

DIAGNOSIS AND PRESCRIPTION FOR CONTEMPORARY U.S. CATHOLICISM

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INTRODUCTION

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The papers that comprise this symposium represent an attempt to understand one of the most remarkable transformations in modern American history: the startling changes within the Catholic Church in the United States over the last four and a half decades. The current state of the American Church, and how it came to it, are obviously topics of intense interest to committed Catholics, and much has been said and written on them. Catholic social scientists share that interest, but have a particular responsibility to pursue the investigation of them, and to bring to bear their professional knowledge and skills.

What is sought is not hand-wringing polemics, but a coherent, persuasive and intellectually honest account. Catholic scholars are not neutral in this inquiry, but they are, or should be, objective. Precisely because we are so passionately interested, we should be satisfied with nothing other than the truth.

This symposium is expected to be the first in a series devoted to inquiries into changes in the nature and social position of not only the Catholic Church, but religion and religious institutions more generally in the modern world. After all, the changes in the American Church are not unique. Throughout the developed world similar things have happened to the Catholic Church, and numerous Protestant churches have experienced their own versions of this process, although over a longer period of time. What to call those changes is not clear: while the

word “secularization” is often used, that term has been controverted, and a remarkably diverse series of explanations have been advanced.

Inquiry must begin somewhere, and it is hard to think of a better place than with Professor David Carlin’s remarkable book, *The Decline and Fall of the Catholic Church in America*. In the pages that follow, he presents a brief, cogent account of that work. Readers may be tempted to let their knowledge of it go no further, but they would be much better served by reading it in its entirety. Certainly Professor Carlin is exceptionally well equipped to explore the topic: with a strong background in both philosophy and sociology he can view changes in the Church from a number of perspectives, and see linkages not visible to others. He is currently a professor of sociology and philosophy at Rhode Island Community College. As well, he served as a member of the Rhode Island Senate for eleven years, and acted for a term as its Majority Leader. This combination of intellectual depth and extensive experience in the world of politics makes his account unusually insightful. He has written hundreds of essays for such publications as *Commonweal*, *First Things*, *America*, *Our Sunday Visitor*, *New Oxford Review* and the *New York Times*. He is, in short, one of the voices most worth listening to in the contemporary American Catholic world.

His commentators also bring exceptional talents to their task. Dr. Joseph Varacalli is professor of sociology at Nassau Community College - SUNY. He has published three monographs on Catholicism in contemporary America, and hundreds of articles and reviews. The co-founder of the Society of Catholic Social Scientists, he served for a number of years as the editor of this journal. Dr. John Quinn is Professor of History at Salve Regina University in Newport, Rhode Island. The author of a book on the temperance crusade in nineteenth century Ireland and America, he has published numerous articles on American Catholicism.

All three have the passionate commitment, disciplined scholarship and unwavering honesty to advance our understanding. It is hard to think of a better way to begin the exploration of the topic.