

THE DECLINE AND FALL AND REVIVAL OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN AMERICA

John F. Quinn
Salve Regina University

In The Decline and Fall of the Catholic Church in America, the sociologist David Carlin offers insightful explanations for why Catholicism began to unravel in the 1960s. Facing the aftershocks of Vatican II, the collapse of their cohesive urban neighborhoods, and the onslaught of the cultural revolution, American Catholics experienced a “perfect storm” from which they have yet to recover. Carlin sees little reason for optimism about the future. Among other things, he notes the bishops’ “appallingly poor” handling of the sex abuse scandal and their tolerance of homosexuality in the seminaries. While agreeing with most of Carlin’s analysis, this reviewer is more optimistic about the future prospects of the Church in America.

The year was 1951, and the location was a stadium near Providence, Rhode Island. Approximately 75,000 people were gathered in Narragansett Park on a Sunday afternoon to hear Fr. Patrick Peyton, CSC, preach at a Family Rosary Crusade. Before Fr. Peyton spoke, a long line of Catholic representatives slowly marched into the stadium. Leading the procession were 175 girls from St. Xavier’s high school and 200 boys from La Salle Academy. They were followed by 200 nuns; 300 priests; a seemingly endless array of Knights of Columbus, Malta, and St. Gregory; the mayors of most Rhode Island cities; and the state’s governor, Dennis Roberts. At last, at the very end of the line came Fr. Peyton and the Bishop of Providence, Russell McVinney. The crowd listened with rapt attention as Fr. Peyton described how the Virgin Mary had cured him of tuberculosis while he was studying for the priesthood. When concluding, he urged his audience to “be strong enough to get on your knees for the rest of your lives. Tell the 20th century that [the Rosary] is Rhode Island’s prayer,” and they roared their approval.¹

Now let’s jump forward to the present and move north to Boston. At a press conference in May the Archbishop, Sean O’Malley, announced plans to shut down 65 parishes and nine schools in the archdiocese. Citing low Mass attendance rates, an aging corps of

priests, and severe financial pressures, O'Malley said that he had no choice but to order the closings and mergers. When outlining the changes, O'Malley put on a brave face: "Please do not interpret reconfiguration as a defeat. It is rather a necessary reorganization for us to be positioned for the challenges of the future."² With these closures, the Archdiocese, which had 404 parishes in 1985, had reduced its number to 292. Later in the summer O'Malley announced another round of 10 parish closures in the northern section of the archdiocese.

While especially acute, Boston's plight is by no means unique. Recently, the Bishop of Toledo, Ohio, Leonard Blair, announced plans to close 33 of the 157 parishes in the diocese.³ In New York City, the Archdiocese recently announced plans to close and tear down St. Thomas the Apostle, a landmark church in Harlem. In Portland, Oregon, and in Phoenix the bishops have filed for bankruptcy, citing the costs of settling sexual abuse claims in their dioceses.

When I read about Fr. Peyton's phenomenally successful crusade or about Bishop Fulton Sheen's immensely popular prime time television show, *Life is Worth Living*, I find myself perplexed about how American Catholicism has been transformed so drastically in such a short time.

For answers to this mystery, one can turn to David Carlin's informative and sobering work, *The Decline and Fall of the Catholic Church in America* (2003). Carlin, a professor of sociology, contends that American Catholicism was blindsided by the aftershocks of Vatican II, the decline of the "Catholic ghetto," and the onset of the cultural revolution of the 1960s. Together these three factors coalesced into what Carlin terms a "perfect storm."

In the wake of the Council, Catholics shed or at least de-emphasized many of their distinctive practices and beliefs, preferring instead the teachings they shared with Protestants. Carlin claims that Catholics adopted a "denominational mentality," seeing themselves no longer as the "One, True Church" but as one distinct expression of Christianity. Along with this new bland theology, Catholics also had to adjust to life in the American mainstream. They were moving out of their tight-knit urban neighborhoods and into ethnically and religiously diverse suburbs. The world that they were entering was proving surprisingly friendly. Much of the old Protestant animus to Catholics had disappeared.

However, a graver threat awaited them. Catholics were leaving their "ghettos" just as the larger society was starting to unravel. Racial tensions were worsening, the Vietnam War was proving increasingly divisive, and more and more students were experimenting

with LSD and casual sex. Nor were young people the only ones losing their bearings. Divorce among the middle-aged was becoming commonplace by the 1970s.⁴ Carlin blames much of this cultural crisis on secularism. Secular humanists were moral relativists who aggressively promoted libertarianism.

Carlin astutely notes that the secularist groundswell did not occur simply as a result of Vietnam and civil rights. He points out that secularist seeds were being sown in the 1950s. In films, James Dean and Marlon Brando played rebel heroes, and in literature, Allen Ginsberg and his Beat friends were promoting nonconformism. In many universities, the works of anthropologists Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict along with that of the atheist philosopher A.J. Ayer were standard texts. Together these books gave students the impression that all cultures were equal and all value systems were man-made constructions.

Despite support from Hollywood and the universities, secularists remained on the defensive throughout the 1950s. With the Cold War at its height, any form of godlessness was bound to be frowned upon by most Americans. The secularists' break came in 1962, when the Supreme Court struck down prayer in the public schools, declaring it to be an establishment of religion. Carlin rightly notes that the secularists were now on an equal footing with the majority who belonged to the "Judeo-Christian tradition." Emboldened by this victory, secularists became increasingly militant as the 1960s progressed. Again and again, whether pressing for birth control or abortion or gay rights or euthanasia, secularists were sure to receive a sympathetic hearing from the courts.

Carlin is disturbed that American Catholics don't seem able to recognize that secularism is the enemy. He notes that in the past, Catholics were quite willing to spar with their Protestant rivals. Now, however, when the threat is so much more serious, they remain largely wedded to what Carlin calls "generic Christianity"—a cheerful, fuzzy set of beliefs which are bound not to offend—or inspire—anyone.

Carlin puts some of the blame for this state of affairs on the bishops. He speaks of their "appallingly poor level of leadership in the past generation."⁵ He is quite critical of the bishops for their handling of the sex abuse crisis. He can't fathom why so many of them have been tolerant of homosexuality in the priesthood and endlessly patient with the sex abusers in their ranks.

As his title indicates, Carlin is not optimistic, about what the future holds for American Catholics. At the present, he thinks that Catholics are no more than 10% of the total population. Statistics

showing that there are sixty some million American Catholics wildly inflate the number of active Catholics. And this number will likely decline into a mere remnant unless Catholics can regain their confidence and start to resist the secularists on all fronts.

While I find a great deal to like in this learned and elegantly written book, I differ with him on a few points, some of which are minor. First, I, too, firmly believe that the Church must take on the secularists. What Carlin might have noted, though, was that the Church did vigorously combat the secularists in the postwar era. In 1947, the bishops issued a stern pastoral letter warning the faithful that secularism “is at the root of the world’s travail today.”⁶ Likewise Fr. John Courtney Murray, SJ, regularly railed against Paul Blanshard and other secularists of the era. As Philip Gleason notes, this sort of rhetoric fell out of favor after Vatican II because Catholic liberals “insisted that secularity was really a good thing and that Catholics ought to align themselves with the forces at work in the secular city.”⁷ So if Church leaders are to vigorously contend against secularism, they must first clear up some of the confusion caused by the previous generation.

Secondly, in considering the Vatican Council, I’d be more inclined to look at the internal workings of the Church during this period. While Carlin is surely right to note that the liturgical and disciplinary changes were bound to cause some distress, it’s my view that many of the Church’s wounds were self-inflicted. For example, take the Jesuits’ actions in the 1960s and early 1970s. By 1970, the order’s leaders had decided to vacate the campus of Woodstock College, their flagship graduate school, and move all of their faculty and seminarians into a cluster of apartments in a gritty Manhattan neighborhood. This way, the students could take classes at Protestant seminaries and have direct contact with the poor. Within two years, the experiment was shelved, and the school was shut down entirely. Likewise, several well-regarded Catholic colleges such as Manhattanville and Webster abruptly secularized in a bid to make their institutions more “relevant.” The historian James Hitchcock has painstakingly chronicled the many foolish and at times scandalous actions taken by Catholic leaders in the aftermath of the Council.⁸ I would argue that Catholic self-destructiveness is another component of the “perfect storm” of the 1960s.

Finally, while I recognize that the Church may deteriorate still further in America, I take a more optimistic view than Carlin. I see some potential bright spots in five areas.

1. Higher education: In the 1960s, Bishop Sheen warned parents: “If

you want your son to lose his faith, send him to a Catholic college.” While much still remains terribly wrong with Catholic higher education, things are starting to change for the better. New colleges such as Christendom and Thomas Aquinas and Ave Maria are on the scene and plans are in the works for at least six new colleges by the end of the decade. In addition, a number of established colleges have recommitted themselves to the Catholic tradition. Franciscan University of Steubenville is the most dramatic example of a turnaround, but significant changes are occurring at Benedictine College in Kansas, the Catholic University of America, and Providence College among others.

2. Catechetics: the Universal Catechism was completed in 1994, and since then the American bishops have established a committee to scrutinize religious education textbooks to ensure that they comply with the Catechism.
3. Communication: there are now a host of orthodox Catholic periodicals: *National Catholic Register*, *Our Sunday Visitor*, *Crisis*, *First Things*, *New Oxford Review*, etc. There are new presses such as Ignatius and Sophia. Especially significant is EWTN which reaches millions of homes all over the country.
4. Ecumenism: while Carlin is right that official dialogue between Catholics and evangelical Protestants hasn't advanced very far, it is clear that at the grassroots level, many Catholics and evangelicals are working together. Many evangelicals are interested in Pope John Paul's writings on the Gospel of Life, and some intellectuals are exploring natural law theory. This is a key advantage that American Catholics have over their co-religionists in Canada and western Europe. In all of those countries, Catholics are standing alone in the struggle against secularism, while in America evangelicals are doing much of the heavy lifting in the culture wars.
5. Clergy and religious: in the past generation, there has been a major shift in the hierarchy. The Bernardins and Weaklands who were so dominant have been succeeded by more conservative or moderate figures. With diocesan priests, sociologists are agreed that younger priests are much more traditional-minded than the generation that came of age in the 1960s. Nuns are a different story, however. Most communities of sisters have not turned back from the decisions they made to leave their convents and discard their habits. However, since

then they have received almost no vocations. John Fialka, author of *Sisters*, estimates that there were 204,000 nuns in America in 1968 but only 65,000 in 2003. Fialka put their median age at 69.⁹

These statistics seem to indicate that there will be few progressive-minded priests and sisters in the years to come. This is not to suggest that liberal Catholicism is about to disappear. On the contrary, they have a powerful new lobby, the Voice of the Faithful, a series of influential journals, and a commanding presence in the old-line Catholic universities such as Notre Dame and Boston College. Still, liberal Catholicism will be a mostly lay affair, and I think that will lessen its impact.

Thus, in these five areas at least, I see reasons for optimism. While my projections are somewhat sunnier than Carlin's, I still think that his fine book is must reading for anyone interested in understanding how the Church has ended up in this unhappy state.

Notes

1. Quoted in Joyce M. Botelho, "The Power of Prayer: The Family Rosary Crusade in Rhode Island," (Paper presented at Brown University, May 21, 2003), 24.
2. Quoted in Michael Paulson, "Sixty five parishes to be closed," *Boston Globe*, May 26, 2004.
3. *Providence Visitor*, September 30, 2004.
4. For divorce statistics, see Carlin, 43.
5. Quoted in *ibid.*, 309-310.
6. "Statement on Secularism," *Pastoral Letters of the U.S Bishops*, 4 vols. (Washington, DC, 1983), 2: 74.
7. Quoted in Philip Gleason, *Keeping the Faith* (Notre Dame, IN, 1987), 125.
8. See James Hitchcock, *The Dissenting Church* (New York: National Committee of Catholic Laymen, Inc., 1983).
9. "Fewer Catholic Women Today Answer God's 'Call' to Convent," *Wall Street Journal*, February 14, 2003.