

THE SUDDEN DECLINE OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN AMERICA

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The crisis into which the Catholic Church in America fell in the late 1960s and early '70s (a crisis that is still with us) is in large measure the result of three factors that occurred more or less simultaneously, thereby creating a "perfect storm" for US Catholicism: (1) Vatican II, (2) the end of the so-called "Catholic ghetto," and (3) the cultural revolution that swept the US beginning in the '60s. Just as Catholics were entering the mainstream of American culture, that culture was losing its old Protestant character and taking on a new, secularist character.

Everybody has long since acknowledged that the Catholic Church in the United States went into a serious decline beginning in the middle to late 1960s. Great numbers of priests left the priesthood, even greater numbers of nuns left the convents, and recruitment of new nuns and new priests dropped precipitously. Sunday Mass attendance sharply declined. Enrollment at Catholic elementary and high schools declined, leading to the closing of many of these schools. The Catholic publishing industry nearly collapsed. One bright spot was higher education. Catholic colleges and universities continued to flourish, and they actually improved in academic quality. But they did so at a high price: many of them, perhaps even most of them, lost much of their distinctively Catholic character, becoming increasingly indistinguishable from secular colleges and universities.

Some would contend that this Catholic decline was quantitative only, not qualitative; that while today's Church is smaller, it is also better. This is a debatable point, one which I am not especially interested in getting into here. What is not debatable is that there has been a great quantitative decline.

The popular explanation given for this decline is a single event, the Second Vatican Council. I agree that Vatican II is *part* of the explanation, but it is, I think, far from being the whole story. The changes made by the council, while important, were relatively minor. The council did not, for instance, renounce any of the ancient doctrines of the faith in the way the Unitarians of Boston in the early 1800s renounced the Trinity and the Incarnation. But the council *did* make changes. And these changes – which would have caused hardly a ripple in an organization that was in the habit, like business corporations, of making frequent changes in order to adjust to the social and economic environment – were like a tidal wave in an organization that prided itself on its immutability. The Church had of course *not* been immutable, but it had been *nearly* immutable ever since the 16th century Council of Trent, and most of its adherents had the impression (a false impression) that the Church had been immutable at least since the emperor Constantine, if not since the time of St. Peter. Hence the relatively minor changes introduced by Vatican II came as a shock to much of the Catholic faithful. What most struck the laity were changes in the liturgy, above all the shift from Latin to English in the Mass. What most struck priests and nuns was the new conception of the relation between themselves and the laity. The council's rediscovery of the old idea of "the priesthood of all believers" was meant to elevate the dignity of lay Catholics, but its unintended consequence was to lessen the dignity of priests and nuns. If the priesthood and the religious life were no longer intrinsically superior to the lay life, then why bother being a priest or a nun?

The Catholic mind, which for centuries had been reconciled to the notion that nothing would change in its religion, suddenly discovered that the principle of immutability had been thrown out the window. And if this principle could be thrown out, why not others? Why not, to take an obvious example, the principle that the use of contraception by married couples is always sinful? A new mentality emerged among many Catholics, a mentality that appealed not so much to the letter of Vatican II as to its "spirit." The spirit of the council, according to this new Catholic mentality, was a spirit of change, a spirit of progress, a spirit of getting in step with the enlightened ideas of the age. Those with this new Catholic mentality were sincerely and profoundly shocked when in mid-1968, two and a half years after the closing of the council, Pope Paul VI issued his encyclical "Humanae Vitae," re-affirming the old Catholic teaching on contraception. Andrew Greeley has argued that this encyclical was the straw that broke the back of many Catholics, causing them to drift away from the

Church. The reason for this reaction, I suggest, is not so much the contraception taboo itself as the fact that the papal reiteration of the taboo indicated that the so-called “spirit of the Council” was not destined to prevail. The Church was doomed to remain an old-fashioned thing; it was not, as many hoped, about to become a truly modern and liberal thing.

This brings me to the two other factors that contributed to the decline of the Church in America: the end of the “Catholic ghetto” and the great cultural revolution of the 1960s. Combined with Vatican II, these produced a “perfect storm” that nearly sank the bark of Peter in America. Before proceeding to these two other factors, let me note two things. For one thing, I do not say that the three factors making for the perfect storm were the *only* contributing factors. There may have been others; almost certainly there were others. For another, my explanation of the decline would have been more complete if I had placed it in a global context instead of speaking only in American terms. Since the late 1960s, the Church has declined elsewhere as well: in western Europe, for example, including rather belatedly in Ireland. And perhaps nowhere in the world did Catholicism decline more precipitously than in our next-door North American neighbor, Quebec. In less than a half-century, Quebec, which used to be the most Catholic place on the face of the earth, has seen Catholicism become an insignificant factor in the life of the province. My book would have been a better book if I had discussed the decline of the American Church against the backdrop of the decline of the Church elsewhere in the world. I apologize for this deficiency, which is due to nothing better than my having a fairly good knowledge of American society and a fairly poor knowledge of these other societies.

Back to the “perfect storm.” In addition to Vatican II there was a second development taking place at approximately the same time as the council, namely the end of the so-called “Catholic ghetto” in the United States. Of course, it was not *really* a ghetto. If we want to see true religious ghettos in America, we can look at the Old Order Amish in Pennsylvania and elsewhere, and we can look at the Jewish Hasidim in Brooklyn and a few other places not far from New York City. The Amish and the Hasidim have built very high and very sturdy “walls of separation” between themselves and the world of outer dark. There was indeed a Catholic wall of separation, erected in the early days of American Catholicism and remaining in place until about 1960, but it was a low wall and it had many holes in it; it was a wall you could jump over or crawl through without too much difficulty. Instead of calling it a ghetto, then, let’s call it a quasi-ghetto.

For Catholics, this quasi-ghetto had long been a decidedly good thing. It allowed Catholic immigrants and their offspring to retain their faith in the midst of a society in which Protestantism had greater numbers, greater wealth, greater power, and greater prestige. It allowed American Catholicism to become a great self-help organization: Catholic politicians, Catholic professionals, Catholic businessmen, and even Catholic criminals could rely on the support and patronage of their co-religionists. And it allowed Catholics to get Americanized. This last came as rather a pleasant surprise to anti-Catholic Protestants - and all Protestants, it may be added, were at least a little anti-Catholic. From the early days of the nation Protestants feared that Catholics would be a dangerous alien force in America. In their view, Catholics were people who were priest-ridden, of dubious patriotism, and incapable of appreciating and sustaining a democratic form of government; and they would probably retain these defects forever. What a nice surprise, then, when it turned out that the great goal of Catholics, a goal supported by their priests and nuns, was to become fully American, was to become, in other words, just like middle class Protestants in everything except religion.

In the first half of the 20th century, Catholics of European and French-Canadian ancestry gradually became more prosperous and better educated; the cultural and economic gaps separating them from their Protestant neighbors narrowed. And then there were three great political happenings that finally did away with the idea that Catholics were second-class citizens: the New Deal, World War II, and the Cold War. If the Civil War was, as it has been called, "the second American Revolution," the coming of the New Deal and FDR was the third American Revolution. And Catholics more than Protestants supported this new political and governmental paradigm. During World War II Catholics were as patriotic as Protestants. Catholics as much as Protestants sacrificed on the home front and killed and died on the battlefield. During the early days of the Cold War, when Americanism was virtually identical with anti-communism, Catholics were, if anything, more American than other Americans. For Catholics had always been ardent anti-Communists, even during the days of the wartime alliance with Soviet Russia, while other sections of the American people had sometimes wavered in their attitudes toward Russian communism. The Cold War seemed to prove that the Catholics had been right all along; they had taken the true American attitude even when many people had doubts about their Americanism. By 1960 there could hardly be any more doubt about that Catholics were America-worthy, and this helps to explain why millions of Protestants were

willing to vote for a Catholic, John Kennedy, to be president of the United States.

At long last, Protestants were willing to embrace Catholics as full-fledged members of the American national community, and Catholics were more than ready to return the embrace; for there was nothing Catholics wanted more than to be just like their Protestant fellow-Americans, just like them in everything but religious affiliation. Like the literal Berlin Wall in 1989, the metaphorical wall of the Catholic quasi-ghetto fell during the 1960s, and Catholics streamed out of the ghetto to appropriate their American inheritance. Among vast numbers of Catholics, there was no longer a felt need to send their kids to Catholic schools or to read Catholic publications. Public schools would do just as well, and so would secular magazines and books, not to mention TV as a replacement of all reading material. Nor was there any need to be more scrupulous about Sunday churchgoing than Protestants were. If Protestants felt free to skip churchgoing from time to time, so could Catholics. The same was true with contraception and going to confession. Protestants did the one and didn't do the other; so why shouldn't Catholics behave the same way?

It would be an exaggeration to say that in the late '60s and early '70s American Catholicism turned into a Protestant *denomination*—an exaggeration, but not much of an exaggeration. It had certainly become a denomination, using that word to indicate a church which, like the mainline Protestant churches, was exceedingly tolerant of other religions, holding that all religions were approximately equally good and equally true. Once out of their quasi-ghetto, Catholics largely abandoned the belief that the Catholic Church was the one true church. Now that Catholics were true Americans, their attitude toward Catholicism increasingly duplicated the attitude of members of mainline Protestant churches towards their own denomination. They said: "I like the Catholic Church, which was the church of my childhood, the church of my parents and grandparents. But I wouldn't dream of saying that my church is better or truer than yours. The important thing is not that we belong to this church or that church. The important thing is that we belong to *some* church. God doesn't care if you are a Catholic, a Presbyterian, or even a Jew, as long as you are a good person." Let us call this attitude the "denominational mentality" (DM).

Of course, when I say that American Catholics adopted the DM about 30 or 35 years ago, I do not mean that *all* Catholics adopted it. For many did not: they remained old-fashioned Catholics, still holding that the Church of Rome has a unique claim to religious truth.

Yet many did: enough did to change the character of the American Catholic community, transforming it from a highly dogmatic group to a relatively latitudinarian group. Nor do I mean that the bishops sanctioned this change. No bishop, I am sure, explicitly renounced the ancient Catholic claim to be the one true Church of Christ. But not many bishops put up a strenuous fight against the coming of the DM. Nor did many priests. Sermons stressing the truth-claims of the Catholic Church became about as rare as sermons stressing the sinfulness of marital contraception. It would have been tactless to deliver homilies of either species to congregations largely made up of DM Catholics.

Now the DM is a wonderful mentality from the point of view of social harmony and cooperation. If you believe that my religion is as good as yours, and if I believe that your religion is as good as mine, then religion ceases to be a cause of friction as we socially interact with one another. Religion will not be the cause of political conflict, and—a very important point in a great commercial-industrial society like the United States—it will not disrupt business operations.

But from the point of view of religion itself, the DM is a disastrous mentality, at least in the long run of two or three generations. It makes it difficult to pass Catholicism (or any other particular faith) on to your children; for if Catholicism is not truly the religion of God, then what difference does it make if your children remain Catholic? What difference does it make if they marry outside the faith and bring up your grandchildren in a religion other than the Catholic one? Likewise, why bother making an effort to recruit new members to the faith? And why bother making efforts to retain old members? And if you become a “cafeteria Catholic,” rejecting certain doctrines and moral rules that do not suit your taste, so what? And if your parish priest, by never mentioning them, quietly allows certain teachings of the Church to fall by the wayside, so what?

DM Catholics believe, not in Catholicism, which is a very specific thing, but in what may be called “generic Christianity.” That is, they believe that what is important about Christian faith and morals are those things that all Christians hold in common: “mere Christianity,” as C. S. Lewis called it about 60 years ago. In the 1940s the doctrinal consensus among most Christian churches was “thick.” Today it is a very “thin” consensus. Today we have many people who call themselves Christians yet reject much of the ancient content of the faith, content that was subscribed to by both Catholics and Protestants as recently as the first half of the 20th century. Think of John Spong, the retired Episcopal bishop of Newark, New Jersey. Spong rejects the Virgin Birth, the Resurrection, and the Divinity of Christ, while he

defends abortion and same-sex marriage. Whether he believes in God is doubtful: he says he believes in a “non-theistic” God, whatever that could possibly mean. Yet he calls himself a Christian, and he argues that his idea of Christianity is a great improvement on the classic, orthodox idea. Spong is perhaps an extreme case, but he is not an especially unusual case; and, to judge by the sale of his writings, he has many fans and followers. Generic Christianity would be made up of what the pope and Bishop Spong have in common, and what they have in common is exceedingly thin.

Nor is the DM likely to stop at this thin modern version of mere Christianity. If we consider Spong’s religion to be as good as our own, why not be equally broad-minded about Islam and Buddhism and Hinduism? For that matter, why not be equally broad-minded about agnosticism and atheism? If I am unwilling to assert that Catholicism is the true faith, how can I assert that generic Christianity is the true faith? Indeed, how can I assert the truth of any belief at all in a supernatural order of being? Eventually the DM, carried to its logical conclusion, requires me to say to the unbeliever: “Your agnosticism/atheism, while it is not my cup of tea, is just as good as my Catholicism, provided of course that your belief allows you to be a morally decent person.”

This brings me to the third element of the perfect storm. In the 1960s and early ‘70s, a great cultural revolution took place in the United States, mostly among young people, but not among young people only. If we have to sum the revolution up in a brief phrase, we can perhaps do no better than to call it *a generalized rebellion against authority*. Overnight, it seemed, great systems of authority lost much of their prestige: the authority of government, of the police, of schools and colleges, of cultural institutions, of churches, even of parents, they all went into sharp and sudden decline. Conventional morality was rejected, especially conventional sexual morality. A new morality was proclaimed, the morality of (to use a phrase of the day) “doing your own thing.” Or as I would rather put it, the morality of the Personal Liberty Principle (PLP), according to which it is morally permissible for me to do anything I want, provided it doesn’t hurt others in a direct and tangible way. The other side of the PLP coin is the Tolerance Principle (TP), according to which I must be tolerant of whatever you do, provided you do not hurt others. The immediate fruit of the PLP and the TP was what came to be called the “sexual revolution,” as sexual conduct that had hitherto been taboo was now quite okay, on the grounds that it did no harm to others. Premarital sex was okay, and so was casual sex, and so was unmarried cohabitation, and so was homosexuality.

And so was abortion, although abortion crossed a line into new territory, since it was not just about sex; it was about killing too. It was arguable, of course, that abortion violated the PLP in that it hurt others, namely the unborn baby. But the sexual revolutionaries dismissed this objection by denying and ridiculing the proposition that the unborn baby is human. The denial lacked plausibility, but that did not matter, since abortion was the keystone of the entire sexual revolution. If abortion is not allowable as a kind of insurance policy, then a cultural policy of maximizing sexual freedom becomes impractical. And if we cannot allow sexual freedom for heterosexuals, how can we allow it for homosexuals? Do away with abortion, and the whole sexual revolution collapses, and do away with the sexual revolution and the whole personal-liberty revolution collapses. So abortion, if it cannot be justified with good arguments, will just have to be justified with bad arguments. And once it became legal, as it did in the Supreme Court's *Roe v. Wade* ruling of 1973, it had to be kept legal at all costs. This explains why, 30 years later, the aging sexual revolutionaries of the 1960s and '70s remain passionately devoted to keeping anti-*Roe* judges off the federal courts, above all the Supreme Court, and to kicking out of the White House a president who threatens to nominate such judges to the courts.

It is noteworthy that the sexual revolution in particular, and the personal-liberty revolution in general, proclaim a morality that is antithetical to traditional Christian morality. Nonmarital sex, unmarried cohabitation, easy divorce, homosexuality, abortion, pornography, and suicide: all these have been condemned by Christianity for two millennia, and they are now applauded by many Americans as good things. It is no accident, I contend, that this new morality is the antithesis of Christian morality, for the new morality is a *secularist* morality, and by "secularism" I mean an ideological movement that is anti-Christian and bent on defeating Christianity. Secularism has been in the European world for about 250 to 300 years now, beginning with the "Deism Controversy" in England in the early 1700s, and soon migrating to France, where it became the heart and soul of the French Enlightenment and an essential element of the French Revolution. In the 19th century, secularism took three main forms, forms that sometimes overlapped one another: socialism, nationalism, and liberal anticlericalism. In the 20th century, it took two totalitarian forms, communism (an extreme form of 19th-century socialism) and Nazism (an extreme form of 19th-century nationalism). The common denominator in all these forms, many of which have been bitterly hostile to one another, was a hostility to Christianity. They meant to

destroy, or at least to degrade, Christianity and replace it with a “new and improved” worldview and morality.

In America, secularism was never very strong until the 1960s. In the early years of the republic, there were such anti-Christian deists as Ethan Allen and Tom Paine (if Paine can be counted as an American). In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, there were a few “shouting atheists” of the Robert Ingersoll and Clarence Darrow variety, who buttressed their arguments against Christianity by appealing to the biblical higher criticism that had come out of Germany and to the Darwinian theory of evolution. The most significant American secularist of the first half of the 20th century was the philosopher John Dewey. But Dewey was a quiet and relatively inoffensive secularist. He wasted very little time and energy attacking Christianity. In his view, Christianity was a dying faith, and there was really no need for him to help kill it. More important than the destructive work of killing Christianity was the constructive work of creating a new faith—a scientific faith—that would replace it. When Dewey died in 1952, the United States contained more secularists than it had ever contained, but (apart from some members of the Communist Party) they were mostly like Dewey: quiet professors and intellectuals who made a point of giving as little public offense to Christians as possible.

But then came the cultural and sexual explosion of the ‘60s and ‘70s. These new anti-Christians were not discreet like Dewey, and they had little interest in Darwin and biblical criticism. They were interested in sex (plus a few other things), and they advertised this interest in a very public way. These secularists did not come only from the intellectual elite; they comprised a mass movement. Millions were repudiating Christianity by repudiating the ethic of Christianity. In this attack on Christianity, the outright secularists were aided and abetted by DM Christians, including DM Catholics, in other words, by liberal Christians, for the DM Christian and the liberal Christian are the same thing. The best brief description of liberal Christianity, it seems to me, is that it is an attempt to occupy a middle ground between orthodox or traditional Christianity, on the one hand, and secularism on the other. Liberal Christians try to blend what they see as the best of secularism with what they see as the best of Christianity. In practice this has meant, ever since the 1960s, that they have given a Christian blessing to the sexual revolution. After sprinkling a little Christian poetry on it, they approve of much of the same conduct that secularists endorse without the need for poetry. Liberal Christians hope that when you engage in acts of fornication, sodomy, abortion, and euthanasia, you will do so only after a certain amount of reflection and prayer. But even if you

skip the prayer and jump right into action, they would never dream of attempting a restoration of the old and (in their view) hopelessly outdated Christian ethic.

Here, then, we have the third element of the perfect storm that has done so much damage to the Catholic Church in America. When the walls of the Catholic quasi-ghetto fell down, and Catholics entered into the mainstream of American culture, that culture was still dominated by liberal Protestantism. And in those days liberal Protestantism was a much milder thing than it is now. It approved of contraception and a certain amount of divorce, but as yet had no idea of approving cohabitation, abortion, and homosexuality. Within a decade or so cultural hegemony had shifted from the old liberal Protestants to the secularists, aided by the new liberal Protestants. Secularists came to control what may be called the four great “command posts” of American culture: the national press, the entertainment industry, the elite colleges and universities, and the higher ranks of the bench and the bar.

Catholics, in sum, were embracing American culture at precisely the moment when that culture was losing its Christian flavor and taking on a decidedly anti-Christian flavor. Is it any wonder, then, that the Church went into sharp decline?