

## Chapter Twelve

# Faith Amid Complexities

From the election of a Catholic president in 1960 to the opening years of the new millennium after 2000, American Catholics experienced rapid change, increasing diversity and deepening, sometimes troubling, complexity. The Second Vatican Council, which met in Rome from 1962 to 1965, marked an epochal moment of historical change—not just for worldwide Catholicism, but for the Church in America as well. Alongside the bishops in attendance from the United States (among them such leaders as Albert Meyer of Chicago, Joseph Elmer Ritter of St. Louis and Paul Hallinan of Atlanta) was a galaxy of American Catholic and Protestant scholars serving as consultants. One official woman auditor had been invited from the United States as well: Sister of Loretto Mary Luke Tobin.

By the special intervention of Cardinal Spellman, the once controversial Jesuit John Courtney Murray attended as an expert on the subject of Church-State relations. His influence would be especially evident in the landmark *Declaration on Religious Liberty*, which has been widely hailed as the major contribution of American Catholicism to interfaith relations. American advisers would be able to bring to the assembly not only their scholarly expertise, but practical American experience as well.

In its sixteen documents, the Second Vatican Council breathed optimism about the human condition. The Council deemed the modern era to be a time of both unparalleled possibility and unprecedented peril. Quick to encourage and slow to condemn, Vatican II envisioned a renewed Church capable of nurturing the grace and goodness with which God had seeded the world.

In their theological method, the bishops of the Council moved away from tight scholasticism and legalism, taking what some observers have called a “hermeneutical turn.” This means that their understanding of dogma, revelation and

*The bishops of the world take their seats in St. Peter's for the opening of the Second Vatican Council.*

tradition would be enriched—though certainly not totally determined—by modern scriptural, historical and scientific study. Several themes predominated throughout the entire Council, and all profoundly affected the Church in the United States over the next generation. These themes included:

*Priority of vision.* After generations of theological battles, the pivotal doctrines on which most Christians agree—such as Incarnation, Trinity, Resurrection and the Redemption—should have pride of place in the gospel proclamation.

*Ecumenism.* Since there is more that unites Christians than divides them, Catholics should be nurtured by prayer and dialogue with other Christians and people of other faiths. They should strive to bring the integrity of their own tradition to every such encounter.

*Humility.* The Church acknowledged that it is and always remains a community that falls away from its ideals. It has been at times arrogant, unjust and sinful. Always in need of reform, the Church should welcome honest evaluation and self-scrutiny, and appreciate critics who are loving as well as loyal.

*Social justice.* For the gospel to be preached effectively, human dignity, rights and justice must be proclaimed. Beyond proclamation, believers must be involved in the struggle to produce a better society.

*Religious freedom.* Because of the nature of God-given human dignity, no one may ever be coerced in matters of faith. Believers have the right to religious expression, even though they are minorities in their lands.

*Liturgy.* The liturgy is at the heart of Christian life, and its treasures must be made more generously available and articulate. The council stressed (1) the centrality of the Eucharist and the great mysteries encoded in the seasonal cycles; (2) the use of vernacular language and active congregational involvement; (3) the riches of Scripture, hence an expanded cycle of readings.

*Participation.* There must be a sharing of ministry and greater participation in the leadership of the church from across a wide spectrum: from the collegiality of bishops to lay involvement in parish councils.

In the United States, the conciliar years were a time of unprecedented vitality and expectation, dampened only by the tragic assassination of President Kennedy in November 1963.

## For Discussion

**From your own memory or from interviews, describe the impact of Vatican II on ordinary Catholics' lives. Would you describe it as positive, negative or mixed? Why?**



*Pope Paul VI leaves the United Nations after his 1965 address.*

Even in this national calamity, Catholicism made an impact on the country. The televised funeral allowed Catholic symbols to help unify and heal the entire nation.

In the American political arena, Catholics vaulted into the corridors of power. In the generation after 1960, over 25 Catholics were appointed to the presidential cabinet, compared to only 6 in the first 150 years of the Republic. By 1965 Catholics had become, for the first time, the largest religious group represented in the U.S. Congress, with well over 100 members. And by 2001, 3 U.S. Supreme Court Justices, 24 U.S. Senators, and 128 members of the U.S. House of Representatives identified themselves as Catholic. In 1984 Geraldine Ferraro became the first woman to run as a major-party vice-presidential candidate.

In October 1965, Pope Paul VI arrived in New York City to address the United Nations—the first time a reigning pontiff set foot on American soil. But the Mass he celebrated in Yankee Stadium may well have marked the end of the easy euphoria at the Council’s end. For the years that followed, for all their accomplishment and postconciliar zest, also proved to be a time of confusion and conflict.

While a broad majority of Catholics were generally pleased with new developments in their church, polarities arose between those on the left who expected more rapid and fundamental transformations and those on the right who felt that Catholics were losing their distinctive traditions along with reverence and discipline. The former often found support for their views in reading the *National Catholic Reporter*, the latter in the pages of the *Wanderer*.

The forty million Catholics in the country in 1960 were accustomed to seemingly endless institutional growth. Suddenly, within four years of the council’s conclusion, over 3,000 American clerics had resigned from the priesthood. While the numbers of Catholics themselves continued to rise, figures in other categories showed a marked decrease over the next generation. A comparative chart drawn from *The Official Catholic Directory* (1961) and the 2002 *Catholic Almanac* dramatically makes the point:

	<b>1961</b>	<b>2001</b>
Catholic Population	42,104,900	63,683,030
Priests	54,682	46,041
Permanent Deacons	0	13,348
Seminarians	41,871	4,917
Sisters	170,438	79,462
Brothers	10,928	5,565
Elementary schools	10,593	7,061
Elementary pupils	4,389,779	2,058,474*
Secondary schools	2,433	1,596*
Secondary pupils	886,295	680,947*

\*These numbers did show some growth in the decade from 1991 to 2001.

Figures provided by Peter Steinfels in his 2003 study, *People Adrift: The Crisis of the Roman Catholic Church in America*, also show dramatic changes in this era. While the number of Catholic colleges and universities declined from 304 in 1965 to 238 in 2002, the number of students at such institutions increased in those same years from 385,000 to 724,000. Early in this new millennium, there were approximately 600 Catholic hospitals in the U.S. caring for 90 million inpatients and outpatients annually. They constituted the largest group of not-for-profit hospitals in the country. In social services, some 1400 local Catholic Charities organizations in America were aiding 9.5 million people annually. Statistics can also tell another kind of story. According to Steinfels, the average age of the diocesan priest in active ministry in 1965 was 46. In 2002, the age was 60. In 1965, 65 percent of Catholics were said to attend Eucharistic liturgy each Sunday. In 2002, the number was 34 percent.

If traditional forms of Catholic life were in numerical decline, great growth and vitality occurred in new directions in the postconciliar years. Most immediately apparent to ordinary churchgoers were liturgical innovations: Mass in English (beginning in 1964) with the priest facing the congregation; new forms of congregational singing and frequent “guitar Masses”; Saturday anticipation of the Sunday obligation (1970); lay readers (1970) and eucharistic ministers (1973); Communion in the hand (1977). Other postconciliar changes included offering the cup to the faithful, the option of face-to-face reconciliation and communal penance services, and a more ecumenical approach to interfaith marriages. Polls generally showed such changes to have wide support among the faithful. Especially popular was the 1966 ruling that permitted eating meat on non-Lenten Fridays.

If the generation before the Council can be said to have been the apex of institutional Catholicism, the generation after its conclusion witnessed the rise of participational Catholicism. A typical diocese in the new era of flow-chart Catholicism established over two dozen new commissions, councils and boards. These often included a diocesan pastoral council; clerical and religious senates; commissions concerned with black ministries, continuing education, due process, ecumenical affairs, evangelization, family relations, finance,

*A group of permanent deacons are presented for ordination in the 1970's.*



lay ministries, liturgy, media, social justice, spirituality, vocations and youth ministry.

A key factor in all this organizational intensity was the rise of lay involvement on parish councils, teaching staffs, liturgical and social service ministries, as well as on the many new commissions. To cite again Peter Steinfels' 2003 study: "Before the 1960's, priests staffed parishes....Laypeople were volunteers.... Today there are over thirty thousand lay parish

ministers paid for at least twenty hours a week, working in over 60 percent of the nation's parishes. Seventy percent work full time" (p. 331). He also notes that 80 percent of the lay parish ministers are women. And according to a 2003 report from the Catholic News Service, women hold high administrative posts in nearly one-fourth of the nation's dioceses. Fifty women serve as chancellors, the highest official position a layperson can hold in Catholicism. In addition, a permanent diaconate established in 1967 has grown to the extent that over thirteen thousand such ministers, many of them married men, now serve across the country.

While such innovations were aborning in the late 1960's, American Catholics found themselves embroiled in two immense debates touching the conscience of the nation—civil rights and the Vietnam conflict—and in an intramural battle over birth control that convulsed the Church's own inner life. The civil rights movement, with the Baptist minister Martin Luther King, Jr., as prime national leader, sought to remedy centuries of racial injustice and indignity. Across the country, many Catholics walked in protest marches alongside Protestant and Jewish citizens. Support was not unanimous: On some occasions, fellow Catholics pelted habited nuns and clergy in demonstrations with rocks and eggs. As urban renewal displaced black ghettos and blacks moved to previously all-white neighborhoods, many Catholics joined in the national flight to suburban areas.

Together, many religious people, black and white, lay and clergy, worked through political channels to produce major civil rights legislation. In so doing, Catholics were responding to the judgment made in the U.S. bishops' 1958 statement that "segregation in our country has led to oppressive conditions and the denial of basic human rights...in the fundamental fields of education, job opportunity and housing." Such Catholic senators as Eugene McCarthy and Robert Kennedy (assassinated in 1968) became particularly visible leaders in the fight for racial justice.

On the raging issue of the Vietnam War, the moral issues did not appear clear-cut to most Americans. Many Catholics in particular, accustomed for generations to loyal patriotic support of the country's wars, found the decision to challenge national purposes wrenching. Again, large numbers of

## Profiling U.S. Catholics

Five words describing ways in which Catholic religious worldviews vary somewhat from those of some other religious groups:

- 1) Intellectual: more likely to try to reconcile faith and reason.
- 2) Accepting: more understanding attitude toward sinners.
- 3) Pragmatic: marked by intense concern with this world.
- 4) Communal: greater emphasis on social justice as a dimension of faith.
- 5) Private: not intensely concerned about converting others. Evangelization became an articulated theme in American Catholicism only in the 1980's and 1990's.

Five perceptions about modern American Catholics that are demonstrably false:

- 1) Religious activity is declining dramatically.
- 2) Young Catholics are permanently leaving the Church in a mass exodus.
- 3) The more educated Catholics become, the more likely they are to leave the Church.
- 4) Catholic women are in a state of revolt against the Church.
- 5) Catholics have grown more conservative as they have grown more affluent.

Five areas in which Catholics have been on the cutting edge of social change in American society:

- 1) Tolerance
- 2) Women's rights
- 3) Communal dimension of society
- 4) Balancing power in presidential politics
- 5) Peace issues

From *The American Catholic People*, by George Gallup, Jr., and Jim Castelli

Catholics took to the streets and the political process to protest the war. Some, such as Fathers Philip and Daniel Berrigan and the “Catonsville Nine” undertook more dramatic forms of opposition, breaking into a draft board and burning files with homemade napalm. Other Catholics followed the lead of Cardinal Spellman of New York, head of the Military Ordinariate (now the Archdiocese for Military services), in their persistent support of the administration’s war aims.

In 1968, the Catholic bishops of the United States had spoken in measured terms of the Vietnam involvement, admitting the rights of those who dissented and urging the option of selective conscientious objection even as they found warrant for the conflict in the just war argument. In 1971, the bishops released another, more far-reaching statement in which they maintained that “whatever good we hope to achieve through continued involvement in this war is now outweighed by the destruction of human life and of the moral values which it entails” (*Resolution on Southeast Asia*).

In a quiet way, this was a revolutionary moment in the long annals of official Catholic support of national policy. “For the first time in modern history,” historian David O’Brien wrote in *Public Catholicism*, “a body of national bishops, during a war, had publicly judged their government’s actions unjust.” This prophetic challenge to national mores was but a foreshadowing of others to come: from the strong Catholic resistance to the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court decision permitting abortion down to the cautionary letter the American bishops wrote to President George Bush on the very eve of the 1991 war in the Persian Gulf. In the months before America’s entry into war with Iraq in March 2003, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) was especially vocal in raising serious moral questions about the engagement. In a formal statement of November 13, 2002, for example, the bishops said: “Based on the facts that are known to us, we continue to find it difficult to justify the resort to war against Iraq.” Bishop Wilton Gregory, president of the USCCB, joined several cardinals as well as the presiding bishops of the Episcopal and Lutheran Churches in meeting with National Security Adviser Condoleeza Rice to discuss their concerns in this pre-war period.

The papal encyclical *Humanae Vitae* of 1968, which

*Cesar Chavez organized the United Farm Workers of America and orchestrated a nationwide boycott of California table grapes.*

*Abortion protesters demonstrate in their concern for the life of the unborn.*



### **For Discussion**

**Discuss Cardinal Bernardin's "consistent life ethic." How does it affect your political activity?**

maintained the traditional ban on artificial contraception, was endorsed by the American Catholic bishops in a pastoral letter that stressed the need for patience and understanding. But many American Catholics, schooled in newer traditions of challenging national and ecclesiastical policies, resisted the teaching.

Several clerical theologians across the country signed statements of carefully worded dissent. In Washington, D.C., some fifty priests took a position of public opposition and many were suspended by Cardinal Patrick O'Boyle; such action was the exception rather than the rule. Meanwhile, a