

Catholic Church Reform in the United States—

Too Late?

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EDITOR'S NOTE: Mr. Osborne is Associate Professor of Sociology at St. John's University in New York. The following article represents his contribution to the workshop on "The Church in the Modern City" held in Jersey City in December, 1966. Mr. Osborne is speaking here as a sociologist, not as a theologian. We feel that a theologian would interpret the situation differently. We invite any and all theologians to submit their views on this article. If sufficient interest is shown, we will be happy to print a "theologian's reply" in our next issue.

Now that the Second Vatican Council has passed into the realm of history and the Church in this country, as elsewhere, is experiencing the pains of conflict that go with reform, it strikes us as an appropriate task for a sociologist to raise some more or less obvious questions. Just what is the nature of the change now under way in American

dioceses? Precisely what is it that is changing—behavior, belief, norms, values . . . ? Judging by the fact that 138 dioceses are “tooling up” for reform or structural change, one might also ask: does this mean that the significant changes are ahead and are to be determined by ecclesiastical authority?

Although very simply put, these questions actually are beyond our power to answer in any certain or definitive manner. So we propose therefore the usual strategem and couch our response as a thesis. While such a procedure does demand some research, its principal virtue is that it provides the focus for the more definitive research which will confirm, modify, or disprove the thesis itself.

Our thesis flows from a distinction which we believe to be crucial, namely, the distinction between religious and ecclesiastical reform. This distinction, together with the evidence gathered from our research, suggests that religious reform in the Catholic Church in the United States takes precedence in time and significance over the other. This is so because of its very nature which consists in changes in individuals in their norms and values first, then in their behavior. This change, sprung undoubtedly from diverse sources in the secular as well as religious universe, seems to have as its immediate stimulator the mass media: significant books, a change-oriented religious press, TV, and of course, Kung “rallies.” Religious reform, then, proceeds at its own pace and because of its nature (*only briefly elaborated here*) it constitutes the change to which ecclesiastical reform ultimately must adapt—if a structured church is to survive.

Ecclesiastical reform, meanwhile, is a substantially different matter. Its *de facto* operations seem to center largely on such problems as creating new committees, commissions or organizations, formulating new codes and policies, and making shifts in personnel. Behind the scenes, conflicting interest groups vie for advantage, and the forces of change clash with the immovable: entrenched behind seniority, accumulated power, and *savoir-faire*.

By its nature, the pace of change in the realm of the bureaucratic is slow and uncertain. As often as not, it seems to result merely in changes in means or procedures, rather than in goals or substance.

Now it seems to me that there is a rather common assumption that both types of change do, or at least should go hand in hand. Perhaps one could also assert as a common expectation that “the Church” is guiding religious change. Yet from what is evident even in the Cath-

olic press itself and from our own research, we maintain that the two reforms are proceeding almost independently. Not only that, but they have conflicted (*in the dioceses of Los Angeles and Milwaukee to mention two of the more famous cases*). And the prognosis seems to call for more conflict which hypothetically should be predictable by determination of widespread religious reform and, on the other hand, incongruous ecclesiastical reform.

Before elaborating this thesis, a word about its supporting evidence. Over the past two years or so, we have concerned ourselves with the questions stated at the beginning of this article. The best research approach seemed to lie with unobtrusive techniques so that we might be easily governed by what was observed, spoken and performed by Catholics themselves. Unstructured interviews with clergy and laity, the frustrated and the complacent, students and old-timers constitute, much of our notes. Participant observation in selected church societies and movements, and in clandestine gatherings of discontented priests, seminarians and nuns provided most of our data. All these were followed by copious note-taking and a filing system which deemed necessary to change almost every month. All told, we have data which seems to fit naturally under the headings of: norms, values, ritual, bureaucracy and social conflict. The geographical areas include dioceses on the west coast, midwest, east, and deep south. Now I think we're ready for the substance of this report.

With regard to the question as to whether or not the significant changes in the Church lie ahead and await the creation of new structures, our thesis of course suggests that they do not. Those changes are already under way, irreversible, and beyond the control of the official Church. This assertion rests on the assumption that norms, values and ritual are central or essential to any religious institution. Change these and perforce the structures must change in order to establish equilibrium and become functional.

First let us focus on the concept of norm itself. When we talk about norms we are talking about internalized controls and the resultant behavior of the institutions' membership. If change takes place at this level first, structure tends to conform itself to the behavior and ultimately reinforce it. (*The process can however, start with the structures.*) Another preliminary point: change is never complete. It can be detected only in process and this by ascertaining a before and after situation.

Birth Control

Now the first of the changing norms I would like to consider is the stricture on birth control. The prohibition on artificial contraception is a norm which Catholics have internalized for generations with no questions asked. Undoubtedly it resulted in untold defections from membership. Yet for those who remained and participated in the sacramental life of the Church, the terms of that participation were clear. The strength of the norm in moulding marital sexual behavior lay in its sanctions. Violation was a mortal sin. This meant eternal damnation unless forgiven. The Catholic knew he could avoid damnation by a sincere Act of Contrition in case of emergency. But barring this, his only way back to full participation in the sacramental life was by way of Confession.

Only four years ago or less, Catholic newspapers and journals would not even allow discussion of the subject. Rhythm was discussable, but other than that, there was nothing to discuss. Sociologically as well as theologically, the norm was intact.

Today I don't think anyone would doubt that the universal, open and frank discussion of the subject has seriously affected the norm. Here I am making a distinction between the norm and adherence to the norm. Factual or survey research determines the latter, and indirectly, the existence of the former. Logically and theoretically however, the two are separate, and it is on this distinction that we hypothesize that the norm is doomed to gradual extinction. For one thing, the sanctions are gone. (*Now I'm obviously not talking theology.*) In my small sampling of priests, I have found a dozen perhaps, out of some 200 in ten dioceses, who still preach on the subject. And even they do not invoke the old sanctions, but rather exhortations to marital asceticism or the heroic virtue of abstinence where no more pregnancies are desired.

Admittedly this problem norm is only one aspect of Catholicism. And it could be logically argued that it is not even central or fundamental. But anyone who has followed the debate knows that far more is involved. For this stricture rested on the assumption that it derived from the natural law to which the Church alone was privy. As far as the rank and file of Catholics were concerned, priests and laity both, there was more certitude involved in this teaching of the Church than understanding. This certitude not only gave the stricture its effectiveness, but it evidenced a faith that the Church couldn't

possibly be mistaken on it. The reality of the public debate then renders vulnerable this faith, at least for those Catholics who have followed it. I am not on the other hand, implying that mass defection is or will be taking place. If man were strictly a rational animal, no institution could survive such a blunder. But since he is not, all that we can say is that with the dissolution of this norm and with it the faith in infallibility, we hypothesize that Catholics are reshaping, by the influence of their collective behavior, the nature of ecclesiastical authority.

Compulsory Mass Attendance

Another vital norm that can be described as losing its vitality is that of compulsory Mass attendance. Here again the dearth of "fire and brimstone" sanctions is remarkable. The sense of guilt and fear a Catholic had to live with when he missed Mass is a sense that, while still lingering, shows evidence from our sample, of dissolution. But here consensual validation and deeply ingrained habit continue to maintain the performance.

On the other hand, the consensus is far less among the younger generation of Catholics. To increasing numbers, Mass in the parish, particularly the larger ones, is less meaningful and therefore less obligatory. Mass for its own sake, aside from Sunday, draws few young Catholics. In one of the nation's larger Catholic universities, for example, a Mass was held to commemorate the opening of the school year. Between 50 and 75 were present. Simultaneously all cafeterias and lounges were overcrowded; the capacity of these places representing those who could attend was over 3,000. But again, Mass offered as the culmination of some function or meeting which has an atmosphere of fellowship or community and a religious purpose does draw maximum participation. What this phenomena seems to suggest is that Mass is becoming a function of community or fellowship. In any other situation, except for "days of obligation," it has little appeal. Father Fichter's survey of students in the high schools run by Jesuits also conforms the dwindling appeal of the Mass.

So far we've discussed Mass attendance as a norm and behavior pattern. But it is, of course, the core ritual of Catholicism, if not its most distinguishing feature. It is probably no exaggeration to say that with respect to the future of Catholicism "as the Mass goes, so goes the Church." Boas, Malinowski and a host of other scientific students of religion assert the primacy of ritual. Anthony Wallace, of the

University of Pennsylvania, makes the point quite clearly when he states that "ritual is religion in action; it is the cutting edge of the tool . . . it is ritual which accomplishes what religion sets out to do."¹ What occurs, therefore, in or around the Mass carries far more import for the future of the Catholic Church than what happens to structures or to the Chancery. (I think it very fortunate that with the growing acceptance of sociologists in ecclesiastical circles, the more prominent ones are focusing on surveys and calling for "structural reform." Catholic schools and chanceries are not where the action is.)

But to return to the Mass. Keeping in mind that we are speaking sociologically and not theologically, it is clear that there has developed over the past few years a small variety of Masses. Five years ago one could speak of no real variety except the low Mass, the High, and the Solemn High. The motif varied depending on the occasion—a funeral, a wedding or a commencement. In the psychological realm, Mass was the Mass, and it was attended principally through a more or less mental bodiless and silent effort to follow the action at the altar. The Liturgical Movement changed all this and now the emphasis is on participation by the laity.

Today however, we have a range of Mass types from the most simple to the most elaborate. In the simple end of the scale is what I call a "Catacomb Mass." It is indistinguishable (*to an unchurched observer*) from a Protestant Agape Service. It is held in a private home with about 15-40 people present. The priest is dressed in no vestments, he conducts a discussion with the group after his homily. He uses a home-made twist loaf of bread, a bottle of wine, and an ornate chalice. The whole service is said in English and the participants give themselves the Communion under both species. Appropriate hymns usually of a folk variety are sung with distinguishable fervor. Tears of joy are common and expressions of heartfelt gratitude to the priest are even more so. At the other end of the Mass spectrum is one concelebrated by a bishop and eleven or less priests. All are fully vested; parts of the Mass are in Latin. A choir sings alone or leads the congregation in hymns of a more conventional type. Participation by the congregation is contingent on several factors. Water and wine are in cruets, and the bread is the quarter-size unleavened white host. Priests and congregation do not mingle before or after. In between these two extremes is a variety where, toward the simple end of the spectrum some assert they experience Christ's presence. In the more elaborate type such assertions are rarely heard.

The question now facing those sociologists who are interested, is that of typing this variety which has flowered these last few years. And typing also those who attend which type, and where, and more importantly, why. A new typology of religious belonging seems in order therefore. At least one which would account for the contemporary Christian situation.

One category under such a typology would include those Christians seeking fellowship or community centered on the core ritual—the Mass or Agape service. Such Christians would be found—as far as any research among Catholics is concerned—in Newman Clubs, the Cursillo and Better World Movements, Catholic Worker, Friendship House, the inner city apostolates and the Peace Movement. This type looks for that ritual which will provide a more tangible religious experience.

Our random interviews among these groups indicate that they experience Mass in a novel and unique way in these esoteric settings. On the other hand, they do not feel the compulsion to attend just any Mass. At least they do not suffer the pangs of fear and guilt if they miss the conventional parish Mass. For them the norm has all but disappeared.

Many from this same minority have meanwhile experienced an Agape Meal or Service under Protestant auspices. And this, significantly, is always a communal one. Catholic college students in the New York metropolitan area for example have been identified and interviewed after attending the Agape Service at the Judson Memorial Baptist Church near the N.Y.U. campus. The remarkable resemblance between that and what I referred to above as the Catacomb Mass impresses these students. Whatever theological distinctions they make between the two services is dulled by what they regard as a Christian community or a genuine religious experience in a Protestant setting. Here, on the fringes of Catholicism in other words, is an ecumenical group unwittingly building a bridge between the core rituals of Protestantism and Catholicism. Such unformed groups have been identified also in Chicago and on the West Coast. There are several organizational vehicles whose latent function is to carry forward this movement. One, the University Christian Movement, recently organized on a national scale. In at the center of the Catholic institution meanwhile, are official Liturgical Commissions, presumably governing ritualistic change. Not having interviewed at all in this sector I can

only wonder what they are doing. They undoubtedly govern the rubrics of Mass at the elaborate and formal end of our spectrum but the more meaningful change seems to be at the other end where the Commission's voice is—I suspect—too distant to be heard.

Unquestioning Obedience

Other norms and values, which at one time were knit into the tight ecclesiastical fabric, are coming loose. I will give them only brief mention. The unquestioning obedience due the bishop is no longer of the unquestioning type. I have no comprehensive statistic, but I've made a count of individual priests and groups of them who have confronted their bishop with a challenge to his directives or his policies. With no intent to search out all, I have discovered over 50 such confrontations over the past 18 months.

For the most part, these are priests who consider themselves first and foremost as Christians. They are orthodox or fundamentalist in that they take the Gospel more seriously than the Church. The latter they see as the "people of God." They view the institution or the bureaucracy as an instrument of the People of God, and not its master. While such priests have a genuine respect for their bishop as the immediate source of their own priestly powers, they are frequently willing to sacrifice their priesthood to the primacy of their conscience in a serious matter. Numbering in the hundreds, and growing as issues and crises mount, this body of priests evidences the decay of a bureaucratic control.

Vocation Crisis

In the realm of values, the high value youth once placed on the priesthood seems to be in eclipse—if one uses as a criterion the declining rates of seminary admissions. This, plus increasing drop-out rates among seminarians, add up to what is widely referred to as a "vocation crisis." Our data here is not of the solid variety, except for one of the nation's most populous dioceses—and it is not for publication. Father Fichter's survey² of the Jesuit high school population in the U.S. offers another piece of tangible evidence. One-fourth of his sample thought they would join the Peace Corps some day; only 8% thought they would give one year of service to the Church.

The Future

Now if I may, I would like to restate the thesis in terms of conclusions or hypotheses: conclusions for those interested in speculative thinking, hypotheses for those interested in testing its validity. In this final section of the article, I would also like to explore with you the implications for the practical problem of anticipation. (*I shy away from the term "prediction."*) What, in other words is the most likely course the two reform processes are likely to take—a merger? a clash? a divergence?

We conclude, first of all, that the dissolution of significant norms for Catholic behavior—birth control, compulsory Mass attendance and clerical obedience, combined with a dilution of the high value placed on the priesthood itself—all of this signifies a process of profound change already underway. The function of the official Church in this process—bishops, pastors, chancery officials, Liturgical Commissions, etc.—appears marginal or *ex post facto*. To be sure, there are some dioceses where efforts are being made to render structural reform congruous with the basic religious reform. Most dioceses which we have observed however, seem to be planning too slowly and with the assumption that they are in control. Research and dialogue also seem to be minimal.

Further evidence of substantive change lies with the variety of Masses which have developed in recent years. Also, the drawing power of that type which is the expression of community or Christian fellowship contrasted with the declining attraction of the conventional types suggests fundamental change in the Institution's core ritual. May I suggest here that quantitative research would be very much in order to determine if, to what degree and in what sectors of the population, this segment of the thesis can be validated.

Another conclusion that seems to warrant emphasis is that religious reform, defined as change in norms, values, goals, should be theoretically distinguished from ecclesiastical, defined as change in structures, procedures, on various levels from the national down to the parochial. If the theological view that "the Spirit breathes where He wills" is correct, then this distinction between the types would seem to suggest some practical implications as to the posture of ecclesiastical authority. For one thing, the process of change that we've spoken of here lies beyond the control and responsibility of that authority. And undoubtedly, they would be among the first to agree—

the bishops, that is. On the other hand, being human it is only reasonable to expect from them a certain measure of dissonance or unwitting incongruity between this belief and their overt administrative behavior. For, as far as we can tell from sociology, institutions simply do not reform themselves except through pressures (*external*), conflict, or a long-term dialectical process.³ They exist, after all for the maintenance of order and stability and as a bridge over the generations. Change is not their *raison d'être*. Therefore, conflict with dissident groups and individuals is as natural as it is inevitable. And it is through such conflict that authority must see the genesis or development of structural adjustment. This latter process is one of fitting into currents already flowing, not so much with the idea of control as with the purpose of bringing larger numbers into those currents. Whatever control or management of the *avant garde* is attempted, it must be for the two-fold purpose of a dialectic and bringing the main body along into the emerging synthesis.

Now, with respect to control over the celebration of the Mass, we run into the most central and most sensitive of all issues facing the Church today. And, paradoxically, the least discussed. The *de jure* rights of the hierarchy in this matter is a theological principle that need not concern us here. The sociological—perhaps “human” would be the better term—problem, on the other hand, does concern us. Yet there is not much that can be offered as a “conclusion.” What we might suggest is the application of appropriate theory. What is appropriate can be determined by our data relevant to the “new” Mass. That is to say, it is viewed by participants at the communal end of the spectrum differently than by more numerous but traditional Catholics. Profound religious belief and sentiment, and thus the total personality, is involved. These contrasting “definitions of the situation” (to borrow Thomas’ phrase) thus hold the potential for either conflict or crisis of conscience. The applicable theory then should be from the area of social conflict.

The most viable theory here and the one receiving support from research in interracial conflict⁴ in the United States, is that of Simmel and Coser.⁵ The research and theory both attest to the positive or beneficial functions that can accrue from a frank “free-swinging” confrontation of antagonists, bargaining, so to speak, from positions or power of equality. Painful and tense though they may be, the creation of such negotiating committees, workshops, or whatever the

conflict arrangement may be called, is, in the words of Coser "likely to have stabilizing and integrative functions for the relationship . . . and (constitute) an important stabilizing mechanism (for the institution).

In addition, conflict within a group frequently helps to revitalize existent norms; or it contributes to the emergence of new norms. In this sense, social conflict is a mechanism for adjustment of norms adequate to new conditions. A flexible society benefits from conflict because such behavior, by helping to create and modify norms, assures its continuance under changed conditions.⁵

It goes without saying that institutionalization of conflict, as suggested by the theory, means selection of participants or antagonists from and by each opposing group. It also presupposes equality of authority or a willingness on the part of both to resort to sanctions or pressure tactics should negotiation fail. Yet the ability and/or desire of bishops, priests and laity to arrange themselves into opposing parties and fulfill the above conditions for the institutionalization of conflict is, to say the least, doubtful, except perhaps in a couple of dioceses.

What is likely to happen then is, from the sociological point of view, too difficult to predict. About all that we can do is to proceed deductively from our findings reported herein. If these be correct—the dissolution of norms and beliefs in the infallibility of the Church, (*resulting from the birth control controversy*), a new definition of episcopal authority, a new meaning for the Mass—then any unilateral attempt by a bishop to eliminate or substantially modify the new Mass runs the risk of alienating those involved or inducing an "underground schism." One archbishop with whom we discussed this whole problem claims such a schism already exists. In theological terms, either or both of these results may be translated "diaspora." A new development that indeed seems to be underway.

FOOTNOTES

¹ *Religion: An Anthropological View* (New York, Random House, 1966), p. 102.

² "and get back a man." *America*, October 1, 1966.

³ *Human Behavior*, edited by Berelson and Steiner. (New York, Harcourt, Brace & World), pp. 366, 379.

⁴ Killian and Gregg, *Racial Conflict in America*. (Englewood Cliffs, Prentice Hall, 1964).

⁵ Lewis Coser, *The Functions of Social Conflict*. (Glencoe, Free Press, 1956).

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 154.