the recent past (up to the Second Vatican Council) was a contributing factor in inhibiting the proper development of political responsibility within American Catholicism. I suggest that more profound study of the former is likely to cast light on the latter. A presupposition of this, simply stated, is that clerical integralism is likely to go hand in hand with political immaturity of the Christian community under its influence. I hasten to add that I mean political immaturity as judged not only from the viewpoint of politics but also from that of faith, where the two are seen as necessarily related to each other.

It would be a mistake to understand this hypothesis as aiming toward an explanation through one cause only. Before developing it, therefore, I must note some other relevant factors which form the context for the precise development on which I concentrate.

I.

Since American Catholicism has had a distinctive development and yet has been powerfully influenced by the transnational components of Catholic life, as befits a cosmopolitan Church, one must keep an eye on both the American and the European contexts. For the most recent period in a predominantly American context, I find David O'Brien's interpretation on the whole very convincing. He passes before the reader's eyes in sufficient detail the major factors which have converged to produce a crisis of tremendous radicality. For one thing, the 1960's brought the Vatican Council, which for many thinking Catholics has changed the vision of the Church in which they live. In particular those who were already uneasy with the disjunction between secular and religious living have found their attention being directed away from ecclesiocentric concerns to the larger goals of mankind's common good. Here O'Brien cites with approval Richard P. McBrien's work, *Do We Need the Church?* Meanwhile, the goal for which immigrant American Catholics had been striving for generations was achieved: full admission into American society.³ Finally, in the same decade, American society,

³See Philip Gleason, "The Crisis of Americanization," in *Contemporary*

that wonder of human genius and good will, showed its feet of clay, its belly of corruption, its racism and militarism. The American Catholic crisis opened up into two vaster crises, those of the Catholic Church and of the American nation. And this at the term of an evolution which had seemed to promise all good things!

As for the political domain, the radical tradition, represented by only a few in American Catholicism (e.g., Dorothy Day and Paul Hanley Furfey), seems nevertheless to provide the most appropriate kind of connection between faith and politics that has been realized in our past. Catholicism of *Catholic Worker* inspiration, however, desperately needs to recognize the necessity for well-founded analyses of the political-social-economic realities.⁴ As we have seen, O'Brien arrives at an emphasis on Catholicism's task in the world which is not unlike Metz's reading of current needs under the broad heading of "political theology." The failings of American Catholicism along with its bright spots and its present opportunity in regard to great issues of public life, as diagnosed by Edward Duff in an important article, would seem to lend further weight to the opinion that something is wrong, though not hopelessly so, in the way American Catholicism confronts its responsibility to the social welfare and secular destinies of mankind.⁵

In dealing with the non-American background, it is well at least to

Catholicism in the United States, ed. by Philip Gleason (Notre Dame: University Press, 1969), pp. 3-31, reprinted with deletions and without footnotes in Philip Gleason, ed., *Catholicism in America* (New York, 1970).

⁴O'Brien, *Renewal*, pp. 208 and 224. Compare the insistence upon reasoned mediations between faith and politics in François Biot, *Théologie du politique* (Paris, 1972), Part Three.

⁵Edward Duff, S.J., "The Church and American Public Life," in *Contemporary Catholicism in the United States*, pp. 97-125. Cf. James Finn, "American Catholics and Social Movements," in *Contemporary Catholicism in the United States*, p. 143: "One national Catholic organization [during the Vietnam War] sent out a large mailing of an appeal that was entitled 'Politics or Peace?' suggesting, apparently, that peace was obtainable only if we gave up political activities. The inadequate and disappointing contribution which Catholics have made to the national political debate during a time of crisis is a fair indication of the thought and attention they had devoted to international affairs before that crisis. Like much of the rest of the country they were unprepared to consider the significant issues in a developed and principled manner."

distinguish between the medieval and modern developments. One can speak of Christendom for the former and of Europe for the latter.⁶ After all, the crisis in which the Church finds itself at present encompasses pretty much the whole world, at least all those parts of the world dominated by Western culture. The American part in this crisis must therefore be seen as affected by and affecting the whole international situation of the churches. As Heribert Mühlen has argued, Western Christians, especially Catholics, are everywhere experiencing the collapse of a world-construct. The historical correlative of this Catholic world that is passing away is still patristic and medieval Christendom.⁷ With Mühlen, I hold that Christendom was a uniquely successful and durable synthesis of religious experience and its expression, but also that the cultural base has become another since the middle ages, and that the depth of the present church crisis is due in major part to our tardy recognition of that fact and to our need to adapt to change of epochal proportions all at once. What Father Lonergan has said about the crisis of culture that is going on within Catholicism I take as another way of expressing this *epochal* dimension of the present transition.⁸ Those who think that the Church is only going through a "phase" at the present juncture are not likely to find much of merit in the following considerations.

Of modern European developments that bear on the present position of Catholicism in America the disunity of Christian churches has obvious significance. Catholics in America became a part of a nation which was self-consciously Protestant even after its Protestantism had been reduced to a "symbolic gloss," a private affair trotted out for ceremonial purposes on certain occasions sacred to the civil religion.⁹

⁶The English Catholic tradition which the Carroll and Spalding families embodied might well be considered as part of the distinctive American background for purposes of this schematization, cf. David J. O'Brien, "The American Priest and Social Action," in *The Catholic Priest in the United States: Historical Investigations*, ed. by John Tracy Ellis (Collegeville: St. John's University Press, 1971), p. 430.

⁷Heribert Mühlen, *Entsakralisierung* (Paderborn, 1971).

⁸Bernard Lonergan, S.J., "Belief: Today's Issue," *Canadian Messenger* (June, 1968), pp. 8-12. Cf. also Bernard F. Donohue, "Political Ecclesiology," *Theological Studies* 33 (1972), 302.

The background and circumstances of immigrants understandably contributed to a certain benevolent clericalism on the parish level. Relative to the European context from which the vast majority of Catholics had but recently come, Emmet Larkin has recently underlined the different sort of Irish who arrived towards the end of the nineteenth century, better mannered and more pious than the first wave had been.¹⁰ With this pointer, we can again return to the particular hypothesis about the role of devotion to the pope with which I started; for the new breed of Irish immigrant was the product of an ultramontane devotional revolution spearheaded by the redoubtable Paul Cardinal Cullen.

II.

Ultramontanism is a historical designation perhaps too frail to stand for the tremendous development of *Romanità* that the modern Roman Catholic Church has experienced. Dupront reminds us of its centuries-old forbears and of the stiff resistance it had to overcome or outlive in order to become what it was by the time of World War I.¹¹ The gradual consolidation of ultramontanism which characterized the European Church from 1800 to 1959 (and, I hypothesize, the American Catholic Church as well) introduced into church life little that was in itself new. What was different and unprecedented about it were matters of *Sitz im Leben*: its new front against the revolution and liberal thought paired with its alliance with the restoration, maintained in spirit long after the restoration was history; the unparalleled hegemony it achieved in Catholicism, evident from the reception given to the decrees of the First Vatican Council; and the selectivity it was thus able to exercise with regard to tradition. Indeed, the momentum of ultra-

⁹Martin E. Marty, *The Modern Schism* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), p. 137; Robert Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," in *Religion in America*, ed. by William G. McLoughlin and Robert N. Bellah (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968).

¹⁰Emmet Larkin, "The Devotional Revolution in Ireland, 1850-1875," *American Historical Review* 77 (June, 1972), 625-52.

¹¹A. Dupront, "De l'Eglise aux temps modernes," *Revue d'histoire ecclésiastique* 66 (1971), 441-48. This article was originally commissioned for *Concilium* 67 (1971), which it rounds out.

montane devotion which had built up within the Church soon almost nullified the caution and moderation which a firm minority had been able to impress upon the Council's documents with the aid of *un tiers-parti*.¹² Did this whole movement pass by the American Catholic Church without a trace? That would fly in the face of living memory. Did it, on the other hand, vitally affect American Catholics, particularly as to their sense of responsibility for political values? That is by no means clear, though I suggest that it did.

In European Catholicism we see repeatedly how a lack of appreciation for the values of democratic process was a troublesome flaw in the best-intentioned social and political programs of Catholics.¹³ Do the heartfelt expressions of democratic spirit by a line of American churchmen perhaps mask an analogous flaw among us? If so, no more highly revered source for the blockage could be found than the political traditions and mentality of ultramontanism.¹⁴ All protagonists in the Americanist controversies sincerely proclaimed their loyalty to the Holy Father and his ideas, but that should not blind us to the inner incompatibility that exists between the goal of a mature laity who take responsibility for the world and the hierarchical denial of competence in such matters to all except the upper echelons of the ecclesiastical institution.¹⁵

¹²Victor Conzemius, "Why Was the Primacy of the Pope Defined in 1870?" *Concilium* 64 (1971), 75-83; Roger Aubert, "Documents concernant le Tiers-Parti au Concile du Vatican," in *Abhandlungen über Theologie und Kirche*, Festschrift Karl Adam (Düsseldorf, 1951), pp. 241-59; Yves Congar, *L'Eglise de saint Augustin à l'époque moderne* (Paris, 1970), pp. 445, 455-58.

¹³Sandor Agócs, "Christian Democracy and Social Modernism in Italy during the Papacy of Pius X," *Church History* 42 (1973), 73-88; Emile Poulat, *Intégrisme et Catholicisme intégral* (Tournai, 1969); Waldemar Besson's review of *Ultramontanismus und Demokratie* by Karl Buchheim in the *Historische Zeitschrift* 203 (1966), 135-39.

¹⁴For illustrations see Thomas T. McAvoy, *The Great Crisis in American Catholic History, 1895-1900* (Chicago: Regnery, 1957), and Robert D. Cross, *The Emergence of Liberal Catholicism in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958). To get a feeling of the political mentality congenial to ultramontaniam, consult Bela Menczer, ed., *Catholic Political Thought 1789-1848* (Notre Dame: University Press, 1962).

¹⁵Theodore M. Steeman, "The Priest as a Socio-Religious Leader," in *Clergy*

Recently I have come across Catholic authors who sharpen the dilemma of pre-Vatican-II Catholicism by speaking of "papal absolutism."¹⁶ Needless to say, they use the concept in its accepted sense in political theory as a fairly well-defined way of viewing the relations that should obtain between society and Christianity.¹⁷ It is not meant as a term of reproach. Karl Otmar von Aretin goes so far as to utilize the theme of papal absolutism to structure his survey of papal history from Leo XIII to Pius XII. (Naturally papal absolutism has a long history of its own; what occasions surprise is its thriving at so late a date.) Aretin notes for instance that despite the attention Leo XIII devoted to modern social and political questions, he "had nothing to say in his doctrine on the state concerning the political responsibility of Catholics. This defect qualified the effects of an otherwise remarkable pontificate."¹⁸

Other clues to this political mentality can be cited in abundance by any student of the European Church of this time. Let me cite only three representative works. Roger Aubert, for instance, acknowledges that papal absolutism was the substance of the Neo-ultramontanism of William George Ward, the editor of the *Dublin Review*. Lest he be thought to be an unrepresentative eccentric only, Aubert puts the Jesuit theologian, Clemens Schrader, and the erudite lay canonist, Georg Phillips, under the same rubric.¹⁹ For the period after Vatican I, which after all refrained from canonizing papal absolutism in church government, Yves Congar finds the thesis in at least one widely-used textbook on ecclesiology.²⁰ Finally, E. E. Y. Hales draws attention to the fact

in *Church and Society* (Actes de la IX Conférence Internationale de Sociologie Religieuse, Rome, 1967), pp. 182-85.

¹⁶Alphonse Dupront, cited above, and Karl Otmar von Aretin, *The Papacy and the Modern World* (New York, 1970).

¹⁷See index s.v. in George H. Sabine, *A History of Political Theory* (New York: Holt, 1961).

¹⁸Aretin, *The Papacy*, p. 179.

¹⁹Roger Aubert, "La géographie ecclésiologique au XIX^e siècle," in *L'Ecclésiologie au XIX^e siècle* by Maurice Nédoncelle and others (Paris, 1960), pp. 30 and 41.

²⁰Yves Congar, *L'Eglise de saint Augustin à l'époque moderne*, p. 457, note:

that as late as 1954, shortly after the death of de Gasperi and at the time when Roman officials were suggesting that John Courtney Murray cease writing, Pius XII forcefully renewed the medieval tradition of the Roman See about the authority of the pope over human society at large. Brushing aside the claims to autonomy for the laity in the political domain which was the foundation of Sturzo's and de Gasperi's political program in Italy, Pius XII asserted not merely the Church's (read: the pope's) right to pronounce on the great moral issues of the day, or to interpret natural law, but also and emphatically "the ecclesiastical right to Lordship over the political sphere generally."²¹

III.

Just what effect such thinking had in the United States has not, to my knowledge, been investigated except peripherally.²² James Hennesey has shown the significance of the vigorous conciliar tradition that characterized the American Catholic Church in its first century from the time of Bishop Carroll; he has also noted its nearly complete extinction in the present century.²³ Was this one sign of a more comprehensive Romanization of American Catholicism? Is the fact that increasing Roman centralization coincided with the time of the greatest

Filograssi's 1931 edition of an earlier work by Palmieri "tient une thèse de pure monarchie papale."

²¹E. E. Y. Hales, *Pope John and His Revolution* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1965), p. 179. Naturally this is not the whole thought of Pius XII on church and society, but it is a disconcerting element which belongs to the whole, cf. A. Latreille, "La pensée catholique sur l'Etat depuis les dernières années du XIX^e siècle," in *L'Ecclésiologie au XIX^e siècle*, p. 290.

²²For instance, as it impinges upon the Americanist controversies, cf. above, note 14. The papalist factor in intellectual repression has been more clearly seen, cf. the studies by John Tracy Ellis and Michael V. Gannon in *The Catholic Priest in the United States: Historical Investigations*.

²³James Hennesey, S.J., "Papacy and Episcopacy in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century American Catholic Thought," *Records of the American Catholic Historical Society* 77 (1966), 175-89, reprinted without footnotes in *Catholicism in America*, pp. 28-44. Hennesey shows an uncommon sensitivity to the interplay of the "indigenous" and the "derivative" elements at work in the development of American Catholicism, cf. his "American History and the Theological Enterprise," *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 26 (1971), 91-115.

growth for American Catholicism significant? Up to now this complex of questions has been left too much to journalists and popularizers, who themselves are unable to base their work on much more than personal reminiscence and hunches.²⁴ The present remarks are equally hypothetical, though designed to move research forward along the line of comparative study with Catholic integralism in Europe.²⁵

I submit therefore as a proposition for consideration that the study of the reception in the American Catholic community of extreme ultramontane doctrine would be a key to understanding our present disarray as well as the opportunity that is before us.

PAUL MISNER
Boston College

²⁴Though I don't mean to denigrate the worth of the work of Edward Wakin and Joseph F. Scheuer, *The De-Romanization of the American Catholic Church* (New York: Macmillan, 1966), the fact remains that the historical underpinnings of their thesis are very slender: When and how was it Romanized in the first place?

²⁵Since preparing these remarks I have learned that Gerald P. Fogarty, S.J., has agreed to write a volume for the series, *Päpste und Papsttum* (Stuttgart: Hiersemann), on the papacy and the Church in the United States since 1870 (see notice in *The Catholic Historical Review* 57 [1971], 305). See also the same author's "American Conciliar Legislation, Hierarchical Structure, and Priest-Bishop Tension," *The Jurist* 32 (1972), 400-409, according to which the American priest in recent times has labored under a double absolutism, the resurgent papal absolutism of which I have spoken superimposed upon the earlier nineteenth-century American or Cisalpine episcopal absolutism.