As anyone even slightly familiar with the history of American Catholicism knows, there is a long tradition of reflection among Catholics about the relationship of Catholicism to American democracy. Alexis de Tocqueville, Orestes Brownson, John Courtney Murray and countless other thinkers—not to mention several popes and many bishops—have reflected at length upon the compatibility of what Murray famously called “the American Proposition” with “the principles of Catholic faith and morality.”

At the same time, over the past half-century, America has undergone a profound transformation. As one of the contributors to this symposium, Ryan Barilleaux notes, the past few decades have been a time of far-reaching change in American public life:

At the opening of the century, federal and state laws protected the institution of marriage, religious institutions were able to conduct their affairs with a minimum of state interference, and no one seriously questioned which bathroom a male or a female should use. Since then, however, each of these facts had changed or were seriously challenged: following passage of the Affordable Care Act (ACA) in 2010, the Obama Administration mandated that all employers in the nation—secular or religious—provide free contraceptive and abortifacient drugs to their employees; in 2015 the U.S. Supreme Court discovered a right to same-sex marriage in the Constitution; and in 2016 the Obama Administration tried to require schools across the nation to allow transgender students to use the bathroom or locker-room that corresponds to each student’s “gender identity.” Along with these legal and regulatory changes, public opinion had changed: in 2001, fifty-seven percent of Americans opposed same-sex marriage; by 2016, fifty-five percent supported it. What had once been the mainstream view in American society and public policy was increasingly being defined as a “fringe” position.
To this must be added, the threats to religious liberty that loom so large on the contemporary American public scene; threats that were unimaginable only a few years ago. Today, as Gary Glenn observes in his contribution to this symposium, “at least in the public square” we are witnessing a “nascent suppression” of Catholicism and “Catholic moral teachings.”

Against the backdrop of these and other changes (some of which are explored by the contributors), it is increasingly apparent that a new American public order is taking shape that diverges in important respects from the one that preceded it. While tensions between Catholicism and what might be called “Americanism” are nothing new—and would seem to be inevitable, if for no other reason than the status of Catholics as minority in a predominantly Protestant society—these tensions have been greatly exacerbated by the nature of the new order that seems to be emerging. While Catholic thinkers have never fully agreed about the nature of the American political experiment and its compatibility with Catholicism, it is clear that whatever challenges the original American order posed for Catholics and whatever reservations Catholic thinkers might have harbored concerning it, pale before the problems posed by its successor.

If Catholic thinkers have debated to what degree and in what respects the original American order was compatible with the principles of Catholic faith and morality, there can be no question about the simple incompatibility of these principles with the new order that is now taking shape. As Steven Brust, another contributor points out, at the heart of this new order is found “the triumph of the will”—the rejection of the idea of “a permanent human nature with its inherent moral laws and telos” in favor of a “moral relativism” and understanding of “freedom as license,” in favor of the view that “reality can be constructed by willing it into being as opposed to coming to discover the nature of reality.”

The focus of this symposium is on the emergence of this new order, its nature and causes, and its implications for the Church in America and American Catholics (or at least to those American Catholics committed to remaining faithful to the teachings of the Church). Brust’s paper explores the problems that have attended efforts to “inculturate” the faith in the American context, particularly as these difficulties manifest themselves in the areas of “law and public policy” and “primarily . . . in reference to Catholic politicians.” These difficulties stem from the fervently Protestant character of American society and the “fear of Catholics in general” and concern, in particular, about Catholics’ political “allegiance.” Confronted with this hostile environment, American Catholics have been tempted to seek converts and acceptance “by weakening the faith by omitting or downplaying certain aspects of it,” in particular, by insisting that Catholics “pay...
attention to the internal workings of the Holy Spirit within them with less external guidance and less consideration of the Church’s teachings.” This temptation has manifested itself in the political careers of Catholic politicians like Al Smith, John F. Kennedy, and, most recently and egregiously, Tim Kaine. The result has been the separation of “Catholics from the Church rather than” the conversion “of non-Catholic citizens to the Faith.”

Barilleaux’s contribution explores the new institutional order that is taking shape. Whereas the American polity was traditionally characterized by decentralization and sought to create “a federal government of limited power that would be held in check by the operation of its checks-and-balances system,” today this system has given way to a highly centralized “executive administrative state” in which the national government possesses essentially “plenary” power, and in which the bureaucracy wields “all three types of governmental power.” When combined with the traditional suspicion and even hostility toward Catholicism of American “political and social elites”—be they Protestant or secular in orientation—this new institutional order creates a “political-legal environment” that “constrains” and even “threaten[s]” Catholics, affording them “an increasingly narrow space for practicing their religion outside of the sanctuary.”

Finally, Gary Glenn’s article examines the contemporary threats to the religious liberty of Catholics through the prism of Tocqueville’s classic account of the nature of democratic societies. If the immediate cause of these threats is “the twentieth-century suppression of America’s historically “Protestant public culture” in favor of a public culture dominated by “secular liberalism,” to be properly understood this transition must be seen in the context of the cultural dynamics set in place by democratic social conditions. These social conditions, Tocqueville argues, act in a variety of ways to erode religious belief and to foster in its place the growth of “pantheism,” a “philosophical system” which denies the “immortality of the soul,” insisting instead that “all things material and immaterial, visible and invisible, which the world contains,” come into being and pass away.” Since “despotism may be able to do without faith, but freedom cannot,” by doing so democratic social conditions lay the groundwork for the replacement of “democratic freedom” by “democratic despotism.” While Tocqueville believed that Catholicism might be better equipped than Protestantism “to retain its influence against democratic society’s dissolving tendencies,” Glenn believes that even if this were true, it is “unlikely that Catholicism can successfully protect its liberty alone” in a “secular liberal public culture.”

This symposium began as a panel at the 2016 Annual Meeting of the Society of Catholic Social Scientists at Aquinas College in Grand Rapids, Michigan. The contributions of Drs. Brust, Barilleaux, and Glenn are re-
vised and condensed versions of the papers they delivered. I wish to thank the contributors for their willingness to participate in both the panel and symposium.

It is our hope that this symposium contributes in some small measure to a much-needed discussion among Catholics about their relationship to the new America that is rapidly emerging.

Notes
