

CHAPTER THREE

EUROPEAN AMERICAN PRESENCE IN THE USA AND IN THE CHURCH

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Provenance and History:

With a few notable exceptions, U.S. Catholic historians have most often written the history of European American Catholics, a history easily divided into three periods: 1) Colonial and Republican Catholicism (1521-1820), 2) Immigrant Catholicism (1820-1945), 3) Catholicism and the Dynamics of Pluralism (1945-2010). Names such as San Antonio, Santa Fe, St. Louis, and New Orleans attest to the early presence of Spanish and French explorers and colonists in what would eventually become the United States. The Spanish came to the New World almost a century before the English finally settled at Jamestown in 1609. But political borders made descendants of the English Catholics who landed on St. Clement's Island in the Chesapeake Bay in 1634 the nucleus of European American Catholicism in the U.S. Clustered in Maryland and Kentucky, the tiny community of republican Catholics welcomed the unprecedented religious toleration that came with the political revolution of 1776.

Between 1820 and 1920, some 33.6 million immigrants, the Irish and German majority to be followed by Italians and Eastern Europeans, came to the United States. Concentrated in the Northeast and the Midwest, they built cities and railroads and worked in the factories of the industrial United States. The end of the nineteenth century brought heated controversy over whether the unique political and cultural characteristics of the United States (separation of church and state, religious liberty and pluralism, and a de facto Protestant culture that put a high priority on individual autonomy and achievement) were benign or hostile to Catholic flourishing. With the end of the Great War, the subsequent closing of U.S. borders to new immigrants, and a secular culture beginning to overwhelm the native Protestant one, generations of "brick and mortar bishops" used the proudly given voluntary contributions of the laity to build an immigrant subculture. This far from air-tight network of parishes, schools, hospitals and social service agencies (staffed largely by religious sisters), along with fraternal and professional organizations, protected many Catholics from Nativism, simultaneously socialized them, and set them on the road to economic prosperity.

By the end of World War II, immigration had been closed for two decades. The GI Bill opened the doors of higher education to many ethnic Catholic returning veterans. In 1960 Americans elected John F. Kennedy president. Descended from Boston Irish, Kennedy had been to Harvard and served with distinction in World War II. By the end of the 1960s, there were more Catholics like Kennedy and, according to measures such as levels of education and income; they became statistically indistinguishable from other Americans. Though its institutions remained, this demographic point signaled the end of

the immigrant Catholic subculture. The dissolution of the subculture is the context for the reception of Vatican II in the U.S. and the defining moment for European American Catholics as they move into the twenty-first century.

The political experience of Catholics in the U.S. contributed positively to the universal Church's engagement with modern politics. Democracy American-style emerged from World War II having banished its competitors on right and left from the moral high ground. Vatican II's subsequent solemn affirmation of religious liberty both coincides with and marks the shift of European American Catholics from a faith primarily inherited from generations of immigrants to a faith that appears out of the maelstrom of pluralism as personally embraced and chosen.

Demographics:

Since the 1970s, Catholics have remained consistently at about 25% of the U.S. population. There are between 65 and 70 million Catholics in the U.S. with an estimated 20 million "inactive." Of all those who self-identify as Catholic, about 80% check the "white" box on national surveys. Most of those are descended from the European immigrants who came to the U.S. between 1820 and 1920. In terms such as educational level, occupational status, and family income, this European American Catholic population tends to be well-assimilated into U.S. society. But it is graying and gradually being replaced in the 25% U.S. Catholic total by new immigrants from places such as Mexico, Central and South American, Vietnam, Africa, and the Philippines. Among millennial Catholics (those born between 1979 and 1987, 9% of Catholics in 2005), only 55% self-identify as "white," while 39% identify as "Hispanic." While European American Catholics are most likely to live in the Northeast and Midwest, new immigrants swell Catholic populations in the West/Southwest. On a fluid and diverse religious landscape, nearly one in three U.S. residents was raised Catholic. Fewer than one in four are now Catholic. Between 8 and 10% of Americans are former Catholics.

Gifts They Bring:

Some have read the history of European American Catholics as a liberating transatlantic exodus. Others have found in it a cautionary tale of over-assimilation. The truth no doubt includes both perspectives and more. In any case, it is a story rich with heroic figures, even saints. Sts. Elizabeth Seton and Francis Xavier Cabrini stand for the thousands of sisters who built and taught in this country's Catholic schools. These schools, along with the more than 200 institutions of Catholic higher education, Catholic hospitals, and Catholic Charities constitute major contributions to public life by European American Catholics. Financed almost entirely by voluntary contributions, such institutions are unique to U.S. Catholicism. The Church's spiritual heritage, particularized in the popular devotions and traditions of prayer from various European countries is a constant resource. Not only did that heritage inspire artists such as Flannery O'Connor, activists such as Dorothy Day and globally recognized spiritual leaders such as Thomas Merton, it also contributed to significant social policy decisions regarding human welfare such as social security and worker protection legislation.

Perhaps the finest gift European American Catholics offer is the great number of descendants of immigrants who have chosen to remain in the Church of their birth. In a pluralistic setting, those who choose to stay generally have a strong commitment, share with others what they find life-giving in the Church, and extend Catholic insights through their participation in civic life.

Challenges:

The most serious challenge facing post-subculture European American Catholics is passing on the faith. Under-forty Catholics identify strongly with Catholicism. But their commitment to the Church as an organization is growing weaker. Only one in four attend Mass weekly. The work of forming Catholics in the practices of worship, communal life and service, and witness (Acts 2.42-47) must become more intentional and more like evangelization. Further, it must be done in a way that gives Catholics access to their faith as intelligible, credible, and a sustaining source of energy, healing, and inspiration for their lives in the world. Evangelization must extend to the religiously unaffiliated and those who have left the Church. In pluralism, churches that don't evangelize die.

The once immigrant Irish face of the Church in the U.S. is becoming increasingly Hispanic. One in three adult Catholics is Hispanic. Many of the subculture's institutions are shrinking and financially struggling to stay afloat in urban settings and serve new populations of immigrants as well as the wider culture without the resources once provided by religious communities. European American Catholics must learn to welcome new immigrants into the Church.

Meeting such challenges depends on some minimal shared sense of being a Catholic people. But European American Catholics appear increasingly to replicate in the Church our culture's fault lines. Catholicism is a sacramental church in an anti-institutional, spiritual but not religious culture with little trust in ritual, a sacramental church whose clergy is aging, diminishing, generally overworked, and often generationally divided. The increasing pastoral role of permanent deacons and lay ecclesial ministers tends to blur, sociologically if not theologically, traditional boundaries between clergy and laity. Most lay ecclesial ministers are women. Could they also be permanent deacons? The bishops, their moral credibility severely damaged by the way some handled clergy sexual abuse of children, cannot always speak with a unified voice on crucial topics. The Church's public presence in American society is often limited to individual witness. Sometimes we do look like "a people adrift."

Trends are statistical and general. Challenges are framed on a national scale in response to trends. But effective responses are most often local. People look to Jesus in particular parishes. In the sacraments, the way of life, and worldview of the Church, they seek healing, reconciliation, and belonging. But in a voluntary society, the Church is only one of the places they can look. The world is full of people and institutions that either suck the life out of you or give you life. Jesus is the true life and the Church must be life-giving for the people who turn to it amid pluralism, diversity, and flux. If the

soul-sustaining work of the Church is real, its incarnational overflow will spill into life-sustaining work in society. Many shadows cloud the Church's future. But the Church has many gifts. After the promises of Christ, the chief among them is its faithful and resilient people.

Questions for discussion:

1. What are the gifts in the Church's heritage that sustain you?
2. How can you share that with the young, the disaffiliated?
3. Does the Church help you pray?