

SEMINAR ON THE AMERICAN CATHOLIC EXPERIENCE

This Continuing Seminar originated last year in a paper and proposal by Robert Kress. Its purpose is to provide a forum for theological and, in particular, ecclesiological reflection on the history and experience of the Roman Catholic Church in the United States. The two papers presented by Robert Kress and Jon Nilson this year were intended to provide both material for discussion and possibilities for the seminar's future work. A summary of the papers provided by the respective authors follows.

THE PEOPLE'S CHOICE: ROBERT KRESS

The disparity between religious belief and practice in the United States on one hand and Western Europe and Latin America on the other has been widely remarked. The reasons for this disparity also help to account for the transformation of the American Roman Catholic Church from a predominantly hierarchicalist, clericalist, established state church to voluntary, free, people's church.

In contrast to the revolutions of Europe (French, Russian, and, in its own way, the Enlightenment) and Mexico, the American "revolution" was neither anti-clerical, anti-church, anti-religious, nor anti-God. In fact, the American freedom movement invoked God in its favor and established itself on the basis of inalienable human rights originating in the divine source. Furthermore, American churches were generally on the side of the revolution, in contrast to Europe and Latin America where the church(es) and clergy were allied with the state. In the latter case, freedom from the oppressive state also entailed freedom from the church, religion, and God. Further, the United States established no religion or church.

The absence of established religion has abetted a religious pluralism in America from the beginning, even when the population was overwhelmingly Protestant. This resulted in a "free market" in religion, in which all churches were welcome to participate. They would survive and thrive according to their capacity to compete without aid from the national or state governments.

In this context the American Roman Catholic Church learned to compete very well. Its population survived and thrived, despite some losses, even large ones. A major reason for this must be the voluntary participation of Catholics, for without the coercive power of an established state church, there is no other reason to participate. Social pressure was not a dominant factor, since in America, far greater social pressure existed to abandon Catholicism than to remain or join. Likewise, ethnic inherence and loyalty explains little, since religion is always cultural, and especially since Catholicism emphasizes "*et . . . et*," in contrast to Lutheranism and Calvinism which tend toward an "*aut . . . aut*."

Another important factor is the greater communion between clergy/religious and laity in the American Catholic Church. No doubt the clergy and religious were

over and above the laity, but for various reasons, most especially the Protestant persecution, they were also united much more than elsewhere in the West.

Also to be noted and emphasized is the observation of Alexis de Tocqueville, namely that American preachers have known how to preach the future world and life without rejecting and demeaning the present. That is, prosperity and happiness in this life conform to God's will. In American Christianity, religion does not require misery. Religion may even contribute to human happiness and prosperity on earth.

This brings us to perhaps the most striking dimension of the American Catholic experience. According to the classical critique of religion (Nietzsche, Feuerbach, Marx, Freud), religion is rooted in human misery and oppression. If people are freed from cultural, economic, political, educational, sexual, and other oppressions, religion will automatically wither and die. The American Catholic Experience has, at least thus far, demonstrated just the opposite. Catholics, who generally started at the bottom of the ladder in every respect, have ascended very high on the economic, educational, political and professional scales, yet they are still committed to their Catholic religion. Though prosperous, they are still loyal to the church. However, one can perhaps more correctly say that because they are prosperous, they are loyal to the church and still interested in religion. For American Catholics achieved their prosperity precisely in and through the church, not apart from and in spite of it. They have voluntarily been members of the church and achievers in the society at large. There has been a liberation theology and practice (praxis?) in the United States. It is only now beginning to be reflected upon and explained.

In contrast to certain contemporary claims, the American Catholic Church has always been a "public" church. Had it not been, it could not have survived in the anti-Catholicism which so infested American public opinion and practice. There is a remarkable contrast between what I call clericalist piety, which emphasized the passive (and perhaps private) virtues of obedience, self-denial, and withdrawal from the world, on the one hand; and the "people's" piety, which emphasized participation in the world and achievement for the sake of the church and its "people's" institutions (parishes, schools, hospitals, social support clubs, insurance and credit unions and other economic institutions), on the other. It takes little effort to discern which piety was really effective in the life of the whole church.

The neo-clericalists also claim that American Catholicism had not been a public church until recently because they equate church with the hierarchy. "Plus ça change, plus c'est la meme chose."

Such claims of an earlier "privatized" American Church reveal a woeful ignorance of American history, both civil and ecclesial. They also reveal a fundamental characteristic shared with the old rightist, conservative clericalists, namely fear of and inability to deal with an educated, professional, and prosperous laity.

One must ask, finally, whether the "official" and "clerical" church, whether left or right, has appropriated the American experience and appreciation of freedom as well as the laity. Indeed, one can ask whether freedom has really entered the thinking of this official and clerical church at all. In the pastorals on nuclear and economic strategies (that is what they are, however frequent and impassioned

the disclaimers!), both the word and the concept of freedom appear hardly at all—and then usually only *in obliquo*.

Heretofore, the American Catholic Church has been a "People's Church," in which the people and the clergy and religious have practiced a remarkable communion. Can this state of affairs endure? The achievement of American Catholicism has been remarkable. It has combined religious and ecclesial participation with secular and civil achievement. The pertinent question is not why so many American Catholics do not practice. Rather, it is why so many American Catholics practice!

A caveat is in order: Hispanic and Black Catholicisms in the United States have had different experiences and histories than Catholicism at large. These have also been investigated even less than the rest of American Catholicism. As these Catholics move more into the mainstream of the American national enterprise, it will be interesting to compare their experience with that of the larger American Catholic population.

U.S. CATHOLIC SPIRITUALITIES: JON NILSON

This paper sketches those distinctively Catholic ways of assimilating the gospel which are clearly shaped by elements of the American national experience.

In the early period (1780-1820), a promising synthesis of Enlightenment Catholicism and the American experience never fully developed. Lacking indigenous traditions, church leaders tended to look to Rome for guidelines. A high percentage of clergy were recruited from France. They had seen the violence and anti-Catholicism of the French Revolution and so sought to curb the nascent republicanism of the U.S. Church.

In the latter half of the 19th century, a devotional revolution swept over Catholicism. Its view of human nature was pessimistic, its view of sin individualistic. It fostered clericalism and rules. It stressed devotional practices with Jesus, Mary, veneration of the saints and frequent communion as the major foci. Dolan argues that this spirituality gave immigrant Catholics an identity in an overwhelmingly Protestant society and a world-view which they could not derive from a culture rightly perceived as hostile to them. A central feature of Catholic life was the parish mission.

Yet this spirituality could not last as the Catholic population became well educated and middle class. The laity became very active in the liturgical movement, the Christian Family Movement, the CYO, YCS, YCW, Marriage Encounter, Cursillo, etc. Vatican II's dominant metaphor of the church as the People of God was thus welcomed by many as an affirmation of the truth of their experience as American Catholics. They said "Amen!" to *Gaudium et Spes*'s portrait of the church journeying through history linked to all humankind. Yet many others remain wary about embracing and integrating the achievements of secular culture.

FUTURE AGENDA FOR THE SEMINAR

The two papers fulfilled their authors' hopes of provoking wide-ranging discussions of American Catholic history and raising questions about appropriate theological reflection upon it. Our sessions made us aware of the necessity of un-

derstanding the experiences of our Hispanic and Black sisters and brothers and, in particular, of exploring their implications and challenges for white American Catholics.

Next year we hope to focus our reflections around two papers. One will be a study of Rev. Charles Coughlin, the "radio priest" of the Depression era. We shall examine the theological and sociological reasons for his slide into anti-Semitism and see how his case might illumine today's phenomenon of the religious "New Right." A second paper will present the challenges of Black Catholics to white U.S. Catholic spiritualities.

We know that theological reflection upon the American Catholic experience is a task now in its infancy but it is also long overdue. We would welcome other collaborators in this enterprise.

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