

Introduction: “Evidence of Loyalty”

Anything less than victory is inconceivable!

Francis Cardinal Spellman
December 1966¹

In December 1967, the editors finally broke their silence. While many other American Catholic publications had opined on the war in Vietnam, the monthly *U.S. Catholic* had avoided the issue. But during Advent that year, the magazine issued a lengthy and blistering editorial entitled “The War in Vietnam Is Immoral.” The decision was newsworthy enough to be covered by the *New York Times*. Then, ten months later, the magazine devoted part of the October 1968 issue to articles criticizing, in equally strong terms, American actions and policies in Vietnam. The first essay was an analysis of “The Moral Issue Involved in Vietnam,” a reprinting of an article originally published in the Jesuit journal *Theological Studies* earlier that year. The author, Robert H. Springer, SJ, was a professor of theology at his order’s seminary in Woodstock, Maryland. In the piece, Fr. Springer analyzed the epistemological aspects of individual moral responsibility. He noted that at that time one heard people ask: “Why do not the moral theologians speak out on the Vietnam War? . . . Why do not the bishops tell [us] what to think about the war?” It sounded to Springer like this sort of question was spoken “with a pre-Vatican II accent.”²

To say that the 1960s were a time of upheaval for Americans is, by now, a cliché. Yet for American Catholics in particular, the disruption was twofold. In addition to all of the profound social and political changes that one associates with “the Sixties,” Catholics found themselves faced with a Church that was undergoing a transformation. The Second Vatican

¹ Patrick O’Connor, SSC, “Cardinal Spoke on Peace in Vietnam,” National Catholic Welfare Council News Service (NC) (Foreign), December 28, 1966, 13–14.

² George Dugan, “Catholic Magazine Calls Vietnam War Immoral,” *New York Times*, December 18, 1967, 22; Robert H. Springer, SJ, “The Moral Issues Involved in Vietnam,” *U.S. Catholic*, October 1968, 9.

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Council, which one church historian has described as the “most significant religious event” in five centuries, begat striking alterations in the ancient Church.³ It was, according to another, “the defining event of the Catholic Sixties.”⁴ In the same year that the Council concluded – 1965 – President Lyndon Johnson decided to commit 200,000 troops to fight the war in Vietnam. Penelope Adams Moon summarized the situation: “Coupled with the social tumult of the 1960s, epitomized by the Civil Rights movement, the Vietnam War, and the emergence of the second wave of feminism, American Catholics struggled with demographic and institutional changes that challenged their understanding of their roles as Catholics and as Catholic Americans.”⁵ It is no wonder that some American Catholics would find the subsequent years deracinating.

Father Springer drew a direct if unspoken connection between the recent events in Rome and current events in Saigon. The nexus for him was the individual conscience, which had received renewed focus in the postconciliar Church. Springer asserted that “neither bishops nor moralists should tell us what to think about the war in Vietnam. This is a personal responsibility that no citizen may delegate to another.” And he added that the conclusion reached by the Christian conscience was clear: One had a “duty to resist” the type of warfare being pursued by the United States. In fact, in the interest of moral consistency, he pointed to the Nuremberg trials of leading Nazi perpetrators, with the strong implication that such a process was once again justified. Such trials would, furthermore, need to call before the court both the general giving criminal orders and the “subordinate who executes” them.⁶

More than a few Catholics disagreed with Springer’s conclusions. The fact that the commanding general who would soon give those orders in Vietnam, Creighton Abrams, converted to Catholicism in 1970 indicated the vast range of American Catholic opinion on the war.⁷ The priest who wrote of Nuremberg-style trials for American servicemen and the general who proposed the bombing of Cambodia were now communicants in the

³ “How the Second Vatican Council Responded to the Modern World: Andrew Brown’s Blog,” *The Guardian* (October 11, 2012), in reference to an observation by Eamon Duffy (online). www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/andrewbrown/2012/oct/11/second-vatican-council-50-years-catholicism.

⁴ Jeffrey M. Burns, “History and the Catholic Sixties: A Work in Progress,” *U.S. Catholic Historian*, Volume 41, number 2 (Spring 2023), 53–77, at 55.

⁵ Penelope Adams Moon, “Loyal Sons and Daughters of God? American Catholics Debate Catholic Antiwar Protest,” *Peace and Change*, Volume 33, number 1 (January 2008), 1–30, at 2.

⁶ Springer, “The Moral Issues Involved in Vietnam,” 9, 12.

⁷ See Lewis Sorely, *Thunderbolt: General Creighton Abrams and the Army of His Times* (Washington, DC: Brassey’s, 1998), 298.

same church.⁸ But what is most arresting is that Abrams, feeling the need for spiritual solace, was drawn to the faith that, according to Springer, condemned as blatantly immoral the war that the general was tasked to lead.

This disagreement lies at the center of this book. The Catholic debate about the Vietnam War quickly became, in a key sense, a debate about morality. And it became so sooner than is generally recognized. The Vietnam War was “the paramount moral issue of the day,” according to Lawrence J. McAndrews.⁹ And American Catholics introduced the *moral* argument about the war earlier than most others, thus significantly influencing the debate. Up until they did so, the debate had largely been prudential, concerning as it did the political and military wisdom of American intervention. Additionally, the Catholic debate over the morality of American intervention was not a simple binary. It was, rather, three cornered: Some saw the war as fundamentally immoral, others as morally obligatory, while still others focused on the morality of the *means* – for example, napalm, torture, free-fire zones – that the US and its South Vietnamese allies were employing. It is broadly correct to say that opinions about the war changed “from general support of it at the beginning to more and more unease over it by the end of the 1960s.”¹⁰ Yet Catholic attitudes toward the war were more complex and more varied from early on than the narrative of linear movement from support to opposition suggests.¹¹ The perception has often been, as United Press International (UPI) opined in 1983, that “until late in the Vietnam War, the church was a ‘my country right or wrong’ superpatriotic institution, avowedly anti-Communist and enthusiastic supporters of the Cold War.”¹² But in fact the debate among Catholics over the Vietnam War began earlier than this asserts. It was more multifaceted. And it deeply engaged issues of morality from the outset.

⁸ On Abrams and Cambodia, see David F. Schmitz, *Richard Nixon and the Vietnam War: The End of the American Century* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014), 47. On Abrams and Catholicism, see Sorely, *Thunderbolt*, 296–298.

⁹ Lawrence J. McAndrews, *What They Wished For: American Catholics and American Presidents, 1960–2001* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2014), 63.

¹⁰ David F. Settle, *Faith and War: How Christians Debated the Cold and Vietnam Wars* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 82.

¹¹ On the movement from support of the war to opposition, see, e.g., Settle, *Faith and War*, 82–83.

¹² David E. Anderson, “The Bishops and the Bomb: Catholic Bishops Ready to Debate Historic Statement on Nuclear Peace and War Issues,” United Press International, April 30, 1983. Online. www.upi.com/Archives/1983/04/30/The-bishops-and-the-bombNEWLNCatholic-bishops-ready-to-debate-historic-statement-on-nuclear-peace-and-war-issues/3152420523200.

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That American Catholics framed the war so frequently, and so early, as a moral issue is, in retrospect, not surprising. Catholics in the US had grown up in a largely self-contained subculture suffused with thought and discourse on morality. They were educated, overwhelmingly, in Catholic primary schools. There, they frequently learned the Baltimore Catechism, fully a third of which taught students the correct answers to moral questions. Those lucky ones who went on to higher education would frequently attend a Catholic college, where, until well into the 1950s, the philosophy that came to be called Thomism was intellectually dominant. Moral truths were certain and knowable, and “most of the evils of the modern world . . . took their origin from the misuse of human reason.”¹³ Seminarians, for their part, would have studied certain of St. Thomas Aquinas’s works extensively. Catholic education thus taught that moral truth was knowable to the correctly formed conscience. And once known, the individual was obliged to act accordingly, on social and political issues as well as those more “religious” in nature.¹⁴

Among the most significant of those moral certitudes was that human life is always sacred. As a result, life could not be taken except under the most extraordinary circumstances. This was viewed, furthermore, as a constant teaching of the Church, what Joseph Cardinal Bernardin would later refer to as the “seamless garment” of life. For this reason, the American Catholic bishops, though devoutly committed to victory in World War II, nevertheless expressed serious concern over the Allied strategic bombing campaign then being waged against Axis cities. That they also opposed the distribution of condoms on military bases was evidence of consistency of thought, regardless of how different those two issues would no doubt appear to non-Catholics.¹⁵

The “seamless garment” of life understanding helps explain, then, one of the most surprising contributions of this book. A significant portion of American Catholics came to see the issues of the Vietnam War and abortion as not just similar, but in fact linked. This connection, furthermore, was accepted by people on all sides of the war-and-peace debate. The chronological confluence of the later stages of the war with the liberalization of state abortion laws helped guarantee that the fundamental moral issue of human life would be debated in the context of recent and contemporary events in Indochina. Again, this might have seemed strange to non-Catholics, who would have viewed these as two discrete

¹³ Philip Gleason, *Contending with Modernity: Catholic Higher Education in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 108.

¹⁴ Gleason, *Contending with Modernity*, 108.

¹⁵ See Leslie Woodcock Tentler, *American Catholics: A History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020), 278–279.

questions. But in Catholic thought at the time, it seemed almost necessary to frame the debate in this way.

The debate over the war itself was, furthermore, a major factor in the breakdown of the postwar Catholic anticommunist consensus in the US. What makes this attenuation of consensus even more striking is the perception of a strong degree of cultural and intellectual cohesion among postwar American Catholics up to that point. The early decades after World War II were the time of the “Confident Church,” in Leslie Woodcock Tentler’s apt phrase.¹⁶ A key matter about which very many Catholics were confident was their place in American society. In the words of Chester Gillis, “the answer to the question of whether or not a person could be a good Catholic and a good American was a resounding yes.”¹⁷ This had not always been the case. Anti-Catholicism had been a strong thread running through American history since colonial days, when Protestant colonists, “like their coreligionists in England, saw Catholics as opposed to personal liberty and loyal to a hostile foreign power, by which they meant the pope.”¹⁸ Both in the home country and in the colonies, “Catholics were presumed dangerous until proven loyal.”¹⁹ In a fascinating shift, that presumption was reversed by the early years of the Cold War. World War II served as the primary catalyst for this newfound acceptance. During the war, Catholics had “enlisted in the military in large numbers, even though there was less pressure to prove their patriotism as their numbers and influence grew.”²⁰ In war-time, the military mingled together young men of various religious backgrounds, further attenuating the sense that Catholics did not really fit in among the American population. The war had a “homogenizing impact” on American society, and “both intellectually and emotionally, wartime Catholics came to feel at home in a proudly pluralistic nation.”²¹

The most visible symbol of this acceptance was the vast popularity of one particular – and singular – Catholic priest. On the new medium of television, Msgr. Fulton J. Sheen was one of the greatest of actors.²² He was also one of the most compelling. As Mark Massa observes, “a quite large and surprisingly diverse media audience planned their Tuesday

¹⁶ Tentler, *American Catholics*. “This Confident Church” is the title of chapter 10.

¹⁷ Chester Gillis, *Roman Catholicism in America*, 2nd edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), 84.

¹⁸ Tentler, *American Catholics*, 47.

¹⁹ Michael D. Breidenbach, *Our Dear-Bought Liberty: Catholics and Religious Toleration in Early America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021), 1.

²⁰ Gillis, *Roman Catholicism*, 83–84. On the disproportionate numbers of Catholics in the armed services, see James M. O’Toole, *The Faithful: A History of Catholics in America* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), 193.

²¹ Tentler, *American Catholics*, 279. ²² For this insight, I thank Professor Seth Jacobs.

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evenings around a Catholic cleric standing in front of a blackboard, spouting homespun scholastic advice as to why, indeed, life might be worth living.”²³ The fact that his viewership included a large number of Protestants indicates a degree of general American acceptance of Catholicism that had been absent before World War II. Massa is thus on firm ground in noting that “the high-water mark of American Catholic self-confidence, cultural influence, and optimism . . . occurred precisely in the decade after World War II, when Sheen was emerging as a major media presence.” Sheen’s outspoken anticommunism was itself emblematic of a Catholic “arrival”: “The Catholic anti-communism of the 1940s and 1950s [was] a ‘vehicle of Americanization’ for a religious body still perceived by many in the mainstream as ‘foreign.’”²⁴ Catholics’ particularly virulent hostility to the nation’s chief ideological adversary strengthened the perception of Catholic “Americanism,” thus facilitating the acceptance of Catholics into the mainstream of American society.²⁵ Catholics were a “loyal” group, “whose spiritual and social roles were not just compatible with American practices but the greatest defense against Communism.”²⁶

The general acceptance of Catholics by the mainstream Protestant culture, and vice versa, did not engender entirely positive consequences. Nor was the acceptance of Catholics by American Protestants complete.²⁷ Anti-Catholicism still survived, although its center of gravity had shifted to liberal intellectuals worried about papal power and what theologian Reinhold Niebuhr called the “inflexible authoritarianism of the Catholic religion.” This was, after all, the time when Paul Blanshard published the best-selling anti-Catholic screed *American Freedom and Catholic Power* – the “last gasp of respectable Protestant fear of Roman Catholicism.”²⁸ Catholicism would continue to be a consequential “issue” – for both liberal and conservative Protestants – when Senator John F. Kennedy sought the presidency in 1960. Old habits die hard. Yet, as D. G. Hart observes, the resurgence of anti-Catholicism in the early postwar years was, in retrospect, “bizarre.”²⁹ American Catholics were, at

²³ Mark Massa, *Catholics and American Culture: Fulton Sheen, Dorothy Day, and the Notre Dame Football Team* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1999), 84.

²⁴ Massa, *Catholics and American Culture*, 91.

²⁵ On Sheen’s adoption of “Americanism,” see especially James M. Patterson, *Religion in the Public Square: Sheen, King, Falwell* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019), 26.

²⁶ Patterson, *Religion in the Public Square*, 45.

²⁷ Patterson, *Religion in the Public Square*, 37.

²⁸ See D. G. Hart, *American Catholic: The Politics of Faith during the Cold War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2020), 35. Niebuhr quoted in Hart.

²⁹ Hart, *American Catholic*, 35.

that very time, adapting themselves to the dominant culture in unprecedented numbers; so much so that Massa is led to conclude that "many American Catholics embraced the liberal mainstream values of the post-war world with a fervor and devotion that were, if anything, far too uncritical and far too celebratory of American culture for the long-term health of their religious community."³⁰ This was a far cry from the Roman authoritarianism of which Blanshard and his ilk were warning.

A further irony was that American Catholics were, in these years, perceived by so many to be a powerful bulwark against the very totalitarian system that seemed most threatening to the West. In fact, Catholic anticommunism was largely taken for granted during a time when the ardently anticommunist Pius XII was the pope and the far-less-principled Joseph McCarthy represented Wisconsin in the US Senate. Making unfounded and highly damaging accusations against fellow Americans was reprehensible, and even large numbers of his coreligionists rejected the red-baiting senator. And yet, as James M. O'Toole observes, "that a Catholic was leading the charge against America's foe in the Cold War was not lost on observers. Contrary to the old nativist stereotype of Catholics as subverters of American freedom, they now seemed its stoutest defenders."³¹ As Jonathan P. Herzog notes, "by leading the fight against something so essentially un-American [as communism], Catholics had a powerful defense against those questioning their allegiance or patriotism."³² Indeed it was a time when, in Daniel Patrick Moynihan's words, being a Catholic was "prima facie evidence of loyalty."³³ Unlike others – including many elite Protestants – Catholics did not need to demonstrate their trustworthiness in America's struggle with communism; it was taken for granted. The oppression of the Church by communist regimes in postwar Eastern Europe only served to reinforce American Catholics' perception that the conflict was a worldwide struggle between Christians and communists. The Vatican, furthermore, publicized cases of oppression as widely as possible, thus assuring condemnation of these regimes in much of the noncommunist West.³⁴ Moscow

³⁰ Massa, *Catholics and American Culture*, 9–10. ³¹ O'Toole, *The Faithful*, 195–196.

³² Jonathan P. Herzog, *The Spiritual-Industrial Complex: America's Religious Battle against Communism in the Early Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 55; and see Andrew Preston, *Sword of the Spirit, Shield of Faith: Religion in American War and Diplomacy* (New York: Alfred K. Knopf, 2012), 470.

³³ O'Toole, *The Faithful*, 195–196.

³⁴ See most recently Guiliana Chamedes, *A Twentieth Century Crusade: The Vatican's Battle to Remake Christian Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019), 244–245. On the American bishops and Eastern Europe, see also Joseph P. Chinnici, *American Catholicism Transformed: From the Cold War through the Council* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 8–9.

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could hardly have done more than it in fact did to reinforce American Catholic hostility to communism.

Thus by 1950, *The Pilot* (Boston) could boast that “No single group in the United States has been more alert to the Communist threat to our free institutions, nor earlier aware of that threat, than Catholic Americans.”³⁵ And while some still doubted the compatibility of Catholicism with such traditional American principles as the separation of church and state or the right of free expression, the more general presumption of Catholic loyalty to the nation and its institutions made Catholicism less threatening and less “foreign.” As Patrick Allitt notes, “after the war, the issue of anticommunism provided the perfect rallying point for Catholics seeking to demonstrate their right to a central place in the national community.”³⁶ It thus should come as no surprise that American Catholics were broadly supportive of the early US attempts to halt the expansion of communism in Southeast Asia. In addition, American intervention protected Vietnamese Catholics in the south. As Andrew Preston has noted, “if there was ever a war American Catholics were predisposed to supporting, it was Vietnam.”³⁷ The perceived demands of morality, a deep hostility to communism, together with well-established American racial paternalism, all made Catholic support for intervention in Vietnam appear overdetermined.³⁸ What would have been unforeseeable in the mid 1950s was the extent to which the US Catholic community came to be riven by the escalating war that resulted from this effort.

Yet to say that the Vietnam War divided American Catholics is to say only what was already predictable: If the reader knows only one thing about the American experience with the Vietnam War, it is probably that this experience exacerbated divisions within the country. Why should that not be the case with Catholics as well? Nor does pointing out the divisiveness of the war make the “Catholic experience” of the war in any way unique: Scholars have already demonstrated that the war created significant rifts among American Protestants.³⁹ To understand what made the Catholic experience of the war different, one must first understand the

³⁵ *The Pilot* (Boston), April 1, 1950, 4, quoted in Richard Gribble, “An Anticommunist Polemic: The Case of Cardinal Richard Cushing of Boston,” *U.S. Catholic Historian*, Volume 22, number 4 (Fall, 2004), 79–95, at 82.

³⁶ Patrick Allitt, *Catholic Intellectuals and Conservative Politics in America, 1950–1985* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 20.

³⁷ Preston, *Sword of the Spirit, Shield of Faith*, 537.

³⁸ On American paternalism toward Asians at this time, see especially Seth Jacobs, *America’s Miracle Man in Vietnam: Ngo Dinh Diem, Religion, Race, and US Intervention in Southeast Asia* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 95–101.

³⁹ See, e.g., David E. Settje, *Lutherans and the Longest War: Adrift on a Sea of Doubt about the Cold and Vietnam Wars, 1964–1975* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007); Settje, *Faith and War*; Jill K. Gill, *Embattled Ecumenism: The National Council of Churches, the Vietnam War, and the Trials of the Protestant Left* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University

specific cultural and historical context into which the Vietnam War intruded. American Catholics had a singular experience of American history and of their role in that history. The first two decades following World War II were a time of remarkable cohesion and confidence for American Catholics, who largely felt that they had finally “arrived”; that they had at long last found their place in a majority-Protestant country that had for so long been hostile to these geographic, ethnic, and ecclesiological “foreigners.” The Vietnam War thrust itself into this context, raising questions once again of how Catholics fit into the politics and culture of the nation.

The war was certainly not the only factor that altered this postwar unity. Matters seemingly unrelated to Catholic cohesion were in fact quite significant in this regard. The GI Bill of Rights, for example, allowed American Catholic veterans the opportunity to move up to white collar status. With that socioeconomic move came a significant relocation to the suburbs, thus removing college-educated Catholics from the bounds – and bonds – of their traditional neighborhoods and parishes. Even those Catholics who were too young to benefit from the GI Bill were inspired by the academic and economic attainments of their older siblings to aspire toward upward mobility.⁴⁰ The mass suburbanization of American society, in turn, had the effect of reducing the social significance of religious differences. As O’Toole observes, “overt anti-Catholicism generally ceased to be respectable as people of all faiths mixed together as never before, living next door to each other, joining the same boy and girl scout troops or the Rotary Club.”⁴¹ This development tended to mute perceived distinctions among suburbanites of different faiths, and thus the cultural distinctiveness of Catholics as a group.

And then there was the Second Vatican Council. The *aggiornamento* – or bringing up to date – of the Church and its practices remains in significant ways regrettable for “traditionalist” Catholics who are devoted to many pre-Vatican II practices and emphases. Mass in the vernacular, the downplaying of Scholastic philosophy, the adoption of modern historical-critical methods for understanding scripture: all of these innovations and more jarred numerous Catholics. The very confluence of the end of the Council and the beginning of the Americanization of the Vietnam War alone had an impact.⁴² In addition, however, specific

Press, 2011); David Swartz, *Moral Minority: The Evangelical Left in an Age of Conservatism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

⁴⁰ See Tentler, *American Catholics*, 213. ⁴¹ O’Toole, *The Faithful*, 194.

⁴² On discussion of Vietnam in the context of Vatican II, see Chinnici, *American Catholicism Transformed*, 292.

innovations coming out of Vatican II would affect the way American Catholics responded to the war. Quite significant in this regard would be the encyclical *Gaudium et spes* (“The Joys and the Hopes”) (GS), promulgated by Pope Paul VI in December 1965. Bearing the name “Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World,” it was one of only two documents issued by the Council with the word “pastoral” in the title.⁴³ As this suggests, its purpose was to provide ways for the Church to respond to the challenges of the modern world.

One of the most pressing of those challenges was modern warfare and the concomitant threat of nuclear annihilation. The Church teaches that “peace is not merely the absence of war, nor can it be reduced solely to the maintenance of a balance of power between enemies, nor is it brought about by dictatorship. Instead, it is rightly and appropriately called an enterprise of justice.” The Pastoral Constitution calls on Christians “to join with other peacemakers in pleading for peace and bringing it about.”⁴⁴ This adjuration was particularly urgent, since new technologies and ways of war were making combat even more costly than in the past. Of particular concern – both for the bishops and for this study – is that guerrilla warfare was now “drawn out by new methods of deceit and subversion. In many causes the use of terrorism is regarded as a new way to wage war.”⁴⁵ There were methods of waging war that were, of their very nature, morally unacceptable. Some of these were, as it turned out, the methods favored by the South Vietnamese insurgents, whom Americans came to dub the Viet Cong (VC). Others would come to be adopted by US forces and their allies in the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN).

Also of great significance to this study was a new emphasis on individual conscience that was evident in GS. The Council declared that “it seems right that laws make humane provisions for the case of those who for reasons of conscience refuse to bear arms, provided, however, that they agree to serve the human community in some other way.”⁴⁶ The broader impact of and interest in this emphasis was soon visible to anyone who read the Catholic press. As Peter Cajka has shown, “Vatican II certainly increased the frequency with which conscience language appeared in print.” And this meant, in turn, the potential for a moral dilemma, since the dictates of an individual conscience might well conflict with the decisions of legitimate authority.⁴⁷ What, then,

⁴³ Douglas G. Bushman, *The Sixteen Documents of Vatican II* (Boston, MA: Pauline Books, 1999), 617. For the text of GS in English, see 627–719.

⁴⁴ GS, S. 78. ⁴⁵ GS, S. 79. ⁴⁶ GS, S. 79.

⁴⁷ Peter Cajka, *Follow Your Conscience: The Catholic Church and the Spirit of the Sixties* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2021), 153.