Anyone seeking to understand the causes of the devastating scandals currently plaguing the Catholic Church should look no further than Joseph Varacalli's brilliant little book, *Bright Promise, Failed Community*. The rotten fruit of a half-century's dissent from Church teachings is all there one only needs eyes to see it.

Sociologists have a well-deserved reputation for being unreadable authors. Their stiff prose and twisted logic often mask a fundamental misunderstanding of human nature. Such opaque writing normally signals a lack of clarity of thought and, sure enough, today's sociologists generally share a deep-seated longing to be part of the herd and thus exhibit a mindless devotion to political correctness and left-wing politics.

It was, then, a delightful surprise to read *Bright Promise* (newly released in paperback), which suffers from none of these defects. Varacalli, a sociology professor at Nassau Community College in New York, takes a calm and well-reasoned approach to religion and politics that makes his book both a welcome addition to Catholic sociological scholarship and a fascinating, thought provoking read for the layman.

Varacalli's major thesis one that must have occurred to all thinking Catholics is that despite being the largest religious denomination in the country, Catholics have failed to shape the American republic. As he puts it, "Contemporary Catholic America has conformed to, much more than challenged, the basically secular nature of the present American culture."

How did the Church Militant lose her moral influence? In large part, it's the failure of leadership by American bishops, a breakdown manifesting itself in today's clerical sexual abuse scandals. According to Monsignor George Kelly in his book, *Keeping the Church Catholic With John Paul II*, as the solidly orthodox American bishops who presided over the Church in the post-WWII period retired or died, Pope Paul VI relied greatly on the judgment of the liberal Belgium Archbishop Jean Jadot, who recommended many bishops who were prepared to compromise with secularism. From there, it was only a matter of time before authentic Catholicism became the watered-down gruel that results from trying to split the difference with heresy.

Consequently, Varacalli points out, dissent groups now occupy powerful positions in Church hierarchy. Even orthodox bishops find their statements and teachings twisted or ignored by specialists who disagree with their
teaching. Furthermore, some bishops take one aspect of Catholic truth corresponding to their ideological predilections (feminism, Marxism, multiculturalism, New Ageism) and ignore the Faith's other balancing truths. Many diocesan leaders have become saturated in American culture and practice the "heresy of Americanism" condemned by Pope Leo XIII in Testem Benevolentiae, particularly the tendency toward democratization within the Church. Finally, some are, sad to say, just plain apostates who hate historical Catholicism.

Perhaps no other occurrence precipitated the current crisis and diminution of the Church's societal influence than this change in the American episcopacy's character. Fifty years ago, approval or disapproval of Catholic bishops actually meant something: for politicians, the difference between winning and losing; for literature, television or movies, the difference between success and failure. Today, who even worries about what the bishops will say? Many are outright dissenters from Catholic teaching, attempting to refashion the Church into something of their own imagining often with suspiciously Protestant-like innovations. The consequences for the American Catholic Church from this revolt have been, to be kind, less than triumphant.

Take the recent United States Conference of Catholic Bishops meeting in Dallas to address clerical sexual abuse. Say what you will about the outcome, but collectively, the bishops came across as a timid, confused bunch, more fearful of the media than the Vatican. If the Church's ancient and solid teachings on the nature of sin and evil were ever referred to, I certainly didn't hear it. Psychology rather than theology was the order of the day in Texas.

What makes the Church's loss of influence particularly distressing is that given the precipitous decline in American moral and cultural life, with Protestant Christian influence all but entirely effaced, this country needs a strong Catholic influence now more than ever. According to Varacalli, "The 'bright promise' of Catholic America lies in the vast, ever developing, ever more sophisticated tradition of social Catholicism and natural law thinking that could, in principle, serve both as a leaven in American society and as an alternative to the currently reigning and mostly sterile philosophies and ideologies that monopolize both the thought and policies that emanate from the American public square."

Yet, the task of regaining strong Catholic influence seems so daunting. So do we give up and retreat to our caves, or is there a roadmap back to a sane world? There is a way, according to Varacalli, who says, "the required restoration of the American Republic presupposes a successful," that is, orthodox, integrated, and sophisticated [Catholic] community to serve as the carrier of Catholic social doctrine."

Thus, states Varacalli, we can start by putting our own house in order. One of the most important ways to do this is through revival of "plausibility structures," defined as "a set of supportive institutional arrangements that
provides for individuals who participate in it a sense that the message being propagated is real and of central importance." In layman's terms, plausibility structures are organizations like religious orders, schools and colleges, orphanages, hospitals, lay associations like the Knights of Columbus, and newspapers, magazines and other forms of communication. These institutions and other tangible reference points are where Catholics look in carrying out the Faith in their daily lives and help shape the character of their endeavors.

For American Catholics, plausibility structures took shape after WWI, hit their full stride in 1940s and '50s, and were severely weakened by both internal and external forces post-Vatican II. The energy and vigor of these organizations go a long way in both the proper formation of Catholics and in helping evangelize the outside culture. Ideally, these structures should support and reaffirm the Church's teaching in every aspect of Catholic lives. Without an effective Catholic plausibility structure, what shapes individuals is not "the mind of the Church" but whatever is the prevalent and defining cultural message at any given moment. Today that is a Godless secularism.

How do we regain control of our plausibility structures? Varacalli suggests that a counter-revolution (my words, not his) be approached on three levels. First, individuals and families must have a conversion of the heart, with Catholic education and evangelization geared again toward saving souls. Second, the Church's infrastructure network of organizations and complementary associations must be rebuilt by orthodox Catholics becoming active in parish and other Catholic activities. This will take intense group pressure and strong institutional support from Rome but is absolutely essential in restoring authentic Catholicism to the Church's plausibility structures.

Finally, the culture at large can be changed by reinfilitrating key idea-generating sectors of American society government, corporations, mass media, education, entertainment, and others with well-catechized Catholics. Further, with their newly regained "plausibility," Catholic institutional structures which have provided the proper formation of armies of Catholic individuals and groups can then perform their tasks of enculturation, evangelization, and character formation in civil life.

Varacalli argues that the reassertion of authentic Catholicism must always be guided by the Magisterial authority, and each of the three parts of the counter-revolution must work cooperatively with each other. By a fundamental restructuring of a decaying American civilization along lines derived from Catholic social doctrine and the natural law, not only will the Church regain her influence but our society will again bloom and prosper.

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