CHAPTER ONE

PRO-CHANGE CATHOLICS:
FORGING COMMUNITY OUT OF DIVERSITY

Since its foundation, sociology has been concerned with the problem of the relation of the individual to the collectivity. Both Max Weber (1864–1920) and Emile Durkheim (1858–1917) were concerned with how social cohesiveness would be maintained in the face of changing institutional conditions. Weber was preoccupied with what he saw as the dehumanizing effects of an ever-expanding societal rationalization, whereas Durkheim focused on how collective solidarity might be maintained against social forces that appeared more likely to create anomic than moral order. We are still preoccupied with this long-standing sociological question. Today, the issue is whether the plurality of group identities seeking public legitimacy undermines social cohesiveness, unity, and order. There is a sense that the egalitarian advances achieved since the 1960s by women, racial minorities, and gay men and lesbian women, have been pivotal in unsettling the moral and institutional bases of social life.

While the question has been a constant one, it was raised with particular vigor in the 1960s, when diverse social movements arose and protested the idea of communality. These movements challenged the dominant culture and its inegalitarian institutional practices in the areas of family life, politics, law, and employment. The protest activity of women, gays and lesbians, and African Americans highlighted the existence of historical and sociocultural experiences that undermined the notion of a cultural universality. In so doing, they directed attention to the ways in which claims to universality are inappropriately used in practice, since rather than being inclusive, they are frequently used to restrict institutional and social participation.

Today, greater public awareness of cultural pluralism, and of the
ways in which some groups have been excluded from participation in various domains of public life, have sensitized people to the importance of affirming different identities. This new emphasis, however, tends to see identity differences as in tension with, rather than complementary to, participation in larger communal traditions. The tendency to draw distinctions between universalist frameworks and cultural particularism is a perspective shared both by those who lament what they see as the breakdown of community in American society as well as by those who welcome the new societal configurations as a way to revitalize democracy. Sociologists associated with the communitarian movement (e.g., Etzioni 1997: 64–73) interpret the post-1960s changes in American society as evidence of a deteriorating moral order and of social anarchy. Although concerned about the prospects for communal integration, they do not suggest a return to traditional social arrangements that fostered gender and other forms of inequality. They seek rather to establish a new balance between individual rights and social responsibilities. Grounded in the belief that, as Amitai Etzioni argues, “The greatest danger to autonomy arises when the social moorings of individuals are severed” (1997: 27), communitarians are committed to a project of moral regeneration centered on shared “commitment to a set of core values” (ibid. 13).

Etzioni observes that the sociological challenge is to develop a societal framework that allows for the “enriching particulars of autonomous subcultures and communities while sustaining the core of shared values” (ibid. 196). At the same time, Etzioni is doubtful that people committed to celebrating differences based on gender or race, for example, are willing to accept a bounded or “qualified diversity” that recognizes the necessity of core values (ibid. 197).

In contrast to the arguments advanced by communitarians, the declining impact of universal ideals is welcomed by sociologists such as Steven Seidman. He argues that foundational arguments appealing to God, reason, the laws of history, and moral or natural law, while they are not absent in America, lack public authority and moral credibility (1994: 191). In today’s “culture of cynicism,” he says, “claims to universality are suspected of masking particular interests” (ibid.). Seidman welcomes the cynicism towards universalism, seeing it as compatible with the pragmatism of American culture and the possibility of achieving a more democratic public culture which affirms “more local styles of moral legitimation” (ibid. 192).

Ideologically divergent analyses of contemporary American society
thus concur in implying a tension between the realization of particular identities and integration with a broader communal tradition. For social conservatives, “too much” diversity is seen as breeding cultural relativism, fragmentation, and social anomie. For those with a postmodern inclination, on the other hand, the celebration of diverse identities tends to be posited as necessarily marginalizing the appeal of what they consider to be repressive universal traditions. To argue either for a universalism that suppresses differences, or for the proliferation of subcultural groupings that dissociate identity from larger communal connections, is a tempting response to the challenges posed by cultural diversity. Yet this dichotomized approach does not allow for the forging of new social patterns that creatively encompass the integrative aspects of a broadly shared tradition with the uniqueness of particular group experiences. As Jane Mansbridge observes (1993: 359), “community, in most cases, entails particularity.”

Craig Calhoun (1995: xii) argues that it is possible theoretically to find a way out of the dualistic opposition represented by the tension between universality and difference. He calls for a critical theory that while focusing on power and cultural differences also pays attention to the general principles that underlie social relationships and social integration. Similarly, Steven Seidman, notwithstanding his critique of universal or foundationalist arguments (1994: 191), also recognizes that local struggles over the politics of cultural difference do not necessitate the disavowal of “broader forms of social solidarity” (Nicholson and Seidman 1995: 35). But can this nondualistic theoretical approach work in practice? That is the question underpinning this book. I will show that the contestation of universal claims can be integrated in practice with participation in a more global moral community.

FOCUS OF THIS STUDY

I address the relation between diversity and community in the institutional context of the Catholic Church. Catholicism is not a universal tradition, in the sense that it is clearly not the religious tradition to which all people adhere but is instead one of many diverse communal traditions in modern society. As a transnational and transgenerational doctrinal and institutional tradition, however, the Catholic Church comprises a more universal than local community. I focus on institutionally marginalized American Catholics. These are Catholics who choose to stay Catholic even though their understanding of
Catholicism is denounced in official church teaching. Catholics who are gay or lesbian, advocates of women’s ordination, or pro-choice on abortion are the primary subjects of my investigation. These Catholics occupy a cultural space that challenges the assumption of a dichotomized opposition between the affirmation of difference and the maintenance of solidarity with a broader tradition. Professional Catholic theologians are also a focus of this study. I include them in order to explore how from their institutional location as experts within the tradition but outside the church hierarchy, they view the possibilities that exist for forging a broader understanding of Catholic identity than that allowed by official church teaching.

In a time when identity is considered an individual “design project” (Berger, Berger, and Kellner 1973: 71–74), and when the politics of lifestyle (Giddens 1991: 214) and of difference (cf. Calhoun 1995: 214; Fuss 1989: 97–112) are making difference a source of subcultural celebration rather than social stigma, the Catholics in my study choose to maintain links with the institutional church and to work from within to effect change. To be openly gay or lesbian and Catholic, to be Catholic and committed to women’s ordination, or pro-choice and Catholic, explicitly engages the tension between holding a particular identity and simultaneously maintaining connection to a more global community in which these identities are officially defined as contradictory. In writing this book I was thus interested in understanding the subjective meanings (cf. Weber 1978: 399) that Catholics inject into and derive from Catholicism as they affirm their plural identities, and how these meanings in turn act as resources for change in the church.

This book will show that the articulation of differences does not demand the sacrificing of commitment to a more global communal tradition. I will argue, in fact, that rather than leading to fragmentation and anomie, differences can constitute a source of change and redefinition of the larger community. The concern that differences may fragment community is a valid one. Clearly, the narcissistic celebration of differences can, on the surface at least, undermine the commonalities shared by diverse groups in society. Yet, differences and community invariably coexist. In the Catholic Church, dissent from what are purported to be core doctrines does not necessarily fracture the tradition and unity of the church. Similarly, in the political sphere, protest is inextricably intertwined with the institutional practices and traditions against which it is aimed. Whether differences are ignored, acknowledged and denigrated, or acknowledged and affirmed, it is evident that
differences comprise community and are an essential ingredient in the process of communal change, vibrancy, and adaptability.

DATA SOURCES

In order to investigate how institutionally marginalized Catholics negotiate their multiple identities, my research has focused primarily on members of organizations committed to change in the Catholic Church: members of Dignity, a national association of gay and lesbian Catholics, members of the Women’s Ordination Conference (WOC), an organization committed to the ordination of women, and volunteer regional activists for Catholics for a Free Choice (CFFC), an organization advocating official church recognition of moral pluralism on abortion. Although each organization has a primary focus on issue-specific concerns, Dignity, WOC, and CFFC are participants in the broad-based Call to Action movement for change in the Catholic Church. Call to Action (CTA) was established by laypeople following an initiative by the U.S. bishops, who held a Call to Action conference of the laity in 1976 to devise a program for Catholic institutional renewal and social justice. Call to Action holds an annual conference which has evolved into “a national congress of persons, communities, and organizations working to give birth to” a transformed church (CTA organizational literature).

The study used a variety of data-gathering methods. I combined content analysis of archival data, ethnographic research, self-administered questionnaire surveys, and personal in-depth interviews. At the outset I conducted a content analysis of the organizational literature (promotional materials and newsletters/journals) of Dignity, WOC, and CFFC in order to establish a strong firsthand knowledge of each group’s historical origins and evolution, and of the various issues and tensions that had emerged as salient to each group’s organizational id-

1. Recognizing that sexuality is pliable, Dignity/USA’s formal mission and membership also includes bisexual and transgendered Catholics. While I do not wish to be disrespectful to people who are bisexual or transgendered, I use the summarized “gay and lesbian” phrasing in this book for ease of presentation, even though I recognize that to do so may be seen by some readers as collusion in the use of disempowering language categories.

2. CTA also coordinates Catholic Organizations for Renewal (COR), which is a network of over thirty national and regional pro-change Catholic groups, including Dignity, WOC, and CFFC.
entity. I conducted an ethnographic study of Dignity/Boston, a local chapter of gay and lesbian Catholics, in order to identify the routine practices that they use in building an identity that affirms their sexuality and their Catholicism. The Dignity data comes from a five-month observation study of community activities. In addition, I surveyed participants in Dignity/Boston using a self-administered questionnaire, and conducted in-depth, face-to-face interviews with twenty-six active members of the chapter. This triangulated research approach to the study of Dignity provides a vivid representation of the ways in which talk and action combine into the collective reworking and integration of multiple identity affiliations.

In addition to the Dignity study, I also surveyed members of the Women’s Ordination Conference (WOC) and regional volunteer activists for Catholics for a Free Choice (CFFC). I sent a self-administered mail questionnaire to randomly selected members of WOC chosen from its membership mailing list, and to a smaller targeted group of CFFC regional volunteers. The surveys provide extensive data concerning the arguments Catholics use to legitimate views of Catholic identity alternative to those delineated in official church teaching.

I supplement the data gathered from pro-change Catholics (Dignity, WOC, and CFFC) with mail questionnaire survey data from a sample of members of the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights, a national organization committed to publicly defending official church teaching. I incorporate this data in order to probe the cultural commonalities among Catholics whose views of church doctrine differ quite considerably. Finally, my study included in-depth, face-to-face interviews with faculty members in theology sampled from two geographical centers of theological inquiry in the United States: the Boston Theological Institute, a consortium of universities, colleges, and seminaries in the greater Boston area, and the Graduate Theological Union at Berkeley, California.\(^3\) As professional experts deeply immersed in the Catholic tradition but relatively marginal to the church hierarchy, theologians offer a distinctive understanding of the range of institutionally legitimate options available to Catholics who selectively disagree with the Vatican. Although theologians are not collectively engaged in any publicly organized pro-change project,

\(^3\) Of the twenty theological faculty members interviewed, some were moral theologians and others were specialists in ethics or church history. For ease of reference, I use the more general category of “theologians.”
they constitute a significant voice in the articulation of Catholicism and the extent to which its official boundaries can be shifted. (I provide a more detailed description of the research methods used, sample selection procedures, and pro-change respondents’ sociodemographic data in the Appendix.)

This book clearly is not a study of American Catholics as a whole. Nor is it a study of the individual antecedents of institutional loyalty among Catholics. I do not, for example, examine how different life experiences or patterns of religious socialization, respondents’ experiences of Catholicism in their families of origin, schools, and in other domains impact upon their commitment to Catholicism. These variables, as other studies document (D’Antonio et al. 1996; Davidson et al. 1997), are significant in influencing long-term commitment to, and subjective understandings of, Catholicism. Not all Catholics, of course, stay Catholic; many switch to other denominations or refrain from participating in any public or institutionalized form of religious expression. To understand why Catholics leave or disengage from participation in the church would comprise a different study.

THE SOCIAL AND INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT OF IDENTITY

The object of this book is to illuminate the identity construction mechanisms used by institutionally marginalized Catholics. In sociology, there is a long theoretical tradition starting with Karl Marx, developed by Karl Mannheim (1936: 79–83, 264–311), and used more recently by some feminist theorists (e.g., Harding 1991; Collins 1990; D. Smith 1990a), that the experiences of those on the margins provide a critical standpoint from which to discern the ways in which inequality is perpetuated. Institutionally marginalized people have less invested in maintaining the status quo and having experienced collective action against their marginality may be more likely to be aware of and to see beneath the appearances that maintain unjust practices (Harding 1991: 123–132). The standpoint of marginalized individuals and groups, just as any other position, should not be thought of as mo-

4. In his study of spirituality among American baby boomers, Wade Clark Roof (1993: 175) found that 81 percent of those who grew up Catholic still identified themselves as Catholic. Mainline Protestants had a retention rate of 65 percent, and conservative Protestants had a rate of 80 percent.
nolistic (see Flax 1990: 141; Harding 1991: 121 n.19). Further, there is always the possibility that those who are on the margins may distort institutional processes or fail to act on their own perceived interests. Nevertheless, self-conscious holders of objectively contradictory identities continuously confront the routine dilemmas associated with negotiating difference and maintaining multiple loyalties (cf. Calhoun 1995: 185–187).

How this study’s pro-change Catholics, as people with multiple overt loyalties, construct identities that are relatively autonomous of official church teaching may point to the processes that are also available to and/or tacitly engaged by other Catholics. Although it is well documented that the majority of Catholics are Catholics “on their own terms,” whereby they compartmentalize the teaching of the church hierarchy from participation in the doctrinal and communal tradition (Greeley 1977; 1985; Hout and Greeley 1987), we do not know how they validate their Catholicism. The strategies adopted by other Catholics who remain involved in the church may differ from those used by this study’s respondents. The ways in which pro-change Catholics use and reinterpret Catholicism, however, may, I believe, illuminate what other American and Western Catholics do in an attenuated and relatively unself-conscious way. Furthermore, the mechanisms employed by pro-change Catholics may suggest useful strategies for people in general as they confront the identity dilemmas associated with the globalism and fragmentation of late modern society. With social life increasingly disconnected from the “external referents” supplied by family and local communal attachments and obligations (cf. Giddens 1991: 146–148), and characterized by networks whose participants tend to share a common technological rather than cultural vocabulary (cf. Castells 1997: 1–4), pro-change Catholics may illuminate how it is possible to use external communal traditions as anchors for an identity grounded in multiple bases.

How pro-change Catholics express their Catholicism addresses important theoretical debates in sociology. In the late 1960s, the sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966) introduced the concept of the social construction of reality. Highlighting the paramount reality of everyday life and practical commonsense knowledge, Berger and Luckmann (ibid. 19–27) emphasized that society and culture are the products of people’s own activity. Although people experience institutions as external to them and as having a reality of their own (ibid. 29–32), Berger and Luckmann stressed that institutions,
including religious institutions, are themselves the products of social activity. In short, while society is an objective reality, it is simultaneously a human product. Berger and Luckmann’s emphasis on the social context in which meanings are produced focused attention on the human agency that inheres in institutional reproduction. Social processes, therefore, while still external to people, were no longer assumed to be the result of anonymous social, historical, natural, or divine forces.

The publication of Berger and Luckmann’s book coincided, moreover, with the emergence of the new social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, and their creation of what Steven Seidman (1994: 235) refers to as “new subjects of knowledge (African-Americans, women, lesbians and gay men) and new knowledges.” These movements thus provided a public and practical demonstration of the various ways in which the taken-for-granted commonsense knowledge about what is “normal” could be overthrown and transformed.

Once attention is directed to the context in which knowledge is produced, it inevitably leads to a probing of who and what defines knowledge, and of how it is organized in institutional practices (see, for example, Foucault 1978: 18–20). This interrogation begins the process of unveiling the power interests behind what used to appear as the “natural,” taken-for-granted assumptions of social life. If commonsense knowledge really is paramount in social life, then the everyday experiences of ordinary people become valid sources of knowledge production. Recognition of the multiplicity of valid standpoints thus challenges the idea that there is a single locus of interpretive authority. It is this transformation in the sense of ownership of interpretive authority that empowers individuals and groups to engage in action against inequality, and to build “new” identities that challenge the traditional view of identity as pre-given and immutable. In this new understanding, as Stuart Hall emphasizes, identity is processual and fluid. It is a never-ending “production” which because it is “always in process . . . belongs to the future as much as to the past” (1992: 222, 225).

I will argue that the contestation of official church teaching by Catholics who are gay or lesbian, advocates of women’s ordination, or pro-choice on abortion reflects their appreciation for the fact that doc
trine is, in part, a social construct contingent on the specific historical, cultural, and institutional contexts in which it emerges. Pro-change Catholics’ sense of Catholicism is grounded in the view that interpretive authority is diffuse. In this understanding, interpretive power in
the Catholic Church is not located solely in the official hierarchical power structure, but is dispersed, seen in the everyday interpretive activities of ordinary Catholics. It is this democratic understanding of interpretive authority that enables pro-change Catholics to make Catholic doctrine a site of what Steven Seidman (1994) would call "contested knowledge." They are thereby able to produce relatively autonomous interpretations of Catholicism that make sense in light of their diverse experiences, including their experiences of Catholicism.

It is not just pro-change Catholics who are sensitive to social context in their approach to Catholic doctrine. An analysis based on the social construction of meaning also needs to be applied to the official church. As I will document, it is important to recognize that as an institution, the church's organizational structure, doctrines, and practices are, in part, products of the social and historical context in which the church has evolved. In this view, the accent on the church hierarchy's authority, no matter how "natural" or divinely prescribed it may seem, is the result of particular social and political contingencies. The church hierarchy itself, moreover, as the official collective voice of the church, constructs doctrine and is not simply the mediator or transmitter of divinely willed meanings.\(^5\) In Catholicism, a core of doctrinal

5. In this book, when I refer to the church hierarchy I will be referring to those who hold sacred office in the church — that is, the Pope and the college of bishops (the magisterium), and the various Vatican congregations and councils (such as the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, headed by Cardinal Ratzinger) whose work informs and disseminates papal teaching and that are central to the "governance of the universal church" (Reese 1996a: 106). In short, to talk about the church hierarchy is to variously and somewhat interchangeably include the Pope, collectivities of bishops (such as, in America, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops [NCCB]), and the Vatican (referring to the Pope and/or the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, for example). In using such terms as the church hierarchy or the Vatican, my intent is not to reify official church processes but simply to communicate in shorthand the empirical fact that the organizational structure of the church is hierarchical and its official doctrines and practices are controlled by a governing hierarchy (Pope, cardinals, bishops). The church hierarchy speaks as a collectivity even though clearly not all bishops necessarily agree with the Pope or with their conferences on any given issue. Moreover, the Pope, national conferences of bishops, and the diverse Vatican bureaucracies all enjoy various degrees of autonomy from one another. For clarifications on the complexities of the church's organizational structure see Reese (1996a). In this book, for ease of reference I cite collective statements issued by the NCCB or by any of its committees by using the general label "U.S. Bishops."