

## A CATHOLIC HOUSE IN REPAIR OR FURTHER DIVIDING?

---

Joseph A. Varacalli  
Nassau Community College—S.U.N.Y.

*As she emerges from the immediate post-Vatican II period, the Catholic Church in the U.S. is experiencing simultaneously both positive and negative developments. Negatively, the immediate post-Vatican II period, characterized by the institutionalization of internal dissent, predictably produced various religious and social dysfunctions and witnessed increasing numbers within the ranks of Catholic leadership accepting secular assumptions of reality as superior to those of the historic and organically developing Catholic tradition. During the immediate contemporary era, the growth of this institutionalized dissent—characterized as a “first wave” of decomposition—has been capped but has not been significantly reduced.*

*Key to contemporary positive developments occurring at the moment is the appearance of a significant minority of young people in search of a worldview and lifestyle consistent with the spiritually rich and life-affirming worldview of the Catholic faith. Key to contemporary negative developments is a more recent “second wave” of decomposition characterized by needless and self-destructive rancor taking place within the remaining sectors of orthodox Catholicism. This second wave of decomposition is partially the result of the inability of a Catholic leadership too enamored of a secular bureaucratic mentality to articulate and enforce the parameters of Catholic orthodoxy in the form of a “Catholic center” as defined by Magisterial thinking.*

*The failure to forge an effective Catholic center has resulted in the continuation of the general decomposition of the Church in the form of a partially hidden but operative “protestantization” and individualization within the Catholic community. In this second wave, elements of orthodox Catholicism conflate their time and space-specific responses to the unsatisfactory condition of the Church in America with the far wider range of legitimate responses acceptable within the tradition of the Church Universal, thus absolutizing what are, in reality, responses that are relative, incomplete, and, in some cases, simply false. Because of the lack of an effective “Catholic center” in America, in other words and in too many cases, the organizations and movements created by serious Catholics in response to the present unsatisfactory condition of the Church have failed to revitalize and invigorate the*

*Church and her tradition through an organic development. Rather, they are serving to further splinter her into competing, and at best, partial and incomplete versions of the Catholic faith.*

*The immediate future of the Catholic Church in America, and derivatively, the direction of American civilization depend on whether legitimate Catholic leadership can create a functioning Catholic center based on Magisterial authority that is consistent with the adage, “in necessary things, unity; in doubtful things, liberty; in all things, charity.” The task of this Catholic center, under present circumstances, is to suppress and control the two waves of decomposition, both of which operate simultaneously within the contemporary Catholic Church. The Catholic center must discipline and reject the overt dissent generated by secularism, focus attention on the basic and non-negotiable principles of the Catholic faith, and significantly reduce needless conflict on prudential concerns and issues between the various sectors of orthodox Catholicism in the United States.*

## **Introduction**

The recent visit of His Holiness Benedict XVI to the United States (April 15-20, 2008) provided many an opportunity to observe, or hopefully better yet, to systematically reflect on, the state of the Catholic Church in the United States.<sup>1</sup> The papal trip provided a convenient benchmark for a reassessment and updating of my own analyses in the volumes, *Bright Promise, Failed Community: Catholics and the American Public Order* and *The Catholic Experience in America*.<sup>2</sup> What I would like to address in this brief reflection is the question of whether or not the Church in America is in the process of restoring herself, relatively speaking, to her former vigor and effectiveness as characterized in the post-World War II era up to the advent of the Second Vatican Council. (I say “relatively speaking” because I make no claim that the post-World War II Church in America represented any sort of “golden age;” my claim merely is that the Church was effective and functioning as a legitimate historical representation of Catholicity during this era.) I am presently very ambivalent regarding the immediate future prospects for the Church in America, observing both positive and negative developments of significance occurring simultaneously.<sup>3</sup>

Following the general contours of the work of Monsignor George A. Kelly, James Hitchcock, and Gerard Morrissey,<sup>4</sup> *Bright Promise*, while not ignoring the impact of broader secularizing trends in American civilization within the religious institution, focused on the

devastating consequences of a mostly unchecked internal dissent on the spiritual health and cultural/political effectiveness of the Church that accelerated in earnest in the mid-1960s. Justified in their minds by an indiscriminately selective and heterodox reading of the “spirit of Vatican II,” an influential segment of progressive dissenters attempted to “update” the Church and make her close to identical with the worldview of the prevalent secular cultural gatekeepers of the time. They denied (either overtly or more subtly) many of the fundamental truths that are intrinsic to the very core of the Catholic worldview as passed on by Christ through Magisterial authority. Examples of such fundamental truths that were denied included the existence of God, the divinity of Christ, the existence of Heaven and Hell, the claim that the Catholic religion is the assigned mediator between the demands of heaven and earth, the role of grace and of the sacraments in salvation, the reality and role of the natural law, the secondary (albeit non-negotiable) role of the social apostolate and social activism vis-à-vis the more fundamentally spiritual mission of the Church regarding the salvation of souls, the sanctity of life from the moment of conception to natural death, among other such foundational claims.

Dissent within the Church during this period mushroomed due to the weak oversight and ineffectual intervention of Bishops, betraying a lack of confidence, courage, and vision on the part of ecclesiastical authority, and in some cases, an actual support and encouragement for this dissenting class. (It is this focus on the failure of Catholic leadership and its corresponding effects of dissent on the Catholic institution and the American Catholic people, by the way, that primarily differentiates my analysis from the otherwise superb analysis of David Carlin, *The Fall and Decline of the Catholic Church in America*, the latter concentrating almost exclusively on the external forces of social change initiated in the mid-1960s within American society, which so negatively impacted the practice of the faith.)<sup>5</sup> In *Bright Promise*, I also mentioned many of the revitalized and new movements and organizations of the Church that were heroically attempting to “hold the line” for the Catholic faith against antagonistic external and internal forces and at whatever personal cost to worldly consideration.

The second book, *The Catholic Experience*, was largely consistent with the former analysis but necessarily incorporated a more pronounced discussion of the sexual scandal that had, during the intervening years, exploded into public consciousness. I discussed the scandal as the result, in part, of dissent by sexual liberationists from the moral teachings of the Church, and in part and again, by the failed actions/inaction on the part of many in the hierarchy, whose motivations,

I hypothesized, varied widely from one Bishop to the next. Influenced by authors like Colleen Carroll (*The New Faithful: Why Young Adults are Embracing Christian Orthodoxy*),<sup>6</sup> I also incorporated into this volume a brief discussion of something new on the Catholic religious horizon, i.e., the increasing number of young Catholics yearning for an alternative to our excessively materialistic, individualistic, utilitarian, and relativistic society.

### **Positive Developments**

Over the past couple of years, there has been increased awareness on the part of many inside observers of the Catholic scene in America that, just underneath the radar screen employed by most in the broader civilization, there has occurred a discernable increase in the number and roles of young Catholics open to assisting, in one way or another, the “new evangelization” called for by Pope John Paul II and re-confirmed by Pope Benedict XVI. This is significant given the precipitous generational decline in both knowledge of, and derivatively, assent to, the teachings of the Church that has occurred within the age cohorts (immediate pre-Vatican II, Vatican II, and immediate post-Vatican II) among American Catholics. As just one indicator, many have been struck by the personal accounts of, and in the palpable increase in the number of, Catholic youth participating in the annual March for Life in Washington, D.C.

The recent visit of Pope Benedict XVI to American shores and the demonstrable outpouring of love on the part of all ages, but especially among the young, seemed, at least on the surface, to suggest that the attraction of youth to the Catholic alternative was not just an “enthusiasm” (in the sense of the word as discussed by Monsignor Ronald Knox)<sup>7</sup> to the personal charisma—in a sociological, and not religious sense—of John Paul II as a “rock star.” Rather, it indicated that the attraction of youth was also, and hopefully more importantly, oriented to the institutional or collective charisma—in a religious sense as a gift of God through the reality of “apostolic succession”—that is part and parcel of the office of papacy as the vicar of Christ and the Catholic Church as the Church of Christ. Relevant to this observation also is a recent survey reported in *Zenit* (5/9/08) under the headline, “Poll: Papal Trip Had Impact on U.S. Catholics”<sup>8</sup> which was sponsored by the Knights of Columbus and conducted by the Marist College Institute for Public Opinion. This survey indicated that, as a result of the recent papal visit, Catholics in America “grew in their understanding of Church teaching,” among many other positive claims. Catholic optimists

see the salutary effects of the Pope's recent visit as part and parcel of the same religious matrix that also includes other positive developments like the recent appointments of, again relatively speaking, more orthodox and effective Bishops; the more orthodox nature of the latest cohorts of seminarians and priests; the creation of new orthodox religious orders and institutions of Catholic higher education; and the appearance of some renewed diocesan youth ministries. These signals of religious renewal among the young and all age cohorts of the Church suggest to some of the Catholic hopeful and faithful that the worst days of the past forty years plus may be over and that the restoration of the Church in America is now well underway.

### **Hanging in the Balance**

There seems to be no denying that there are outpourings of the Spirit occurring in Catholic America at the present moment. But I am far from convinced that the strands of evidence that the Catholic Church is putting her house back together represent a convincing case that the Church is anywhere close to being out of the American religious wilderness. As I see it, the Church is experiencing a series of counter-movements, some favoring restoration and others a further weakening. Simply put, the immediate prospects of the Church restoring herself at present depend on decisions and actions made, or not made, by Catholics in the United States.

### **Negative Developments**

A more pessimistic prognosis is one that involves the claim that, as she moves to the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, the Catholic Church in this country, qua both institution and community, is witnessing a continual decomposition and unraveling. The nature of the most recent wave of decomposition, however, is different from the earlier (but still existing) movement that characterized the Church from the mid-1960s through to most of the remainder of the twentieth century. The main distinction is that the first wave of decomposition is fomented mostly by those who accept *secular* assumptions and philosophies fundamentally at odds with a Catholic worldview. The present or second wave of decomposition, by comparison, is occurring within the remaining sectors of orthodox Catholic America. It is fostered by two dialectically related movements, first, the weakening of a Catholic "center," itself a reflection of ineffective, and occasionally, unfaithful Church leadership, and second,

by many members of the Catholic rank and file who too readily identify their own prudential judgments, or the prudential judgments of some wing of the Catholic tradition, with the overall “Mind of the Church” constituting, methodologically, a “protestantization” and “individualization.” Presently, both the first and second waves of decomposition operate together. Combined they have severely battered and weakened the integrity and effectiveness of the Church’s religious ministry and social apostolate.

Bringing with it the rejection of prudence and charity, this second wave of decomposition involves the increased willingness of sectors of the orthodox community to speak and act maliciously toward each other over issues that, while very important, and in many cases, involving grave matter, remain legitimately debatable within an authentically Catholic religious and ethical framework. Among many other issues that are presently and oftentimes unnecessarily internally splintering the orthodox Catholic community in the United States are those dealing with 1) the compatibility of American civilization and Catholicism; 2) voting and other associated political activities; 3) the morality of the American involvement in the Iraq War; 4) immigration policy in the United States; 5) the relationship of capitalism, socialism, and distributism vis-à-vis Catholicism; 6) approaches to the reduction of poverty; 7) reform in Catholic education, at both the grammar/high school levels and in higher education; 8) the role of women in Church and society; 9) developments in liturgy; and 10) the issue of deference to the decisions and policies of Bishops and their diocesan bureaucracies.

One example of a basic issue that has produced unnecessary rancor between elements of the authentic Catholic community involves the evaluation of American civilization from an authentically Catholic perspective. Fairness, realism, objectivity, I contend, should acknowledge the *ambiguous* cultural and moral reality of the present situation in the United States. This translates into rejecting *both* a “knee-jerk” idolatrous worship and defense of things present-day American as well as the invitation, offered over the past 40 years or so, from the secular and religious left but also now by elements of a radical Catholic traditionalism, to join the “America-hating club.” The former denies the many failures of our civilization, past and present, while the latter, conversely, studiously, and often-times quite consciously, ignores American civilization’s undeniable accomplishments and virtues. America is not, and never has been or will be, the Kingdom of God here on earth; neither is it (presently at least) Nazi Germany or Communist Russia or China.

There can be little doubt that America *is* presently accelerating its descent into a culture of death concomitant with its overall secularization. America *is* in need of significant reform in its vision and social institutions. It is also to be expected that there are legitimate disagreements that should be expressed publicly and civilly by Catholic citizens of the Republic about the ways, and to what extent, American civilization must reform herself to be more acceptably closer to the Christian ideal. Given, however, that there is still too much that is positive and life-affirming in the present state of American life, and even more so, in its potential for reform, these disagreements should not lead to various orthodox sectors of the Church in America hurling anathemas at each other about “not being good Catholics” and denying their respective rights to reasonable, empirically grounded, and rationally argued judgments about the present and possible future state of the American experiment vis-à-vis an authentically Catholic frame of reference.

Both 1) a detailed investigation of the ten issues mentioned above (and others) and 2) an analysis of just under what conditions one can accurately make the claim that some position or activity of a historically viewed legitimate sub-cultural variation is incompatible with orthodox Catholicism is outside the scope of this paper. It requires a full-length monograph analysis devoted to the application of fundamental Catholic principles to the cultural and historical exigencies of time and place.<sup>9</sup> Much, although not all, of this “informal excommunicating” between and among the present day orthodox Catholic sectors is both unjustified and destructive.

### **Two Types of Decomposition**

The primary engine of the first major wave of decomposition, commencing in earnest in the mid-1960s, centered around the revolt of Catholic intellectuals, academics, and bureaucrats who desired the acceptance of, and rewards offered by, the secular cultural gatekeepers of the day. These progressive Catholics wanted to be freed from what they viewed as the constraints of the Catholic tradition, most prominently, the requirement to conduct their intellectual studies and live their lives from a Catholic frame of reference, including the Church’s rejection of the idea of an “autonomous individualism” and the Catholic prohibition against a licentious sexual morality. The dissenters from the mid-1960s onwards, again, were helped indirectly by the inaction of the hierarchy, and perhaps in select cases, by Bishops supporting the revolt, to some degree and in some manner, many times

*sotto voce*. The past ten years or so has seen a certain lid being placed on the further spread of dissent within the Church; short of egregious displays of disobedience, however, dissenters, in large part, have been left alone, and they operate more or less autonomously within their colleges, schools, parishes, religious orders, and diocesan organizations hoping for what, for them at least, will be “better” days ahead. The dissenters presently still maintain a practical (although not theoretically or juridically justified) control of major sections of the organizational infrastructure of the American branch of the Church Universal. However, it is important to qualify somewhat the argument about the entrenched nature of dissent within the Church by following the observation of Kenneth Whitehead, that “to some extent this situation has seen at least a modicum of self-correction, since the rebellious elements in the Church have not been entirely successful in transmitting their heterodox viewpoints to a new generation of followers. As these dissenters retire, die, or otherwise disappear from the scene, they are not infrequently replaced by ... (those) ... of a more orthodox and obedient persuasion. The episcopal structure of the Church has guaranteed that doctrinal and disciplinary authority continues to remain in the hands of the bishops—i.e., does not pass into the hands of dissenters—even when the bishops do not effectively exercise the authority they possess.”<sup>10</sup>

The second wave of decomposition taking place in some orthodox sectors of the contemporary Church has been encouraged largely by the present refusal, for various reasons, of the Bishops’ collective failure to address head on the dissent involved in the first wave of decomposition. This second wave started initially to emerge in the immediate post-Vatican II period of the Church, given the mostly unopposed misuse of the documents of the Second Vatican Council by dissenters in their attempts to internally secularize the Catholic Church. The second wave has been growing larger and larger, concomitant with the length of time that Bishops have failed to adequately respond to the crisis of dissent. For the most part, the Bishops have failed by not intervening, when necessary, in the life of the organizational activities of the Church and by not articulating clearly the legitimate parameters of Catholic thought and activity. This continual failure on the part of ecclesiastical leadership has produced, in many cases strong, and in some cases, bitter and unhealthy responses on the part of many frustrated and otherwise committed contemporary members of the Church, thus fostering a second decomposition, albeit of a different nature from that of the first.

Barring some religious re-conversion, those who are part of the first wave of decomposition are lost to the Church. To borrow the

terminology of Alasdair MacIntyre,<sup>11</sup> secularism and Catholicism represent incommensurate worldviews. However, those who are part of the second wave can be much more easily rehabilitated; what is needed here is an expansion of an already formed and authentic Catholic consciousness, not the replacement of an internally consistent non-Catholic alternative. Expulsions from the Church from the first category are matters of philosophical and ethical consistency as well as institutional integrity and maybe even survival. There is no injustice perpetuated on Catholics who are disciplined and on Catholics who might be ex-communicated and, literally, “dis-graced” because they have consciously rejected, through their actions, the foundational vision of the Catholic Faith. Defections from the second category, however, are oftentimes tragic for both the individual and the Catholic community and are mostly unnecessary and not inevitable.

In describing sociologically the present second wave of decomposition, I am reminded of the poem of William Butler Yeats, “The Second Coming” published in 1920. In the poem, Yeats is responding to the weakening of Western civilization and the enervation of its aristocratic leadership. I believe that the formal outline of his analysis is analogous to the contemporary situation of the Catholic Church in America. I quote from selected lines of his poem: “Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; mere anarchy is loosed upon the world”... “The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity”... “And what rough beast, its hour come round at last, slouches toward Bethlehem to be born?”

This pessimistic scenario would claim that things are increasingly falling apart in the Catholic Church of the U.S. in one of three interrelated ways. First, for many secular progressive dissenters (who nonetheless subjectively still claim, for whatever reason, the Catholic label), the Church, especially her hierarchy, is rejected as it is viewed as an unnecessary, oppressive, and power-obsessed institution. The Magisterially-defined Catholic center is thus rejected. Second, for many nominal and non-ideologically oriented Catholics, Catholicism lacks any significant “realness” in their consciousness. In this case, the existence of any Magisterially defined Catholic center is either unacknowledged or is responded to with indifference. As God and His Church fade from the consciousness of individuals representing the first two cases, new, false, and oftentimes worldly gods emerge to fill the vacuum. Third, given the failure of the Bishops to implement an authentic Catholic worldview, for some orthodox Catholics the Magisterially-defined Catholic center increasingly is apprehended merely as an unattainable and lifeless, albeit a beautiful and coherent,

abstraction. Such Catholics sense too much of a disconnect or dissonance between what the Church espouses as an ideal and what is operationally embedded in too many of her organizations.

How can one explain the sociological dynamics of this Catholic “falling apart” by so many groups and individuals? The answer lies in two movements that, perhaps somewhat counter-intuitively, are linked together and dialectically reinforce each other. One is an official Church leadership becoming too secularized. The other is a lower-echelon clergy and religious and laity becoming too protestantized and individualized. The first, following sociologist Max Weber, is an excessive and hyper “rationalization.”<sup>12</sup> The second, following the terminology of the Protestant theologian and sociologist, Ernest Troeltsch,<sup>13</sup> is a movement away from a “Church” unity to a religious orientation combining elements of both a “mystical” individualism and a “charismatic” sectarianism. Closely related to Troeltsch’s discussion is the analysis of the contemporary liberal Catholic, Father Andrew M. Greeley, and of his advocacy of what he terms a “communal Catholicism” or of a highly selective, “pick and choose” form of “cafeteria Catholicism.”<sup>14</sup>

Regarding rationalization, too many of the Church’s “best,” i.e., the Bishops and other Catholic leaders in its official bureaucracies, lacking sufficient religious “conviction,” appear to be—and in some cases, have been—transformed into secularized and disenchanting “organizational men.”<sup>15</sup> This, in turn, fosters a “cult of administration”<sup>16</sup> characterized by a myopic preoccupation with daily routine tasks, self-serving and inwardly-focused bureaucratic imperatives, and in some cases, the simple pursuit of power, prestige, and wealth for their own sake. In other words, following the term employed both by the Protestant theologian, Rudolph Sohm, and the ex-Protestant and agnostic classical sociologist, Max Weber,<sup>17</sup> the Catholic Church has witnessed a “routinization” of at least some of the charisma of at least some Church leadership.

Over a prolonged period of time, this excessive “routinization of charisma” among official Church leadership encourages, in turn, a reaction, a backlash, on the part of those Catholics not centrally involved with the inner administrative workings of the institution but who are devoted to the Catholic faith. This backlash and reaction involves the emergence of numerous “would-be saviors” and “charismatic wannabes” full of “passionate intensity,” who desire—quite audaciously and arrogantly and with their own limited time and space “solutions”—to revitalize a Catholic Church with an organic developing tradition spanning no less than 2,000 years. These solutions, while oftentimes not devoid of some partial connection to a Magisterially-defined tradition

and some practical utility, too often promote the interests and egos of the putative “saviors.” This is an example of what the psychologist of religion, Gordon Allport, meant by an “extrinsic” or “immature” religious orientation (as compared to those, relatively speaking, more “intrinsic” and “mature.”).<sup>18</sup> Put another way, the Church’s real charisma, a gift from God, has been increasingly viewed by many as being separated from its office-holders and social institutions with the subsequent void being attempted to be filled by individuals with their own self-defined specific missions and understandings of Christianity as was the case in the Protestant Reformation. In short, what is occurring is what sociologist Edward A. Shils would term a “dispersion of charisma,”<sup>19</sup> but too often not one channeled in a way to revitalize the structures and institutions of the Church but to splinter it further along the lines of a highly selective and individualized Catholicism. While Catholics are comforted by the promise of Christ that the “gates of hell shall not prevail” against the Church Universal, this scenario, if unchecked, portends a long, cold winter for the Church in America, and derivatively, for American civilization, the latter, quite possibly, to be dominated by any number of possible “ungodly beasts.”

It is important to point out that the history of Catholicism *is* replete with saints, social movements, religious orders, and individuals through whom God works, and in many cases, in response to some failure in the Church and society. These historic manifestations are organic reflections of the authentic charisma of Jesus Christ. And it is also important to point out that any religious tradition operating in a modern context *does* require a certain amount and type of bureaucratization, legalization, and routinization of charisma if it is successfully to institutionalize and evangelize its message in everyday life. While necessarily prioritizing the spiritual, the Church needs to maintain a balance between its constitutive dimensions, a balance that has eluded the contemporary Catholic Church in the United States. At present, the cart has been placed in front of the horse, with its secular bureaucratic component dominating and weakening its traditional and charismatic elements.

In a functioning Catholic Church, the Catholic center weeds out the chaff from the wheat, and then assists in the distribution of the wheat to meet the spiritual needs of the religious community and the world outside of it. In a dysfunctional Catholic Church, Catholic leadership fails in separating the chaff from the wheat with the disastrous result of a form of religious relativism in which almost anything is allowed to pass as a legitimate variation of the Faith. The argument of this reflection is that the Catholic center in the contemporary Church of the U.S., while

not completely defunct, is far from functioning in a satisfactory manner. As Karl Adam has noted in his *The Spirit of Catholicism*, “the divine must necessarily suffer in its incarnation,” and “as long as Catholicism lasts, it will feel the need for reform for a more perfect assimilation of its actuality to the ideal which illuminates its path.”<sup>20</sup> A key question here is whether Pope Benedict XVI and other key Church leadership are aware of the related problems of an ineffective Catholic center, overt internal dissent, and indiscriminate manifestations of individualism within the Catholic population at large and have the resolve and ability to reform the presently unacceptable situation.

How can one best conceptualize the ideal or optimal functioning of a Magisterially-defined “center?”<sup>21</sup> At the level of its theoretical ideal (not empirical reality), the relationship between a Magisterially-defined center and the rest of the “people of God” should represent a legitimate expression of community or “communion,” along both vertical and horizontal lines, as it has developed organically over time.<sup>22</sup> Given the Catholic understanding that the Holy Spirit does not have an exclusive relationship with the pope and the Magisterium, but can and does enlighten bishops, priests, other religious, and lay persons, the hierarchy is expected to listen attentively to the theological reflections of all. Put into the language of cybernetics theory, the Magisterium as the Church’s “command post” is expected to receive “input” and be open to being energized from non-magisterial sources, but, in the final analysis, is to decide what constitutes or doesn’t constitute ideas and practices that belong within the parameters of Catholic orthodoxy.<sup>23</sup> For its part, Church authority, following the title of the latest of Russell Shaw’s important series of books, should have “nothing to hide” from the laity and American citizenry in the sense of making public the logic and rationale behind key decisions that affect the life of the Church and the civilization in which it is embedded.<sup>24</sup> On the other hand, all elements of the Catholic community that take the Catholic heritage seriously are expected to work cooperatively with each other.

Given the failure of the Catholic center to operate satisfactorily, the pessimistic scenario as depicted in this essay lays out an empirically tragic possibility. It is that many young people—with their good will, earnestness, spiritual hunger, openness to the transcendent, yearning for the Truth that is God, and who are increasingly rejecting of the false promises of a secular, materialistic age—will neither be satisfactorily attracted to, nor received by, a Catholic Church that is still characterized by too many significant dysfunctions. These dysfunctions range, again, from the still-significant institutionalized sectors of dissent found

throughout the fibers of the Church; to a Church leadership refusing, too often, to articulate and enforce Church orthodoxy; to the existence, practically speaking, of autonomous wings of orthodox Catholicism that do not fully or satisfactorily embody the universal breadth of the Catholic tradition or work cooperatively within it.

Simply put, there is no guarantee that discontented young Americans—or, for that matter, Americans of any age—automatically will find a positive resolution for their existential crises by embracing the Catholic Church as mother and teacher, at least as she appears in this country to their secular eyes. Some discontented youth will find solace, again, in some “enthusiasm,” whether it be with a conservative Protestant alternative, or in some non-Christian religion or philosophy, or, for that matter, in some superficial, secular would-be messiah or political movement. Or, just as likely and almost as unfortunately, some will convert to a “sectarian” wing of the Catholic Church instead of accepting the comprehensive worldview and promise of a 2,000 year old institution in all her completeness, majesty, and splendor as defined, taught, and protected by Magisterial authority.

The latter possibility, i.e., incomplete conversions to the Catholic faith, is always a perennial threat to Catholicism, given her internally structured, albeit ideally wholesome, pluralism. In the felicitous phrase of Karl Adam, Catholicism, at its best, is “an infinitely various yet unitary thing.”<sup>25</sup> On the one hand, it always takes much vigilance and work to keep the Catholic house together and to channel its diversity as a way to best address the mystery, complexity, and ideal required balance both within and between the supernatural and natural spheres of existence. The threat of Catholicism unraveling in various centrifugal directions is greatly exacerbated when Church authority is ineffective in setting and enforcing the parameters of the tradition and when, as is the case in the contemporary American situation, the Church is embedded in a culture emphasizing a hyper-individualism that fosters a protestantization for those accepting a supernaturally-based religious commitment.

Especially under present conditions, one must always be wary about the possibility of individual Catholics focusing on one or a few of the elements of the total Catholic worldview at the expense, so to speak, of the “total package.” The increased chances that individuals will be attracted to one strand of the “infinitely various” elements of the Catholic worldview at the expense of it as a “unitary thing” is tied not merely to the secularization/rationalization, protestantization/ individuation, and decomposition of the Catholic Church, qua institution, as hitherto discussed. It is also dialectically related to what James Hunter, in his

cogent analysis, *Culture Wars*, refers to as the growth of “para-church” organizations.<sup>26</sup> A para-church organization can be defined as an independent organization often drawing support from a broader inter-denominational base of religions and cultural groups in support of some particular political, social, or spiritual mission involving such issues as abortion, homosexuality, “social justice” along socialist lines, “economic freedom” along capitalist lines, war and nuclear weapons along pacifist lines, etc. The temptation, then, in joining these “interest group” organizations is that it is the specific issue that becomes what the liberal Protestant theologian, Paul Tillich, has referred to as the “ultimate concern”<sup>27</sup> of the individual and not the total Catholic heritage with its independent logic that weaves many otherwise seemingly disparate issues into an organic whole.

The sectarian temptation within the contemporary Catholic Church can easily and, empirically has, become an operant reality. Some who are attracted to the Catholic Church because of her forthright opposition to the grotesque practice of abortion nonetheless reject or don’t fully understand the full Catholic logic behind the rejection of the use of artificial means of contraception or of human embryonic stem cell research. Some traditionalists, while seeing themselves as members of the Church, come too close to rejecting, *tout court*, the Second Vatican Council. There are elements within the overall Catholic charismatic movement which remain more Protestant than Catholic in their fundamental religious understandings. Some of the new traditional orders view themselves, practically speaking, as self-contained and autonomous. There are various Catholic utopians, whether of the political/cultural right or left, who refuse to see that there are more than a few aspects of American civilization that are constructed along lines consistent with the natural law and Catholic social doctrine and that there are other American social institutions and sectors that are salvageable and subject to reform and purification. Some Catholic “soft socialists”—misinterpreting the Catholic principle of “subsidiarity”—view the Church’s social teachings as always a call for increasing the role, authority, and coercive power of government and are, in turn, indifferent or perhaps even hostile to the Church’s position on issues that promote and defend innocent human life. On the other hand, there are Catholic “soft capitalists”—also misinterpreting the Catholic principle of “subsidiarity”—who desire a knee jerk reduction in all government sponsored programs aimed at addressing any “preferential option for the poor” and who come close to advocating an “autonomous individualism” in American social life.

## Prescription

Prescriptively, the call here in response to the continual decomposition of the Catholic Church is to institutionalize within the fabric of the authentic Catholic community in the United States, the implications of the adage, “In necessary things, unity; in doubtful things, liberty; and in all things, charity,” which is commonly, although far from definitively, attributed to Saint Augustine.<sup>28</sup> This adage is relevant in dealing with both the first wave of decomposition brought about by outright dissent and the second wave with its unnecessary rancor and disharmony. In the first case, severe disciplinary actions on the part of the Church hierarchy, up to and including excommunication, are called for, and in the latter case, the exercise of self-discipline and prudence are required on the part of all sectors of the faithful Catholic community.

On the one hand, it would constitute an impossible and impractical burden on Roman authority, as the final arbiter of the teachings of the Church’s Magisterium, to be expected to intervene, in any effective way, in the everyday, routine crises, problems, and issues that arise in the various sectors of the Church in America. (This point, even if accepted, does not excuse legitimate Roman authorities from not having more effectively, efficiently, expeditiously, and frequently intervened in the life of the American Catholic Church than they have over the past fifty years.) Juridical oversight, and what sociologists call “social control,” is primarily the job of the Bishops of our country. They are the guardians of their dioceses, and they possess the acknowledged authority and wield the internal organizational power to accomplish the task of setting correctly the parameters of authentic Catholic thought and activity.

Whether with or without effective ecclesiastical leadership and intervention, the question, however, arises as to what the devoted and serious members of the overall Catholic community can do in their everyday activities to attempt to keep the Church whole and faithful to her mission as set forth and constantly reaffirmed by Jesus Christ. The answer is that they can do what they can, i.e., attempt to institutionalize the wisdom of the prescription, “in necessary things, unity; in doubtful things, liberty; and in all things, charity,” in their own lives and in the ministries and apostolates of which they are a part.

That in necessary things there should be unity requires that all beliefs and practices that are based on understandings of reality that are incompatible with the Catholic worldview and that falsely contend to be authentically Catholic should be exposed as such. Outright dissent disguised as legitimate Catholic pluralism cannot be allowed to exist

uncontested by either Church authority or by serious clergy, religious, and laity, fostering, as it does, an “internal secularization” within the Church. Outright dissent should be responded to clearly and quickly but in a civil and reasonable manner, with the logic behind any condemnation explained and publicly constituting a “teaching moment” for all interested parties.

Conversely, that in doubtful things there should be liberty requires an acceptance of a range of legitimate pluralism in terms of philosophies, rituals, organizations, and social policies that accept Magisterial authority and inspiration or at least are consistent with it. That in all things there should be charity requires the rejection of mean-spiritedness and the acknowledgement that all human beings are free to hold to their own viewpoints and perspectives while, simultaneously, insisting that not all viewpoints and perspectives are either Catholic, consistent with the Catholic worldview, or contain equal amounts of ultimate truth, beauty, or utility.

The successful institutionalization of the vision contained within the adage will not and should not end legitimate debate between believing and practicing Catholics. Total conformity to “one way of being Catholic” is neither possible nor desirable given a certain amount of inherent diversity in a religion, following Chesterton, that “has spanned the ages” and that consists of many different sub-traditions; that emphasizes the role of prudential judgment in non-essential matters or where the factual state of things are many times unclear; and that constitutively promotes and honors the role of individual conscience, provided that its formation is shaped and consistent with Catholic doctrine and the natural law. Relevant here is the distinction, pointed out by Brian Simboli, between “disputation” which is wholesome and beneficial to the Catholic tradition and petty and small-minded bickering which undermines the Faith.<sup>29</sup>

The goal of the adage, however, at least applied to the present situation of the Catholic Church in the U.S., is to re-focus energies on the promotion of what are unassailably the essential aspects of the faith. Conversely put, the goal is to eliminate the needless and self-destructive rancor over issues of prudential application found within the core of the serious Catholic community. This is a core whose viability and cooperation with the Church’s institutions and organizations is necessary if the “new evangelization” promoted by such figures as Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI is to have even the slightest chance, humanly speaking, of flowering, in conjunction with God’s grace, in the American context.

In the present situation, with an increasingly powerful secular monopoly antagonistic to the Catholic worldview dominating the American public square, the only chance of maintaining and spreading the Catholic worldview is for an authentic “Catholic center,” anchored by Magisterial authority, first, to coalesce and acquire the psychologically necessary “accent on reality” for members of the Catholic community; second, to hold together, strengthen over time, and organically develop; and, third, eventually and derivatively, to expand and influence the temporal sphere of American civilization. What is needed is a “back to basics” movement in the Catholic Church, emphasizing education and evangelization, holiness and humility, civility and hard work, and dedication to living out the essentials of the Catholic worldview in a loving and accepting manner and in cooperation with all people of good will, including, as the obvious starting block of renewal, all the sectors of the remaining elements of orthodox Catholicism in our country.

### **Consequences of Decomposition**

The consequences of the combined forms of decomposition as discussed in this paper—this internal “hara kiri,” if you will—is to further weaken the already unsatisfactory state of the integrity of the Catholic Church in America. The result is a Church with a significantly lessened ability to serve as a leaven for American civilization and, more importantly, to fulfill its mandate to assist individual souls to eternal salvation. Religiously, the Catholic Church serves as the most important mediator between God and humankind, and sociologically, in the United States, as the greatest potential source of moral authority in society and mediator between the individual and the large organizations of the American public sphere, most notably, the government, the corporations, Hollywood and the mass media, and the public educational establishment. Without an effective Catholic Church as a “mediating structure,” to refer to the important concept of Peter L. Berger and Richard Neuhaus,<sup>30</sup> it is the secular mainstream value system (or what the classical sociologist, Emile Durkheim,<sup>31</sup> referred to as the “collective conscience”) that shapes the minds and hearts of Americans (just as in the earliest period of American history, Americans were shaped by a generic Protestant worldview). At present, this translates into a radical individualism, materialism, utilitarianism, and moral and religious relativism shaping, in an almost uncontested manner, the thoughts and behaviors of the vast majority of Catholic and non-Catholic Americans. This deleterious influence, in turn, is dialectically related to the

pervasive institutionalization of a secularized and self-serving bureaucratic mentality shorn of any concern for the common good that dominates the bureaucracies of the public sphere, whether those of government or of corporate capitalism and even in voluntary associations, like that of the Catholic Church in America.

In the case of the Catholic Church, this secularized bureaucratic mentality, in conjunction with the widespread individualism of the broader culture, has encouraged both overt dissent of a secular nature and a protestantization within the remaining core of the orthodox Catholic community. This secularized bureaucratic mentality, alternatively and variously, promotes a progressivist agenda, the elevation of organizational means over religious ends, and a “let’s get along” philosophy of religious and moral relativism that tries mightily to offer “no offense” to any and all.<sup>32</sup> On the one hand, overt dissent from core Catholic principles often-times go unchallenged on the part of ecclesiastical authorities. Examples would include “Catholic” politicians promoting the legal right to abortion; the equation of pacifism within the Church as a legitimate alternative to just war theory; the denial that nation-states have the right to secure the integrity of their borders; the viewing of either socialism or capitalism as intrinsically compatible in all their essential respects with the Catholic tradition; the positing of poverty in exclusively material terms; the claim that the Catholic academy and “knowledge class” possess equal (or superior) authority vis-à-vis the Magisterium; the claim that there are no essential differences between the nature and functions of men and women equal in dignity; the rejection of the validity of either the Latin or Novus Ordo Mass; the rejection of the Bishops’ duty to pronounce and act definitively on core issues of faith and morality; etc.

On the other hand, the present day “crisis in authority” and protestantization also entails the spread of increasing rancor, disunity, and “unofficial mutual excommunicating” within the remaining sectors of the orthodox Catholic community over issues that are, by their very nature, prudential in import. Examples would include the issue of voting for either a pro-life Republican, Democratic, or Independent party candidate for political office; whether or not the present American military involvement in Iraq can be justified through reference to “just war” criteria; the decision as to whether one should emphasize the needs of immigrants over those of more established American citizens; disagreements over whether or not, or under what circumstances, “democratic capitalism” can be compatible with the Catholic vision; disagreements over which ethical means can be employed to reduce poverty and promote the common good; arguments over the proper

“ratio” of Catholic versus non-Catholic influences and ideas in schools that have significant roots in the Catholic heritage; disagreements over whether or not mothers employed in the work force should utilize day care facilities for their children; ill will over the issue of the superiority of either the Latin Mass or Novus Ordo Mass, and battles over legitimate prudential applications of Catholic social thought and policy on the part of Bishops and their professional staffs.

This inarticulate situation, borderline normlessness, and chaotic state within the Catholic Church has created the conditions under which the ungodly beast(s) of which Yeats spoke have emerged and will continue to do so. Will the Catholic Church of the United States have the ability and desire to put its house together, thus drawing and then defending a line against an encroaching evil manifesting itself from both within and without? One final and cautionary note: time is also a crucial consideration. As the Church burns, so to speak, the secular hegemony of the secular American public square strengthens and solidifies itself, making any possible Catholic resurgence—at least to the secular eye—less and less likely.<sup>33</sup>

### **Conclusion**

There is no doubt that at this moment within the Catholic Church of the United States, one can discern positive stirrings of the Spirit, including, as Jeffrey Mirus has recently noted, some very recent positive episcopal activity on the part of some Catholic American Bishops on issues regarding bioethics, family life, and moral reasoning in public life.<sup>34</sup> However, continuing issues of institutionalized dissent that remain mostly unchallenged, a lack of inspired and effective leadership on the part of the majority of Catholic Bishops, and needless and apparently intransigent in-fighting within the subcultures of orthodox America—all themselves a reflection of an ineffective “Catholic center”—pose threats to channeling—creatively and faithfully—any positive developments discernible on a contemporary scene moving more and more away, in its public presence, from the Catholic Christian vision. The health and welfare of the Church and a positive, life-affirming course for American civilization require a revitalized and coherent Catholic presence in religious, civil, and public life.

## Notes

1. This essay was presented at the 16th Annual Conference of the Society of Catholic Social Scientists, October 24th, 2008, DeSales University, Allentown, PA. Earlier drafts were read on March 30th, 2008 at St. Kevin's Conference Center in Flushing, Queens, New York, jointly sponsored by the Office of Faith Formation, Respect Life Education and the Joint Respect Life Committee on the Diocese of Brooklyn and also on May 21st, 2008 for the "Faith on Tap" Program at Kellenberg High School in Uniondale, New York. I would like to thank the following individuals who were kind enough to provide critical feedback—some (but not all) of which I accepted—on one or more of the earlier drafts of this essay: Richard S. Myers of Ave Maria School of Law, Stephen M. Krason of Franciscan University, Mark Lowery of the University of Dallas, Brian Simboli of Lehigh University, Monsignor Robert J. Batule of the Immaculate Conception Seminary of the Diocese of Rockville Centre, Donald J. D'Elia of S.U.N.Y.-New Paltz, Kenneth Whitehead of the Fellowship of Catholic Scholars, and Russell Shaw, Catholic journalist and commentator. This essay is far better for their input but it should be clear that the total responsibility for the line of argumentation provided belongs to the author.

2. Joseph A. Varacalli, *Bright Promise, Failed Community: Catholics and the American Public Order* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2001) and *The Catholic Experience in America* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2006).

3. The author understands that he runs the risk of appearing to some as a "holier than thou" modern day Gnostic "speaking down" to his fellow Catholics who, in many cases, have contributed significantly and much more so that he has to the cause of Christ and His Church. However, I am buttressed in my attempt to address the central question of this essay, as embodied in the title, by the Catholic belief that the Church accepts truth, from whatever source, including from this sinner. If my understandings of the present and dire situation of the Church in America is anywhere close to correct, the risk to personal reputation is worth it, because the stakes are so high for so many, for the Church and American civilization, involving, as they do, nothing less than the integrity of the Church and her ability to save souls and to serve as an effective evangelizing and cultural force in the United States.

4. Monsignor George A. Kelly, *The Battle for the American Church* (New York: Doubleday, 1979) and *The Battle for the American Church Revisited* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1995); James Hitchcock, *The Decline and Fall of Radical Catholicism* (New York: Image Books,

- 1972); and Gerard Morrissey, *The Crisis of Dissent* (Front Royal, VA: Christendom College Press, 1985).
5. David R. Carlin, *The Decline and Fall of the Catholic Church in America* (Manchester, New Hampshire: Sophia Press, 2003). Also see my review of his book, in the *Catholic Social Science Review* (Volume Ten, 2005: 123-130).
6. Colleen Carroll, *The New Faithful: Why Young Adults Are Embracing Christian Orthodoxy* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 2002).
7. Monsignor Ronald Knox, *Enthusiasm* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994).
8. "Poll: Papal Trip Had Impact on U.S. Catholics," *Zenit*, May 5, 2009, <http://www.zenit.org/article-22539?1=english>
9. I am presently working on such a full length monograph response, tentatively titled *A House in Repair or Further Dividing? The Catholic Church of the United States in the Decades Ahead*.
10. Email communication with Kenneth Whitehead, August 11, 2008.
11. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theology* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984).
12. See the discussion of Peter L. Berger and Brigitte Berger on Max Weber's theory of rationalization in their *Sociology: A Biographical Approach* (second and expanded edition) (New York: Basic Books, 1975: 333-340).
13. Ernest Troeltsch, *The Social Teachings of the Christian Churches* (London: George Allen and Unwin, Ltd., 1931: 376-377). Also see the discussions of Troeltsch's work by Nicholas J. Demerath and Philip E. Hammond, *Religion in Social Context: Tradition and Tradition* (New York: Random House, 1969: 70) and by Monsignor George A. Kelly, *The Battle for the American Church* (New York: Doubleday, 1979: 40).
14. Father Andrew M. Greeley, *The Communal Catholic* (New York: Seabury, 1976) and *The American Catholic* (New York: Basic Books, 1977).
15. William H. Whyte, Jr. *The Organization Man* (New York: Simon and Shuster, Inc., 1956).
16. The phrase was suggested to me in private conversation with Professor Stephen M. Krason of Franciscan University of Steubenville.
17. For a fascinating and informative discussion of contrasting Protestant and Catholic interpretations of the "routinization of charisma" as it applies to the Catholic Church, see the work of John L. Gresham, Jr., "The Collective Charisma of the Catholic Church: Werner Stark's Critique of Max Weber's Routinization Theory," *Catholic Social Science Review* (Volume Seven, 2003: 123-139, WWW.CSSRONLINE.ORG). Some Catholic readers of this essay may

feel a bit uneasy with my sociological analysis, which would seem generally consistent with some of the claims of corruption made by Protestant critics of the Catholic Church at the time of the Reformation. My response? On the one hand, I affirm the historic understanding of Catholics that the Catholic Church, guided by the Pope and the Church's Magisterium, *is* the Church of Jesus Christ and is protected from ultimate failure. On the other hand, the degenerative movements, as discussed in this essay, unquestionably produce dysfunctions in the contemporary operation of the Catholic Church. When Catholics, including Catholic leaders, increasingly refuse God's graces and instruction, the Church, with its human side, submerges (although never fully destroys) its undeniable divine foundation and underpinnings.

18. Gordon Allport, *The Individual and His Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1960).

19. Edward A. Shils, *Center and Periphery: Essays in Macro Sociology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975.)

20. Karl Adam, *The Spirit of Catholicism* (Garden City, New York: Image Books, 1954: 14, 230).

21. That all human societies, and by implication, organizations, require an articulated vision that provides integration is sociologically indebted to the work of Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (New York: Collier Books, 1965). Also see the work of Edward A. Shils, *Center and Periphery: Essays in Macro Sociology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975).

22. Although he does not stress the hierarchal dimension of the Church as much as I do, I am indebted generally to the brilliant work of Russell Shaw, *Catholic Laity in the Mission of the Church* (Bethune, South Carolina: Requiem Press, 2005.) See my review of this work in the *Catholic Social Science Review* (Volume 12, 2007: 398-402).

23. Chapter Two, "The Formal Organization of the Catholic Church," in Joseph A. Varacalli, *The Catholic Experience in America* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publications, 2006:9-14.)

24. Russell Shaw, *Nothing to Hide: Secrecy, Communication, and Communion in the Catholic Church* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2008).

25. Karl Adam, *The Spirit of Catholicism* (Garden City, New York: Image Books, 1954: 9).

26. James Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991: 88).

27. Paul Tillich, *The Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper and Row, 1957).

28. The adage or maxim, “In Necessary Things, Unity; in Doubtful Things, Liberty, and In All Things, Charity” is commonly attributed to St. Augustine. However, there is much debate about whether this attribution is historically correct. An email communication on August 16, 2008 graciously sent to me by S.C.S.S. member, Maurizio Ragazzi, indicated his own initial research uncovered a reference to the maxim in the 1959 encyclical of Pope John XXIII, *Ad Petri Cathedram* (paragraph 72) that was repeated in one of the documents of the Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et spes* (paragraph 92) but with no attribution to Saint Augustine.
29. Email communication graciously sent to me by Brian Simboli of Lehigh University, August 30, 2008.
30. Peter L. Berger and Father Richard J. Neuhaus, *To Empower People: The Role of Mediating Structures in Public Policy* (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute, 1977).
31. Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (New York: Collier Books, 1965).
32. On the promotion of relativism in all of its forms, see Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1987) and John Cuddihy, *No Offense: Civil Religion and Protestant Taste* (New York: Seabury, 1978).
33. I am indebted to Monsignor Robert J. Batule for passing on this insight to me via a personal communication.
34. Jeffrey Mirus, “Bishops to the Rescue!,” *Catholic Culture: Living the Catholic Life* (web service of Trinity Communications, Tuesday, September 9, 2008, [www.CatholicCulture.org](http://www.CatholicCulture.org) )