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Part I

Vatican II in Context

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I Church Life in the First Half of the Twentieth Century

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What was the experience of being Catholic during the fifty years prior to Vatican II? How did the world appear to an average believer through a lens of faith that had not yet been refocused by the reforms wrought by the council? During these years, the demographic center of Catholicism was located in Europe and North and South America. Sub-Saharan Africa had yet to experience the amazing growth of the church it would know after 1960. Asia, with the exception of the Philippines, was still very much mission territory. For this reason, these reflections will dwell largely on life as a Catholic in Europe and North America, with some notes on Latin America.

INTRODUCTION

Sociologist of religion Peter Berger used an expression to describe how religion has traditionally served as a kind of overarching frame that gives order and meaning to the lives of believers. He coined the term “sacred canopy” to convey the way that religion can permeate practically every aspect of human life, giving meaning and coherence to one’s relationship with God, other people, and the world. This is especially true for cultures characterized as “premodern” – where religious, social, and political structures are not questioned but taken as “givens” of human life ordained by God. The Catholic sacred canopy of the early twentieth century spread over an enchanted cosmos. Today its influence is different because of the challenges of globalization and our postmodern sensibilities. These tend to relativize all-encompassing narratives that explain who we are and why we are in the world. Within living memory, however, the Catholic worldview held at the beginning of the twentieth century by a majority of believers gave purpose and meaning to all aspects of life.

Prior to Vatican II there was never a doubt that everyone’s actions – both good and bad – had consequences and could affect not only one’s

own salvation but that of others as well. A key part of the Catholic sacred canopy is the belief in the “communion of saints” that appears in the creed. It was popularly understood as defining three categories of people in the church: the church militant (the living) striving to overcome temptations to sin and live a Christian life; the church suffering (the souls in purgatory) who are being purged of sin in order to enter heaven; and the church triumphant (those in heaven) who are in the presence of God and the saints. The living, in praying for those in purgatory, could shorten “the poor souls’” time waiting to enter heaven. Those in heaven could intercede for those on earth – sometimes miraculously – to ask God to effect cures from disease and grant other favors. Everything and everyone belonged to a network of relationships.

In the eyes of most Catholics at the time, God had directly established the organization of the church. That organization was strictly hierarchical. The pope, bishops, and priests were clearly ordained by God to teach, sanctify, and rule. They, together with religious women, constituted a “spiritual elite” since, having dedicated themselves to Christ, they were considered holier than laypeople. While there were differences and even violent disagreements among national groups within the church, this hierarchy was part of the “sacred canopy,” giving hope and meaning to Catholics as they faced the challenges of a changing world.

Parishes, fraternal organizations, schools, hospitals, and family traditions of piety closely linked to ethnic groups constantly reaffirmed Catholic identity during the first half of the twentieth century. In both Europe and North America, being Catholic meant participating in a web of relationships that gave each Catholic certainty about his or her place in society and successfully defended the faith from what was perceived as the hostile, secularizing voices in Europe and from the Protestant and often anti-Catholic dominant culture in the United States. A Catholic parallel universe was created that intentionally isolated and insulated the individual from a surrounding modern culture that was deemed inimical to the faith. On the eve of Vatican II, Will Herberg pointed out the omnipresence of Catholic institutions in the lives of Catholics in his now-classic work on religion in the United States, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew*. “The Catholic Church in America operates a vast network of institutions of almost every type and variety . . . This immense system constitutes at one and the same time a self-contained Catholic world within its own complex interior economy and American Catholicism’s resources for participation in the

5 CHURCH LIFE IN THE FIRST HALF OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

larger American Community.”¹ How was this self-contained world maintained?

During the first half of the twentieth century in the United States this “self-contained world” has been described as the “Catholic ghetto.” In this ghetto, roles were clear and shored up social and familial expectations. In the United States, Catholicism was a predominantly urban and ethnic phenomenon. After high school it was normal for young men to settle down, find a job, and marry. Young women did not aspire (or were not supposed to aspire) to work outside the home. Unless they entered the convent, they were to marry (preferably a Catholic of their ethnic group), have as many children as God sent their way, and serve as wife and mother. If at all possible, children were to attend the Catholic school attached to their parish. In many ways, the parish served as a social focus for the family, providing space and activities for old and young. It was not unusual for Catholic families to have five or six children since artificial birth control was forbidden by the church and regarded as selfish and immoral. Sometimes a family was blessed with one or more of the children choosing to become a priest or religious sister. These sons and daughters were cherished by both parents and siblings who supported their vocation.

In order to understand church life in the first half of the twentieth century, we will first examine how the nature of the church was understood and how authority was exercised. We will then see how these theological and ecclesiological positions were put into practice at the parish level. Second, it is necessary to consider how the all-important leadership of the local parish was trained. How did seminaries prepare parish priests for their key role of serving Catholics? In addition to the intellectual formation of priests, their pastoral preparation for liturgy and preaching needs to be described to understand the capacity of the clergy to deal with issues affecting their flock. How was the liturgy experienced by the people in the pews? There was no doubt that the priests were in charge of parish and sacramental life, but Catholic life was also enriched by popular devotions. These devotions were often linked to ethnic origins; they helped give voice not only to the spiritual longings of Catholic immigrants but also promoted identity and dignity in the face of a surrounding culture. Finally, we will consider the ferment in the church that led to a reconfiguration of this sacred canopy just prior to Vatican II.

¹ Will Herberg, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1960), 153–54.

THE LOCAL PARISH

Historian Jay P. Dolan, in describing the US Catholic ethos of the pre-Vatican II era, identified “authority” as its first important component.² The Catholic Church presented itself as an international hierarchical institution and there was no doubt who held the power of governance. In 1906 Pope Pius X was unapologetic regarding the division of the church into two categories of persons whose roles were clearly delineated. “The Church is essentially an unequal society . . . comprising two categories of persons, the Pastors and the flock . . . The one duty of the multitude is to allow themselves to be led, and, like a docile flock, to follow the Pastors.”³ The pope is making here the classic distinction between the “*ecclesia docens*” (the teaching church – the clerics) and the “*ecclesia discens*” (the learning church – the laity). Catholics – lay and clerical alike – knew their place.

What, then, was the conception of the church held by both clergy and laypeople? Catholics before Vatican II were taught that this hierarchical arrangement came from Christ himself. Unlike the fractious Protestants, Catholics took pride in their unity of mind and heart that centered on obedience to the pope as the Vicar of Christ and to the bishops as successors to the apostles. They were also to obey their parish priests with whom they had the most dealings and who mediated the presence of Christ through the sacraments. The Catholic Church was regarded as the one, true church, founded by Christ himself when he gave the keys of the kingdom of God to the apostle Peter in Matthew 16. The unity of the church that had been centered on St. Peter as Bishop of Rome and his successors was shattered by Protestants who, in their mistaken pride, relied on their own interpretations of scripture and disdained the tradition of the church that dated from the time of the apostles. This led them into error, cut them off from the grace God made available in the sacraments, and threatened their very salvation. For that reason, Catholics were to avoid interaction with Protestants, especially religiously, lest they be swayed by their errors.

This view of the religious world and the Catholic Church’s place in it was taught and professed by Catholics the world over. Confident in the church’s mediating role, if individual believers followed the laws set

² Jay P. Dolan, *The American Catholic Experience: A History from the Colonial Times to the Present* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1985), 221.

³ Pope Pius X, *Vehementer Nos* (1906), 8.

7 CHURCH LIFE IN THE FIRST HALF OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

down by the pope and the bishops, there was a certainty that this faithfulness and obedience would secure the salvation of their immortal souls. A prayer from the nineteenth-century *Ursuline Manual* sums up this clear vision of the reward in store for those who remain faithful to the doctrine and duties taught by the church.

Most gracious and merciful God . . . who hast made me . . . a member of the one and true Catholic Church, wherein I am secured from error, and guided in the road that leads to eternal bliss. Grant, oh my God, that I may never prove so ungrateful as to waver in the faith, or to contradict it by my conduct; but that, until the end of my life, firmly believing what it teaches, and earnestly endeavoring to comply with the duties it lays down, I may merit the eternal reward thou hast promised to those who persevere to the end in the profession of Thy faith in the observance of Thy commandments.⁴

THE TERRITORIAL PARISH

Established after the Council of Trent in the sixteenth century, the territorial parish (i.e., a parish that is defined by geographical bounds) was founded by the bishop and governed by the pastor with the help of associate priests and women religious. This parish accompanied Catholics from cradle to grave through the celebration of the sacraments, the parish school, social and charitable parish organizations, and a myriad of devotional practices that had developed in the nineteenth century. The parish was such an important institution in the lives of Catholics that it served as the geographical marker for identifying neighborhoods in large cities where Catholics dominated the urban landscape. Even non-Catholics used this shorthand way to locate where they lived in a city: “I’m from Visitation” or “I live in Our Lady of Lourdes” was a common way of identifying one’s neighborhood. In order to be a member in good standing of the parish it was required that parishioners do their “Easter duty,” which consisted of going to confession and receiving communion during the Easter season. This minimum obligation was sometimes even monitored by cards given to the penitent at the time of their confession and then handed in when the individual went to communion.

⁴ *The Ursuline Manual*, 139ff. Quoted in Dolan, *The American Catholic Experience*, 224.

While the pope was revered and the bishop largely respected, the average Catholic's experience of authority usually came in dealings with the local pastor. Writing to his flock in 1947, a pastor explained why it was important for lay people to heed the voice of their pastors. "Your parish is the most important society to which you as a layman can belong. Your parish speaks not only with the voice of your pastor and your Bishop, but with the voice of the Holy Father, who speaks to you the words of God."⁵

It would be difficult to underestimate the importance of the local parish priest in the lives of Catholics before Vatican II. In the United States, the pastor and his fellow priests were usually the most educated persons in parishes that were made up predominantly of working-class immigrant families. The priests' interpretation of the laws and doctrines of the Church was considered authoritative. They were also asked to help settle family disputes and serve as social workers and counselors. Much of the atmosphere of a Catholic parish prior to Vatican II was determined by the preparation of priests that took place in quasi-monastic settings, in seminaries located in the hinterlands away from the temptations of cities. Their ascetical training emphasized personal holiness and discouraged any serious engagement with the modern society lest they be corrupted by "worldliness."

THE TRAINING OF PRIESTS

Bernard Botte, a Benedictine liturgical scholar from Belgium educated before Vatican II, sketches how priests of his generation were trained in his book *From Silence to Participation*. He notes that formation for the majority of the clergy followed a classic model. In Europe, at least, "the majority of priests had six years of humanities studies in Greek and Latin before entering the seminary. Then they had two years of philosophy and at least three years of theology."⁶ Most seminarians in the United States came from minor seminaries and were less prepared than their European counterparts. The historian Msgr. John Tracy Ellis offered an important critique of the intellectual life of US Catholics during this period. He decried the general low level of intellectual

⁵ Fr. Henry Freiburg, OFM of Our Lady of the Angels in Cleveland in 1947. Cited in John T. McGreevy, *Parish Boundaries: The Catholic Encounter with Race in the Twentieth-Century Urban North* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 25.

⁶ Bernard Botte, *From Silence to Participation: An Insider's View of Liturgical Renewal* (Washington, DC: Pastoral Press, 1988), 4.

9 CHURCH LIFE IN THE FIRST HALF OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

attainment of Catholic institutions of higher learning around the country. He blamed in part anti-intellectualism in the US Catholic mentality that often passed for piety.⁷ If Catholic colleges and universities suffered from this deficiency, seminaries were even more affected by this lack of concern for the intellectual life. As Bishop John Lancaster Spalding (1840–1916) lamented at the beginning of the century, “The ecclesiastical seminary is not a school of intellectual culture, either here in America or elsewhere, and to imagine that it can become the instrument of intellectual culture is to cherish a delusion.”⁸

Seminarians were taught from manuals that were organized around the major themes of dogmatic theology – God, Christ, Trinity, grace. They featured short quotes from the Bible, excerpts of the writing of the fathers of the church, and theological arguments in defense of the faith based on simplified and abridged presentations of scholastic theology, especially that of St. Thomas Aquinas. Since the church was trying to defend itself against the criticism of Protestants and of intellectuals influenced by the rationalism of the Enlightenment, much of seminary education was apologetic in nature. Moral theology was taught in order to address practical issues that would arise in the confessional. New ways of evaluating human values and actions that had surfaced by new discoveries in the social or hard sciences did not usually figure in seminary curriculum.

Classes in liturgy were basically the study of rubrics – the mandatory ceremonial details required for celebrating Mass and the sacraments. The meaning behind the words and rituals, however, was not discussed. As Botte describes it,

Liturgy . . . was the ceremonial part of worship emptied of its real content. The goal was to prepare clerics for correctly carrying out ritual acts, and this was very good. Only it is regrettable that no one ever thought of explaining the liturgical texts and showing the spiritual richness they contain. From the way these texts were read it was apparent that most priests devoted only indirect attention to their meaning. The texts were neither food for clerical piety nor a source for sermons.⁹

⁷ Thomas J. Shelley, “The Young John Tracy Ellis and American Catholic Intellectual Life,” *U.S. Catholic Historian* 13, no. 1 (Winter 1995): 1–18.

⁸ Bishop John Lancaster Spalding, quoted by Gary Wills, “Memories of a Catholic Boyhood,” in *American Catholic History: A Documentary Reader*, ed. Mark Massa (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 263.

⁹ Botte, *From Silence to Participation*, 6.

This rubricist mentality was understandable given that celebrating the liturgy was the reserve of the clerics. In order to protect this celebration from abuses the rubrics were enforced by attaching sins to noncompliance. A priest could sin in a variety of ways – even mortally – by not following the rubrics. The introductory material to the Tridentine Missal, after the exhaustive rubrics governing how the priest was to offer Mass, contained a section entitled “Concerning Defects that May Occur in the Celebration of Mass,” which spelled out in great detail what needed to be done in case something unexpected should happen: for example, if a fly should fall into the chalice before or after the consecration, or if the words of consecration were changed or not pronounced in their entirety. The great worry underlying much of these cases was that the priest may do something to invalidate the consecration and thereby gravely sin. It was for this reason that rubrics were so crucial.

This extreme concern for correctly performing the rite was inculcated with seriousness when time came for a seminarian to do a “practice Mass” – usually in the presence of a canon lawyer who specialized in liturgical law. Fr. Adrien Nocent, who taught for many years at the Liturgical Institute of Sant’Anselmo in Rome, shared a story in class of a seminarian in the 1940s who was relieved when he satisfactorily completed his practice Mass. He then asked the instructor, “But Father, when is there time to pray in celebrating the Mass?” “Pray?” replied the professor – “There is no time for prayer when you are saying Mass.”

While real advances had been made in the 1940s and 1950s in Catholic Biblical scholarship under Pope Pius XII, there was still a great deal of suspicion regarding scholars who employed the historical-critical method to the study of scripture.¹⁰ Most seminary professors of scripture were ill-prepared to teach anything but a very traditional interpretation of the Bible. This largely consisted of identifying proof texts against ideas proposed by those who disagreed with the Catholic Church. Its use in preaching was not something that was emphasized. As Botte remarks,

The Bible was regarded as a venerable but somewhat bothersome monument. It often came under attack; you did well to protect it by speaking about it as little as possible. Such was the reaction that seemed to have caused this apologetical teaching. Once in a while a

¹⁰ Donald Senior, *Raymond Brown and the Catholic Biblical Renewal* (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2018), xv–xxi.