

## Every day the church should give birth to the church

Richard Gaillardetz | Mar. 1, 2011



Women pray during Mass at Our Lady of Lourdes Parish in Chicago in 2010. (CNS)

Theologian Richard Gaillardetz will be leaving the University of Toledo, Ohio, to take up the Joseph Chair of Catholic Systematic Theology at Boston College in the fall. On Jan. 27, he delivered his final Murray/Bacik lecture at the University of Toledo titled "The State of the Church, 2011."

Gaillardetz outlined some of the major changes that have transpired in the U.S. church following the Second Vatican Council, and discussed the ongoing tensions between the early reception of Vatican II and the legacy of Pope John Paul II.

In asking where the church goes from here, Gaillardetz outlines two major challenges facing the church today: the flight of Catholics from the church and the use of authority by the hierarchy.

An edited version of this talk appeared in the March 4 *NCR*. Following is the full text.

\* \* \* \* \*

## The State of the Church, 2011: Reflections on the State of American Catholicism Today

Richard R. Gaillardetz, Ph.D.  
Murray/Bacik Professor of Catholic Studies  
University of Toledo



There are moments in the life of any institution when important warning signs emerge, signs

that suggest the need to pause and take stock of the situation. We are experiencing such a moment in the American Catholic church. To be sure, many Catholics continue to enjoy fulfilling experiences of Catholic life that reflect the best of our faith. We all know of parishes that are flourishing, of lay people who are living the gospel in simple but moving ways. We know priests that are exemplary pastors, Catholic schools offering quality education for many including the under-privileged, and Catholic social agencies that are making a real difference in the world. These are all a true cause for celebration but they are in danger of being overtaken by worrisome developments that indicate something is amiss in the American Catholic church.

Those indicators would include the following: First, the church is still feeling the lingering effects of the clerical sexual abuse scandal. Some victims still feel sloughed aside by institutional indifference, and thousands of Catholics have either left the church or have remained in a state of resigned disillusionment by both the accounts of abuse and the subsequent attempts at ecclesiastical cover-up. To date, eight American Catholic dioceses have had to file for bankruptcy because of multiple clerical abuse lawsuits, and more may soon follow. Second, many are disheartened by heavy-handed exercises of church authority: excommunications, declarations that a hospital is no longer Catholic, refusing communion to politicians, protesting the conferral of an honorary degree on a newly elected American president. A particularly troubling example is found in the current Vatican investigations of American women religious communities. This investigation appears to many as a shameful instance of scapegoating women who have dedicated their lives to the church's service and it demonstrates that we still have a long way to go in purging our church of its patriarchal tendencies. Third, the clergy shortage has forced diocese after diocese to close or consolidate parishes. This reality has hit home here in Toledo as the local diocese has announced a three year reorganization plan that will affect 33 parishes. Finally, as we shall see, there is evidence that large numbers of Catholics are simply giving up on the church and going elsewhere.

In short, there is much to suggest that the American Catholic church is in a state of unrest. This raises two basic questions: 1) how did we arrive at this troubling, enigmatic moment in American Catholicism, and 2) where do we go from here.

## **I. How We Got Here**

It is impossible to rehearse the complex and fascinating history of the Roman Catholic Church in America in a few minutes. Yet we can't take a reading on our contemporary situation without at least a brief look back at how we arrived at this moment.

### **A. The Birth and Death of the American Catholic Sub-Culture**

In 1800 Catholics were but a small minority in our still infant republic, yet by 1860, largely as the result of successive waves of European immigrants, Catholicism had already become the largest Christian denomination

in the U.S. (1) With its rapid growth came festering American resentments and anti-Catholic nativism. The preservation of Catholic identity in the face of anti-Catholic prejudice was no small task. One approach lay in the cocooning of ethnic Catholic enclaves: Italian Catholics, Irish Catholics, German Catholics, Polish Catholics, Czech Catholics, French-Canadian Catholics?each formed cohesive but quite insular faith communities. These ethnic Catholic enclaves, in turn, produced a distinctive American Catholic sub-culture. According to Jerome Baggett, within that sub-culture

Catholics could read separate newspapers, join the Catholic Book Club, listen to the weekly "Catholic Hour" on the radio, and subscribe to?Catholic Digest. They could enroll their children in parochial schools, encourage them to join the Catholic Boy Scouts or Catholic Girl Scouts, and send them to summer camps run by the Catholic Youth Organization (CYO). If they were professionals, they could become members of a Catholic Bar Association, the Catholic Press Association, the Catholic Physicians' Guild, the National Council of Catholic Nurses, or the Association of Catholic Trade Unionists.( 2)

This insular Catholic sub-culture was indirectly supported by the Vatican when in 1899 Pope Leo XIII wrote a letter, *Testem Benevolentiae*, to a leading American prelate, Cardinal James Gibbons. In that letter the pope condemned the so called "Americanist heresy," that is, the view that there was no opposition between Catholic teaching and fundamental American values. This papal letter had the effect of discouraging Catholics from engaging the larger American culture, leaving them to retreat into their own "cultural ghetto." (3)

However, by the 1930's cracks began to appear in the Catholic sub-culture. The Great Depression drew Catholics into larger debates about the welfare of American society. (4) In the wake of World War II, many immigrant Catholics became much more conscious of their American identity. The American Jesuit John Courtney Murray demonstrated the possibility of a rapprochement between Catholic teaching and the American constitutional principle of separation of church and state. Diverse ecclesial, theological and societal currents led to the gradual dismantling of the American Catholic sub-culture. As church historian Jay Dolan has pointed out,

even if Vatican II had never happened, the renewal of Catholicism would still have taken place in the United States. That is because the social and cultural transformation of the post-World War II era proved to be as important if not indeed more important for American Catholics than Vatican II. (5)

According to Peter Steinfels, the contributions of Vatican II merely "magnified the theological repercussions of these developments." (6) Granting this, we still should not underestimate the significance of the council itself.

The Second Vatican Council was, by tradition, the twenty-first gathering of all the bishops of the Catholic Church. Convoled by Pope John XXIII in 1962, it would become the most significant event in Catholicism since the time of the Protestant Reformation. Most American Catholics experienced Vatican II as a breath of fresh air which freed many from the church's rigid and insular pre-conciliar forms. The council presented a new more vital and inclusive image of the church, one that stressed the full participation of the laity in the liturgy, in ministry and in the church's mission in the world. The defensive siege mentality of pre-conciliar Catholicism was abandoned in favor of constructive dialogue with other Christians, with other world religions, and with the larger society. The clergy were called to abandon the guise of the secular ruler in favor of that of servant and pastor. It is no exaggeration to say that the spirit of the council loomed large in the American Catholic imagination.

## **B. 1970-1989: The Flourishing of Post-Conciliar American Catholicism**

The 1970's and 1980's were, in the main, a time of tremendous vitality in the American Catholic church as the spirit of the council inspired innumerable impulses for church renewal. Thousands of Catholics were discovering their own baptismal call to a fuller participation in the life of the church, and for some even to professional lay ministry. Graduate programs emerged at major Catholic universities around the country to meet

the needs of a growing number of lay people who wanted to seek advanced theological formation. Parish life was being transformed by more participative decision-making encouraged by pastors who had been enflamed by the vision of the council.

The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, also known as the catechumenate, spread rapidly in U.S. parishes, recovering a more wholistic process for the initiation of the unbaptized into the life of the church. Because adult Catholics were asked to accompany those preparing to be baptized or to be received into the Catholic church. The RCIA also offered scores of adult Catholics an opportunity to re-discover the riches of their faith. Parish-based Bible studies like the Little Rock Scripture program proliferated. The liturgical renewal movement encouraged the "full, conscious and active participation of all the faithful" in the worship of the church. Catholic theology broke out of the sterility and pastoral irrelevancy of neo-scholasticism as it was being invigorated by contemporary historical scholarship and new forms of theological reflection, including feminist and liberation theologies along with a new ecological consciousness.

The vitality of American Catholicism in the mid 1980s, and the continued influence of Vatican II, was manifested in a particular way in the promulgation of two remarkable documents by the U.S. conference of bishops. But to understand their significance we need to place them in a larger context. The Second Vatican Council had encouraged a more active, dialogical engagement with the larger society. It also articulated a bold teaching on the right and duty of all the bishops to act together as a college, in union with the pope, in exercising pastoral leadership over the church. Then in 1971 Pope Paul VI issued a much overlooked apostolic letter, *Octogesima adveniens*, in which, without actually using the term, the pope appealed to the principle of subsidiarity, acknowledging that much of the formulation of Catholic social teaching must be undertaken by regional and national bodies. (7)

The U.S. bishops took to heart the teaching of both the council and Paul VI and tackled two pressing U.S. issues. The first document, *The Challenge of Peace* (1983), reflected on the particular ethical issues associated with modern warfare in a nuclear age. The second, *Economic Justice for All* (1986), brought to the foreground of public debate the ethical dimensions of modern economic policy. This willingness to engage contemporary American social, political and economic concerns sounded the final death knell for the insular, disengaged ghetto Catholicism of the pre-conciliar American church.

The methodology employed by the bishops in drafting the letter was equally noteworthy. The drafting committee conducted open listening sessions which included testimony from noted experts both inside and outside the church and representing different ideological perspectives. After the first draft was completed, it was published and widely disseminated. Local bishops were encouraged to have further listening sessions on the draft within their own dioceses. The feedback was offered to the drafting committee which then produced a second draft followed by a similar feedback process. The result was a final document greatly strengthened by the extensive consultation. The American bishops had put into practice the council's exhortation for church leadership to consult with the Christian faithful.

These documents exemplified a carefully calibrated form of church participation in public policy debate. The bishops wisely drew on the Catholic natural law tradition, making arguments based not on divine revelation but on a form of ethical reasoning that was intelligible to all American citizens. Their teaching was offered at two different levels. First, they presented a compelling moral vision that reflected official Catholic social teaching. Second, they offered more specific policy judgments, while acknowledging that these specific policy analyses did not carry the same authority as the broader moral teaching.

During that time there was a tremendous diversity among the U.S. bishops. Yet there was a critical mass of bishops who set a standard for the exercise of episcopal ministry: they were collegial, pastoral, ideologically centrist, and above all, willing to engage others in respectful dialogue. Chief among them were influential

bishops like Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, Archbishop Rembert Weakland, Archbishop John Quinn, Toledo's own Bishop James Hoffman, and Steubenville's Bishop Albert Ottenweller, who although now 94 and retired, is with us this evening.

It must be admitted that if there were many signs of vitality in the American church of the 70s and 80s, there also lurked in the background matters of real concern. The priest shortage was becoming more serious and the vast exodus of both priests and professed religious, begun in the 1970s, was quickly blamed on Vatican II. Enrollment in Catholic schools continued to decline. Catholic religious education struggled to move away from an exclusive reliance on Catholic schools for providing religious formation. This, and many other factors, gave rise to a generation of Catholics who had many positive experiences of the church but were unable to offer a coherent account of what it meant to be Catholic.

The after effects of Pope Paul VI's 1968 encyclical condemning artificial birth control, *Humanae vitae*, were still being felt. For the first time in decades, perhaps centuries, a papal teaching was met with widespread criticism and disagreement in the church. For liberals this marked the coming of age of an adult laity willing to follow their consciences even if it put them at odds with church teaching. For conservatives it opened the floodgates for widespread dissent in the American church and represented a tragic accommodation with the worst of American secular culture.

As the 1980s gave way to the 1990s a palpable shift began to take place in American Catholicism. Ideological polarization was becoming more pronounced and Catholic discourse less civil. In 1996 Cardinal Bernardin founded the *Catholic Common Ground Initiative* in order to confront this corrosive polarization and recover the true catholicity of the faith. The fact that Bernardin saw the need for such an initiative says much about the changing climate of American Catholicism in the 1990s. It is that shift that we must consider now.

### **C. 1990?2011: A New Model of Catholic Leadership**

If the American Catholic church of the 1970s and 80s drew inspiration from the Second Vatican Council, the 1990s would see a new ecclesial force arrive on the scene, the second longest reigning pope in church history, Pope John Paul II. He was elected in 1978 but the full force of his papacy would not really be felt in the United States until the late 1980s and 1990s. This towering religious figure had broken an Italian stranglehold on the papacy that had existed for four centuries. The Polish pope cut a large figure on the world stage with a heroic biography, a charismatic personality, a probing intellect, and a sweeping global vision. He broke new ground in both Catholic-Jewish and Catholic-Muslim relations, encouraged a dialogue between science and religion, and brought leaders from diverse world religions together at Assisi for an unprecedented day of prayer for peace. In a dramatic departure from his predecessors, he apologized to the world time and again for the sins and failings of Catholics past and present. His tireless global travels brought the papacy to millions who were not sufficiently moneyed to travel to Rome and gain a private papal audience. And in the final years of his life he showed the world how to embrace frailty and infirmity with courage and deep faith.

If he was a man of great vision, the substance of that vision was filtered through his own life story. It was a vision infused with gospel values but prone to apocalyptic flourishes, reflected in his sharp contrast between the Gospel's culture of life and the world's culture of death. In his view it was a traditional Catholic piety and an unyielding fidelity to Catholic teaching at every level that allowed his beloved Polish church to survive in the face of Communist oppression. Throughout his papacy he would prescribe the same medicine to the universal church. He came to the United States on several occasions, most notably in 1993 to attend the World Youth Day in Denver and Americans, particularly American youth, fell in love with him even as most continued to ignore many of his more controversial teachings.

Key sectors of the American church of the 1990s, particularly its young clergy, would fall under the spell of John Paul II. It would not be quite accurate to suggest that John Paul II simply replaced Vatican II as the

principal source of inspiration for American church leadership. After all, the pope was himself a modestly influential bishop at the council and as pope frequently spoke of the importance of the council's teaching, authentically interpreted. And *there* was the key. Pope John Paul II offered the church a particular interpretation of Vatican II, and for many in the American church, that interpretation won the day.

Soon a new generation of young clerics would begin to identify themselves as JPII priests. They shared the pope's high theology of the priesthood. [The story is told that whenever local bishops travelled to Rome for their *ad limina* visit, the bishops could be certain of receiving one question from the pope: how many seminarians do you have?] In any event, these JPII priests were openly uncomfortable with the "servant leadership" theologies of the priesthood that had been predominant in the early decades after the council. Although not in principle opposed to lay ministry, they were much more emphatic about limiting its exercise and reasserting the ontological distinctiveness of the ordained.

The priesthood was not the only church office that fell under the pope's long shadow. The 1990s and the first decade of the twenty-first century have also seen the birth of a new generation of bishops appointed on Pope John Paul II's watch and profoundly influenced by his vision. Today those many priests and bishops inspired by the Polish pope continue to see the world through his eyes. They look back on Vatican II's Pastoral Constitution and see a misplaced optimism in the possibility of constructive dialogue with the world. Instead they see a world ensnared in a culture of death. For them the inescapable pluralism of our world too easily leads to what Pope Benedict XVI has called "the dictatorship of relativism."

The result, over the past two decades, has been a more aggressive, selectively countercultural posture by the American bishops. These are not, for the most part, unintelligent or mean-spirited people. The fact is that many of today's bishops are genuinely convinced that only by drawing a clear line in the sand on such issues as abortion and same-sex marriage can they hope to stem the tide of cultural relativism. Consequently, they have largely abandoned the more dialogical and measured form of public engagement exercised by the leading bishops of the 1980s. Instead, many see themselves as active participants in the culture wars of our time. Here again, the specter of Pope John Paul II looms large. The papal biographer, George Weigel, characterizes the new attitude of many of today's bishops this way:

They had learned from John Paul II and the Revolution of 1989 in East Central Europe that seemingly invincible forces could be defeated, and they were determined to defeat, not find an accommodation with, the cultural forces that, in their judgment, were at war with the gospel even as they were eroding the fabric of American life. (8)

Now, recall that just a few decades earlier the American bishops had championed what Cardinal Bernardin had referred to as "a consistent ethic of life," one that stressed the dignity of the human person from conception to natural death. This life ethic was often referred to as a "seamless garment," which presupposed the interconnectedness of Catholic teaching across a broad range of issues from abortion to euthanasia, the death penalty, concern for the poor, and the ethics of war. By contrast, Weigel contends, the present generation of bishops, with some exceptions, sees opposition to abortion as "the cultural marker of serious Catholicism in America." (9) They have effectively raised abortion and, to a lesser extent, opposition to same-sex marriage, euthanasia and stem cell research as issues that must be privileged over all other public policy concerns.

Consider a recent diocesan newspaper column by Bishop Thomas Tobin of Providence, Rhode Island. The column addressed the recent shooting tragedy in Tucson, Arizona. In it he admits that he was "unimpressed" by President Obama's speech at the memorial service for those who had died in the shooting. He writes:

The problem, at least for me, is that President Obama's persistent and willful promotion of abortion renders his compassionate gestures and soaring rhetoric completely disingenuous?and I confess, abortion policy is the prism through which I view everything this president says and does. (10)

Bishop Tobin is no episcopal outlier. The same attitude was evident in the outcry against Notre Dame's decision to confer an honorary degree on Obama and in the number of bishops who have withheld communion to Catholic politicians deemed insufficiently "pro-life." It was reflected in the recent actions of the bishop of Phoenix who declared that St. Joseph's Hospital was no longer Catholic. For this new generation of bishops, these teachings, are the unique "life issues" of our time. They are not to be viewed as simply part of a larger life ethic, they are the foundation of that life ethic and indeed of all Catholic social teaching and therefore must be given special priority.

Finally, no historical review, no matter how brief, can ignore the cataclysm in American Catholicism that occurred in 2002 as *The Boston Globe* broke a series of stories that recounted not only disturbing tales of sexually predatory behavior by certain priests but also a systematic cover-up by church authorities. Soon investigative reporters uncovered similar cases throughout the country. Tawdry tales of abuse and ecclesiastical malfeasance filled newspaper headlines. Even this crisis became a cause of division as liberals were eager to locate the roots of the scandal in the mandatory celibacy of priests and conservatives in the moral laxity of the post-conciliar period.

This brings me to the conclusion of my own account of the principal shifts in American Catholicism over the last four decades. I must confess that this narrative was in part fueled by a recent essay by George Weigel that offered a quite different narrative of these past four decades. In his narrative the church of the 70s and 80s was characterized by a flimsy and irresponsible application of conciliar teaching accompanied by an episcopal practice of cultural accommodationism that needed to be corrected by John Paul II's insistence on fidelity to "settled teaching" and his robust confrontation with the toxic cultural currents of our age. (11) Obviously, I have offered a different narrative. My own narrative revolves around a tension between two legacies: the Second Vatican Council and Pope John Paul II. In principle, I do not believe they are opposed to one another. But in practice one still finds in our church, those eagerly invoking the vision of the council, and others who claim as their principal inspiration, the legacy of John Paul II. The recent rush to beatify John Paul II is but one indicator of the continued vitality of his legacy. Although I believe Weigel is correct in articulating the counter-cultural tendencies of our new generation of bishops, he has completely misconstrued the posture of the American bishops in the 80s. As I have demonstrated, it is simply wrong to suggest that they abandoned prophetic critique of the culture in order to remain "players." In the 1980s the bishops' conference was not concerned with cultural accommodation but balanced critical engagement with a sensitivity to the need to moderate the authority claims of their policy judgments. The current generation is indeed committed to cultural confrontation by championing a select moral agenda focused on abortion, while applying the full force of episcopal authority to that agenda in an undifferentiated way.

Some may note the surprising absence of Pope Benedict XVI in this narrative. He has now been pope for almost six years. He served as chief adviser to John Paul II for over twenty years and so we should be surprised that, while he brings a different background and personality and has already produced three noteworthy papal encyclicals that depart from his predecessor in scope, content and style, he has not inaugurated, as yet, any fundamental revisions to the John Paul II legacy. Moreover, aside from a few significant episcopal appointments, neither has he yet left a distinctive mark on the American church (although impending liturgical translations and perhaps more dramatic liturgical modifications could change that assessment). And so, as we face a new year and a new decade, we find contemporary American Catholicism at a crossroads and we are compelled to ask: Where do we go from here?

## **II. Where Do We Go From Here?**

I do not claim to have all the answers for what ails the church today. But I do believe that there are two major issues crying out for our immediate attention; the first concerns the alarming flight of Catholics from the church,

and the second concerns the need for a thorough-going re-imagination of the way authority ought to function in today's church.

### **A. Responding to "Catholic Flight"**

Up to now I have been primarily discussing issues of institutional policy, theology and church leadership. But we cannot ignore the upheaval that has taken place in the lives of ordinary Catholics. Growing priest shortages, school and parish closings all have had a substantial impact on Catholic life in the pews. And if recent studies on declining church membership are any indicator, there are a lot more empty spaces in those pews than there used to be.

A major survey of religious life in America, sponsored by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, offers a fascinating window into the place of religion in America. (12) Among other things, the study reveals an unprecedented fluidity in American religious affiliation. We have learned that 28% of Americans have left the religion in which they were raised for either another religious tradition or for no religion at all. The study tells us that the biggest net gain was seen by those who no longer consider themselves affiliated with any religious tradition; they are often referred to as the "nones," for "no affiliation." They now constitute over 16% of the American population. The biggest net loser? The Catholic Church. There are 22 million former Catholics in America today. One in ten Protestants today was originally raised Catholic. If former Catholics were treated as a distinct denomination it would be the second largest Christian denomination in the U.S. One in three Americans who were raised Catholic have since left the church.

I begin with the findings of the Pew study because it suggests a crisis at a level beyond culture wars and ideological battles. The future of American Catholicism will depend in no small measure on our willingness to take seriously this mass exodus from the Church. We need to ask ourselves, what is going on here? I believe Thomas Reese, Jesuit priest and sociologist, offers the simplest answer when he contends that the American Catholic church has become a "lazy monopoly." (13) Catholicism has for too long simply taken church membership for granted. For decades, the continued influx of Catholic immigrants from other countries has artificially kept Catholic attendance numbers flat, masking the disturbing departure rates revealed in the Pew study. Let's look at the results of that study a bit more closely.

Of the many Catholics that have left the church, about half simply drifted away into that growing group of religiously unaffiliated Americans—the "nones." The other half migrated primarily to Protestant, and mostly Evangelical Protestant, churches. Of those who simply became unaffiliated, many had become disenchanted with elements of Catholic teaching. But of those who left Catholicism for another church, 71% said that they left the church because their spiritual needs were not being met. (14) When asked why they joined their new denomination, 81% mentioned that they preferred the style of worship. Many of these people are leaving, in short, because the quality of church life is poor and church leadership appears inattentive to their real pastoral concerns.

Let me offer a simple example. In 2009 the American bishops released a pastoral letter on marriage titled, "Marriage: Love and Life in the Divine Plan." When I first heard of the forthcoming letter, I was encouraged. I believe that in our current "upgrade" culture, two people remaining committed to one another for life is one of the most demanding things anyone could undertake. Pastoral assistance and support from church leaders was certainly welcome. The document that appeared includes very helpful and even inspiring passages, but its emphasis, regrettably, is on the intrinsic evils of artificial birth control and same-sex marriage. Now I recognize that these are official Catholic teachings and this is not the forum to debate them, but here is the problem. When my wife and I are going through a difficult patch in our marriage, it is not like at the end of some marital spat we look at one another and say, "boy, I wish those gay people weren't trying to get married, it would make our marriage a lot easier!" I understand the need on occasion to clarify official church teaching, but when a



preoccupation with doctrinal orthodoxy, focused on a few select and controversial teachings, trumps expending the necessary energy to listen to the felt concerns of ordinary married people, well, you get our current situation.

Now let me offer a positive example of a bishop going beyond ideology to address concrete pastoral concerns. The late Bishop Kenneth Untener of Saginaw had long heard the many complaints about the poor quality of preaching in the Catholic Church. So he decided to address this pastoral problem directly. He directed all of his priests to have their Sunday homilies videotaped. He had his own homilies taped as well. Then he arranged a meeting in which he and the priests would watch and critique together the recorded homilies, again, including his own. He even arranged to have some lay people from a neighboring diocese watch the videos and send him their critique. He encouraged his priests to continue the practice of working to improve their preaching. This was not a liberal initiative. This was not a conservative initiative. This was a pastoral initiative and the improved preaching that likely resulted from his initiative doubtless did more to keep Catholics in the pews than any formal church pronouncement!

For every former Catholic who has left the church over a doctrinal question, I suspect there are many more who have left because of their concrete experience of local parish life. Insignificant preaching, poorly planned liturgies, a basic lack of Christian hospitality?these are the realities that are driving people away. Let's face it, one of the great scandals of contemporary Catholic parish life is that a person could go to Sunday mass at a typical parish for years without anyone coming up and introducing themselves. Churches like Cedar Creek are filled with former Catholics, and it is in no small measure because such a situation would be inconceivable there.

There are no quick fixes to solve this massive Catholic exodus, but a good beginning would be for our pastoral leaders to become more cognizant of this exodus and to redouble their efforts to discern the reasons for these departures and respond appropriately. They must recover the ancient conviction of St. Cyprian of Carthage that you cannot be a good leader and teacher unless you are a humble learner and listener.

For their part, ordinary Catholics need to find ways to voice their concerns to their pastors and bishops. I am not talking about formal petitions, boycotts, church sit-ins and such. They may occasionally be necessary to make a point but often as not they also encourage a kind ecclesiastical defensiveness. What I am talking about may be nothing more than inviting a pastor into your home for dinner and sharing with him some of the real issues in your life. It may mean taking advantage of episcopal visitations to your parish and offering your bishop some of your concerns or writing a polite and respectful letter to the bishop. It may simply be a matter of asking for a few moments on the agenda of the next pastoral council meeting to invite discussion of parish initiatives to deal with Catholics who feel disenfranchised. It may also mean affirming any efforts that are being made to create a more hospitable and vital parish life. Perhaps it is as simple as thanking the priest or deacon when their preaching truly brings the gospel to bear on the concerns of your daily life and gently chiding them when it does not. Most importantly, they can stop waiting for their pastors to take the initiative and do so themselves by proposing to the pastoral team ways to improve parish life and outreach.

Now let me turn to the second issue, the exercise of authority in the church.

## **B. Re-Imagining the Exercise of Authority in the Church Today**

The Catholic Church has always insisted on the need for a stable office of pastoral leadership. Church history provides considerable evidence that bishops and popes have played an essential role in holding the church together through difficult times. They are as necessary today as ever. Yet church history also teaches us that not every bishop and pope has been an effective leader.

I do not question either the sincerity or the pastoral commitment of our newest generation of priests and bishops. Yet, in my experience, even the newly ordained are more inclined to adopt the role of our "spiritual fathers," seeing themselves as the ones best able to assess our true pastoral needs. The principal task of the pastor in their

view is to instruct and admonish. However well-meaning they may be, the paternalism inherent in this model of authority affords no place for genuinely listening to or learning from the people they are supposed to serve. Neither is there much room for entertaining respectful criticism for, in this pastoral framework, criticism is equivalent to disobedience and disobedience cannot be tolerated. What is needed is a profound re-imagination of the basic dynamics of ecclesial authority. Such a re-imagination would need to take into account the following four points.

### ***1. Distinguishing between Legal (de iure) Authority and Charismatic/Moral (de facto) Authority***

First, we must acknowledge two inter-related types of authority. On the one hand, we can recognize what we can call a legal or *de iure* authority, that is, the authority that one possesses by virtue of office. A civic example of this would be the authority of a police officer who is legally authorized to pull you over when you've been speeding. The Catholic Church grants an analogous kind of authority to its priests and bishops in canon law. There is a genuine need for this kind of legal authority. However, there is a second type of authority, a charismatic/moral authority which functions *de facto*. This authority does not presume formal office but rather the possession of a personal charism for leadership.

Now, it is possible to exercise this kind of charismatic/moral authority without possessing any legal authority. Consider the charismatic/moral authority of a Mother Theresa or a Dorothy Day. They had a profound impact on millions of people without ever holding church office. It is also possible to possess legal authority, the authority of office, and not possess any charismatic authority. And here we get to the crux of the problem. Certainly there are occasions when church leaders have to rely on their legal or canonical authority, but in the long run, if they continue to rely exclusively on their canonical authority, without exhibiting genuine charismatic authority, what will result will be at best a minimalist, external obedience to official decrees.

There is, of course, a larger issue here. For centuries Catholicism has been content to rely on the authority of church office and simply hope that a few of the many ordained to ministry would end up being true pastoral leaders. When you could count on a surplus of clergy, this strategy more or less worked. It can't work now. We no longer have a surplus of clergy. We no longer have the luxury of ordaining someone simply because they thought they had a vocation to the priesthood. Sadly our current process of vocational discernment to the priesthood is more about discerning impediments to ordination than it is about discerning the presence of a genuine charism for pastoral leadership. If what we want is a transformation in the way authority is exercised in the church today, a good start would be to focus on calling forth as candidates to lay ministry, the diaconate, the priesthood, and perhaps especially the episcopate, those who actually possess a gift for pastoral leadership.

### ***2. The Bishops Must Teach as Stewards of a Living Tradition***

Second, Catholicism affirms the special teaching authority of the pope and bishops in relation to Tradition. The ancient Greek word for bishops was *episkopos*, meaning "overseer." The bishops are the authoritative "overseers" of the apostolic tradition. As I noted earlier, one of the common concerns of many bishops today, is that Catholics are losing their grounding in that tradition and, consequently, are losing their Catholic identity. It is a legitimate concern, but forging an appropriate pastoral response depends a lot on how tradition itself is understood. Too often a crass and anti-historical "traditionalism" masquerades as a love of tradition. As Jaroslav Pelikan famously put it: "Tradition is the living faith of the dead; traditionalism is the dead faith of the living." (15) If a religious tradition is a truly living tradition and not merely a preoccupation of those prone to nostalgia and a love of antiquities, it must always be re-contextualized in the present moment. (16) With every new social context the tradition will have to, in some sense, assume a new form.

Those who are supposed to be the stewards of the tradition, preeminently the bishops, must re-imagine their own responsibilities. It will no longer serve to conceive their role as curators in a museum, preserving the gorgeous artifacts of the ancient past. It is a tempting model because it suggests control. The curator has

considerable control over how the exhibits are displayed. But the bishops' relationship to tradition must be different, because tradition is alive and it must be allowed to be appropriated anew in each age. The bishops ought to be more like gardeners who try to create the best possible conditions for healthy growth but ultimately have to allow the growth process to act according to its own independent processes. The bishops' task certainly includes articulating the boundaries for proper engagement with the great tradition but their primary task is that of facilitating a responsible engagement between the tradition and each new social context. We cannot expect people to be drawn to a religious tradition simply by appeal to its antiquity; we must demonstrate that it offers a compelling response to the questions and concerns of our time.

### ***3. The Baptized Have an Obligation to "Wrestle with the Tradition"***

Third, the authority of church teaching places demands on all Catholics. The Canadian sociologist, David Lyon talks of the contemporary trend toward the "deregulation of religion." (17) What he is describing is a larger societal tendency to be religious on our own terms, to define for ourselves what matters and what does not in matters of religious belief and practice. It encourages us, in other words, to become religious consumers and for the authentic practice of Catholicism, such an attitude is problematic.

Catholics are called to resist this cultural tendency. I am not talking about some unthinking obedience to what "Father says," or the bishop says, or even what the pope says. Postmodern religion has been profoundly influenced by our culture of choice. Within that culture we are tempted to see our tradition as a religious grab bag in which we are free to pull out whatever we find appealing. It is this consumer oriented view of the Catholic tradition that many have in mind when they speak disparagingly of "cafeteria Catholicism." For many church leaders, the default reaction to this situation is to return to the juridical paradigm of command and obey. Their solution is to insist on an uncritical and unswerving obedience to all church teaching. And so they enforce fidelity oaths on ministers and church employees. They micro-manage curricular and textbook decisions in Catholic schools and parish religious education programs.

But there is another way beyond the inadequacies of "cafeteria Catholicism"; it is to encourage a substantive and deliberate "wrestling with the tradition." To be part of a religious tradition requires that I take that tradition seriously, even when it troubles me, and even when, at the end of the day, I find that I cannot give an unqualified adherence to it.

Consider two Catholics, Michael and Marie, who have both just come across the Catholic Church's teaching that the use of in vitro fertilization to assist in having a child is always morally wrong. Upon learning of this, Michael rejects the teaching immediately as silly and unworthy of his consideration. For him it is simply another example of the Catholic obsession with sex and he never gives it another thought. Marie, however, wrestles with the teaching, researching the scientific and medical dimensions of the issue while trying to grasp the moral arguments that lie behind the church's teaching. She actually reads a recent Vatican statement on the topic and finds herself in sympathy with some but not all of the arguments. She spends considerable time in prayer and reflection on the matter and finds that she still cannot fully accept the prohibition, at least in every case.

We might be inclined to say that Marie ends up at the same place as Michael who also rejected this teaching. In fact, many of the orthodoxy police would be inclined to dismiss both as "dissenters," but is their status really the same? I would argue that it is not. Michael was in no way troubled by this particular teaching; he simply ignored it. But his willingness to be so cavalier about this teaching suggests a general unwillingness to deeply engage any of the Catholic tradition. His Catholic identity is almost certain to remain relatively superficial. Marie, in contrast, may not have found that she could fully embrace the teaching, but she came to appreciate some of the ethical issues in a way she hadn't earlier and she now has a much greater sensitivity to some of the dangers associated with an unfettered use of reproductive technologies. Her wrestling with the teaching, although it did

not end in an internal assent, has impacted her in significant ways. She has been shaped by her tradition.

In sum, the question is not whether authority should continue to exist in the church; the question is whether the church will find the will and the wisdom to re-imagine church authority in accord with both the ancient biblical tradition and the demands of the church today. Again, I think ordinary Catholics can do their part. They can take a young priest under their wing and celebrate his passion and commitment while gently drawing him into a different style of leadership. They can make a point of affirming the positive examples of church leadership they see from their pastors and bishops.

I am aware that there are some here this evening who may find my assessment of the state of the Catholic Church today a bit harsh and even a little discouraging. Yet, if the American Catholic church is in crisis, it may be helpful to recall the sage observation of Fr. Timothy Radcliffe, former master general of the Dominican Order, who once observed that crisis is the Catholic church's *spécialité de la maison* (specialty of the house). Indeed, more often than not, it has been crisis and unrest that brought about moments of re-birth and renewal. The Venerable Bede once wrote: "Every day the church gives birth to the church." Out of this present moment, a new church will doubtless be born. All Catholics should pray that we will be its humble and faithful midwives.

- 
1. Jay Dolan, *In Search of an American Catholicism: a History of Religion and Culture in Tension* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 58.
  2. Jerome P. Baggett, *Sense of the Faithful: How American Catholics Live Their Faith* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 11.
  3. Michael W. Cuneo, *The Smoke of Satan: Conservative and Traditionalist Dissent in Contemporary American Catholicism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 8.
  4. Dolan, 152.
  5. *Ibid.*, 189.
  6. Peter Steinfels, *A People Adrift: The Crisis of the Roman Catholic Church in America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003), 5.
  7. On this point see Kenneth Himes, "The Local Church as a Mediating Structure," *Social Thought* (1986): 23-30.
  8. George Weigel, "The End of the Bernardin Era," *First Things* (February, 2011): 18-25, at 23-4.
  9. *Ibid.*, 23.
  10. Quoted in Michael Sean Winters, "Bishop Tobin 'Unimpressed' with Obama's Tucson Speech," *NCR-Online* accessed at <http://ncronline.org/blogs/distinctly-catholic/bp-tobin-unimpressed-obamas-tucson-speech> .
  11. Weigel, "The End of the Bernardin Era."
  12. What follows is drawn from a series of reports on the study which can be accessed at <http://religions.pewforum.org/reports> .
  13. Quoted in "Saying Bishops 'Scared,' Panelists urge Laity to Take Lead," *National Catholic Reporter*, on-line version.
  14. See the Pew report "Leaving Catholicism," available on-line at [http://pewforum.org/uploadedfiles/Orphan\\_Migrated\\_Content/Catholic.pdf](http://pewforum.org/uploadedfiles/Orphan_Migrated_Content/Catholic.pdf) .
  15. Quoted in an interview in *U.S. News & World Report* (July 26, 1989).
  16. For the need for the constant recontextualization of tradition see, Lieven Boeve, *Interrupting Tradition*, 20-35.
  17. David Lyon, *Jesus in Disneyland: Religion in Postmodern Times* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2000), 34.

---

**Two related articles:**

NCR senior correspondent John L. Allen Jr. interviews Luis Lugo, director of the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, and Pew senior researcher Greg Smith: [In America's religious marketplace, the real Catholic problem is new sales](#) [1].

Allen's follow up to that interview: [More context](#) [2]

**Support independent reporting on important issues.**



---

**Source URL (retrieved on 06/28/2017 - 18:36):** <https://www.ncronline.org/news/faith-parish/every-day-church-should-give-birth-church>

**Links:**

[1] <http://ncronline.org/node/22812>

[2] [http://ncronline.org/node/22968#pew\\_follo](http://ncronline.org/node/22968#pew_follo)

[3] <https://www.ncronline.org/donate?clickSource=article-end>