

“President Trump’s Catholic supporters descended from immigrants we used to call ‘white ethnics.’ So, the white Catholic embrace of Donald Trump in 2016 raised eyebrows in the Church and among political and cultural observers. Whether you find this development exciting or embarrassing, Professor Steven Millies explains how and why it happened with rigor and insight. Drawing on his years of careful learning and study, Millies has written an important book on the Catholic vote in the Trump Era.”

—Jacob Lupfer
Political Analyst

“Though often labelled the ‘swing vote’ in US national elections, the Catholic vote has long confounded political analysts. That has never been more true than since Catholic voters helped anchor Donald J. Trump’s unexpected 2016 presidential victory. Millies skillfully puts the Trump victory in the context of a nearly half-century long evolution of Catholic voting, and in so doing he showcases more clearly than others what underlies the motivations of politically-engaged Catholics. Much more than a conventional political analysis, Millies’s book goes deep into Catholic history, tradition, and theology to provide a deep understanding of the various forces that drive Catholic voting. Highly recommended.”

—Mark J. Rozell
Dean of the Schar School of Policy and Government
George Mason University

“Good Intentions should be required reading for those who want to understand the complex and unique history of the relationship between Catholics and politics in the United States, from *Roe v. Wade* to the election of Trump. Millies’s book will greatly help our understanding of the dramatic expansion of the gap between liberals and conservatives in these last two decades, especially within the wider context of the history of the intra-Catholic division in American cultural and political life.”

—Massimo Faggioli
Professor of Historical Theology
Villanova University

“Good Intentions traces recent US Catholic history to illuminate the contours of the contemporary public church and present political moment. Steven Millies’s engaging narrative deftly navigates enduring tensions at intersections of theology, law, and politics in view of the impact of cultural and religious polarization in the postconciliar church. His subtle, interdisciplinary analysis offers valuable insights into questions of conscience, political engagement, and Catholic identity that will prove helpful to those interested in forging a path forward beyond the binary thinking and divisive patterns he identifies.”

—Kristin E. Heyer
Professor of Theological Ethics
Boston College

“The American Catholic population has never been more divided: half voted for Donald Trump while half voted for Hillary Rodham Clinton. How did our divisions become so deep and bitter? Steven Milles’s perceptive history allows us to make sense of the past, and to move toward common ground in the future.”

—Cathleen Kaveny
Libby Professor of Law and Theology
Boston College

Good Intentions

A History of
Catholic Voters' Road
from *Roe* to Trump

Steven P. Millies



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*for Mary Ruth Singer and Scott Singer,
and for all of the lay women and men
working every day to make
their parishes and their country
great*

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Acknowledgments

While I was a graduate student at The Catholic University of America in Washington, DC, I had an unusual opportunity to observe many of the Catholic bishops of the United States up close. From 1997 to 1999, I was a student member of the university Board of Trustees. Because it is “the bishops’ university,” bishops make up half of the Catholic University board. During one of those years, I sat in executive committee meetings in addition to the full board meetings. I also sat on a trustees’ committee that hired the university’s fourteenth president. In meetings and over dinners, on coffee breaks and during short rides in cars or on shuttle buses, I got to know many of those bishops. That’s not to say we became friends. However, it is to say that I came to know those bishops as people a little bit. While it all was happening, I knew I was getting a rare and privileged glimpse of something. I was determined to observe and remember everything I could. I have been and I remain intensely grateful to Catholic University and to those bishops for that illuminating experience.

Not surprisingly, I found that our nation’s bishops are good men. Some more than others, of course. But every one impressed me with his holiness and his intelligence. Quickly, though, I came to appreciate something else about them. It surprised me a little, but on reflection it should not have. The lay trustees on the board generally were successful people from the worlds of finance or law. They were people

accustomed to a lot of responsibility for others and for overseeing large assets. In my time with them, I came to see our bishops as not really being very different from those lay trustees. Catholics sitting in the pews of our local parishes generally don't think of our shepherds as being like CEOs, managing hundreds of employees or millions (even billions) of dollars in assets. But of course, they are. Much of their time is devoted to tasks that are not really spiritual in any way. That realization came to me as a revelation twenty years ago, as I think it would come to most lay Catholics. The church defines the role of the bishop in three ways—teaching, sanctifying, and governing. Bishops do all three. But day in and day out, even they would agree that governing occupies the bulk of their time.

I owe a debt of thanks to the many Catholics in my parish and in other parishes who sometimes have reminded me that I have had an unusual and privileged experience of glimpsing how the church in the United States is led, and by whom. I have had a peek behind the curtain that has shown me something many people who have known bishops know. But most people in the pews have not known bishops. This book came from conversations with those Catholics who attend Mass regularly, who believe in the Gospel and in the teachings of the church, who support their bishops, but who have been frustrated and bewildered because their bishops' behavior can seem so strange sometimes—especially when they are dealing with political issues. This book is for them, and it comes with my gratitude for how those people have reminded me that we cannot give in to our bewilderment and frustration. In fact, this book is my effort to do on a larger scale what I have tried to do many times in conversations that I have had in parking lots and narthexes. I cannot dispel all of the frustration, even for myself. But years of study and experiences like the one I've described provide a way I can help to ban-

ish the bewilderment. Maybe, once we understand a little bit more about what has motivated the bishops—which, to no small degree, is what they share in common with most American Catholics—we can overcome at least some of the frustration. With gratitude to the many lay Catholics I’ve talked to and the countless others I never will meet who fit the description I’ve given here, this book comes as a reply to the questions people ask me most often and as an affirmation that I am with them, in common cause, to make the most of the lay apostolate in our church.

Liturgical Press and especially Hans Christoffersen were generously receptive to this idea for a little book. The proposal for this book came together rather quickly after the 2016 election and Hans could not have been more encouraging and helpful as this book has come to its completion. The early writing went very quickly, and then in the summer I suddenly found myself with a new job in a new city, while still holding my old job in another part of the United States. To say the pace of my writing slowed would be an understatement. Hans and Liturgical Press were patient and generous. My task as an author had become unavoidably difficult, but my friends at Liturgical Press made it as easy as it could be. I could not be more grateful.

I also owe a word of gratitude to my new colleagues at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, whose encouragement and flexibility with my needs as I take up my new position there have helped give me the time I needed to complete this work. In a special way, let me thank Mark Francis, CSV, Barbara Reid, OP, Ton Sison, CPPS, Bob Schreiter, CPPS, Scott Alexander, Steve Bevans, SVD, Andy Cirillo, Peter Cunningham, and Jessica Curbis, all of whom have made my transition easier.

I received very important assistance from Dr. Matt Thornburg, a colleague at the University of South Carolina Aiken, and Phillip McHood, a political science major at USC

Aiken. Some of what a reader finds in this book depends on a sort of data analysis I am unqualified even to consider doing. Phillip McHood is the sort of student any professor wants to find in his class, and he offered diligent assistance with 2016 election data without which I could not have completed this book. Matt had no reason to help out, yet his expertise and generosity made it possible for both Phillip McHood and me to complete our tasks.

My wife, Mary Claire, and our children, Nora and Andrew, provided the support that made this book possible. They have suffered for it, too. As I was scrambling to write in early mornings, on weekends, and in otherwise spare moments, my wife and children lost access to my time and attention to this book. I cannot give it back. But I can—and I do—hope that this work, as much as the work we lay women and men all do, can bear some fruit. Finally, the better world we want for our families and the reign of God itself depends on our working to bring them forth.

Steven P. Millies
Chicago, Illinois
October 24, 2017
Feast of St. Anthony Marie Claret
Bishop, Missionary, and Educator
amid political turmoil

Introduction

The earliest exit polling reports about the 2016 presidential election told a story that was at once completely unsurprising and, at the same time, head-scratchingly strange: Donald Trump had won the White House with a majority of American Catholic voters.

The picture that emerged later, as more detailed studies of the 2016 presidential vote became available, was more complicated. In April 2017, the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University used better data to determine that “Catholics voted for Clinton 48 percent & Trump 45 percent.” A later study of the election—the most comprehensive one available, with over 64,000 respondents—more or less bears out this picture of the result.

Among Catholic Voters

Donald Trump	49 percent
Hillary Rodham Clinton	46 percent

The difference is statistically quite small, and so this is a virtual tie between Clinton and Trump among Catholic voters in 2016.¹

In one sense, perhaps it is not so surprising after all if Catholics preferred Donald Trump about as much as they preferred Hillary Rodham Clinton. Neither candidate reflected an appealing perspective on social or political questions for Catholics. The 2016 election offered Catholics a

vexing choice. Then again, the nature of making political choices never has been such that any candidate for office should excite easy enthusiasm among voters who take Catholic faith seriously when making decisions on the ballot. George W. Bush was pro-life, but he launched an elective war that was condemned by Pope John Paul II. Barack Obama protected abortion rights, but he made healthcare more accessible for millions of vulnerable people. So while we may be tempted to say that Clinton and Trump offer us a special case in the 2016 election, neither one clearly appealing to Catholic voters, perhaps that does not make the 2016 election such a special case after all. No recent election—and few elections ever—have offered faithful Catholics an obviously suitable candidate. If we are tempted still to say that there was something different, unprecedented, about the 2016 presidential election, we need to look elsewhere for an explanation.

Of course, an explanation is not difficult to find. The difference was Donald J. Trump himself. Trump's victory represents an unprecedented development in American politics. Not only is he the first person to become president without any previous experience of public service, but Trump is also the first to be elected by the American people without a clear public policy roadmap. Ronald Reagan's campaign in 1980 released economic models that justified his hopes for a tax reform. Bill Clinton offered clear proposals to streamline government and cut the deficit. Perhaps most voters did not read the white papers filled with policy specifics that the campaigns released, but the policy specifics existed. Journalists at least read them and, even if those public policy papers were filtered for voters through the media, still specific policy proposals were part of the decisions voters made even if only indirectly. A mark of Donald Trump's political inexperience as much as his keen ear for our political moment, the Trump campaign was notoriously

short on policy specifics. A wall would be built, and Mexico would pay for it. Little was offered to explain how. Obamacare would be repealed and replaced with something better that voters would “love,” but never a word about what that was. A master showman for as long as he dominated New York City society and tabloid headlines, Trump and his campaign played to his strength. Attention-getting promises have one overriding purpose: to get attention. And, every modern campaign has done its share of attention getting. What was different in 2016 was that many voters did not look any further than the spectacular promises. The reality show Trump was hosting was enough for many voters—indeed, more voters than ever before were unbothered by the lack of details. It suited what their expectations from politics had become.

Then there was the matter of character and temperament. Then there was the matter of character and temperament. Trump claimed he could “stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot somebody and I wouldn’t lose any voters.” His voters almost literally have proved him right. John McCain was held captive as a prisoner of war by the North Vietnamese; he refused early release and endured years of abuse he might have escaped so that he could stay with his comrades. For Trump, McCain was not a hero, yet veterans preferred him by a two-to-one margin over Hillary Rodham Clinton. Trump launched a days-long Twitter outburst against Ghazala and Khizr Khan, parents of a fallen soldier, after they spoke at the Democratic National Convention. Military families continued to support Trump. Donald Trump was overheard on tape boasting about sexual assault. Evangelical Christians and many Catholics still supported the twice-divorced acknowledged adulterer. Simpler gaffes and less outrageous scandals were enough to threaten or derail entirely other presidential campaigns at earlier moments in our history—even quite recently. Nothing seems

bad enough to turn away Trump's supporters. The sheer number of his scandals somehow has conspired to make Trump scandal-proof.

If we try to imagine why the lack of any serious specifics about policy or why such obvious deficiencies of character and temperament did not disqualify Trump from election among so many voters, finally perhaps we arrive at the most useful explanation for why 2016 seemed so different. A change has taken place among voters in American life. The politics of grievance, grudge, and revenge always have been with us. The problem was so present in the 1790s that George Washington cautioned against it in his Farewell Address.² No moment in American history has been untainted by arguments so heated that they became personally divisive and destructive. Yet, in the last few decades the problem has intensified. By 2016, that intensity altered the dynamics of our national politics so much that Donald Trump could be elected president of the United States. And even though they only preferred him about as much as Hillary Rodham Clinton, Catholics played an important part in the growing, destructive divisiveness of American political life that made Trump's nomination and election possible.

The story of the 2016 presidential election must be told through this perspective on what made it different. In turn, that is a story of how something has changed among the American people. Finally, because they have come to occupy such a prominent role in American life, numerically and as a social influence, the 2016 election is a story in no small part about Catholic voters. Over the last several decades of American life, it has become common to speak of a culture war that is under way. That culture war is marked by the outlines of an argument over moral questions in American social and political life, and Catholics have been a part of that argument for as long as it has been under way. Those moral issues, especially abortion, became a preoccupation

of Catholic political attention. But this story is not only that simple. In part, the determination among Catholics to press cultural arguments has owed to a particular, peculiar history shared by American Catholics who descend from the Catholic immigrants who came to the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Those circumstances in which Catholicism has been expressed in the United States throughout the twentieth century have played an important role in shaping the Catholic engagement with American politics as we know it today.

For those reasons, this book is not so much a political analysis or an examination of American politics in the light of Catholic social teaching. It is both of those things in places, as much as this book also addresses some specialized topics in law and sociology. But in fact this book is a history, and its purpose is to tell a story that is complex. We might easily take our beginning here from the American founding or from the nineteenth-century entry of Catholic immigrants into the United States. Chapter 1 will set our stage with a survey of Catholicism in the early United States because the questions raised by the election of 2016 are so big and so broad that we cannot overlook the past. We take our more proper and specific beginning from the US Supreme Court's *Roe v. Wade* decision in 1973, which is where chapter 2 begins, as we will trace the changes in how Catholics engage US politics from that point as an important moment that set the culture war into motion. *Roe* arrived at the moment when Catholics in the United States had, by many measures, reached their peak cultural influence. The Supreme Court's decision unsettled American Catholics' sense of where they fit into American life and, amid rising divisions in American life that emerged through the Cold War and from the tumult of the 1960's, *Roe* marked the beginning of a long road of increasing polarization toward the 2016 election. Chapter 3 takes up that story in the decade after *Roe* amid the first

skirmishes between Catholic politicians and Catholic bishops over the role of Catholic faith in public life. Chapter 4 takes up a period of time from the 1990s to the early 2000s when the polarization we now recognize became entrenched both in American politics and in the church, with clear lines drawn between a culture of life and a culture of death and little discernible space between them where a more moderate or nuanced position could be found. In chapter 5 we will see some of the ways that the divisions over culture reached their peak in the years since the presidential election of 2004, and in chapter 6 we examine some of the perverse consequences of that polarization, especially after the economic crisis of 2008, in the light of Christianity's always-fraught relationship with the world.

All along the way, the US Catholic bishops will remain important figures in the story of the road that leads from *Roe* to the election of Donald Trump. Like the American Catholics they lead, there is not much evidence that the bishops are enthusiastic or happy about the place in which we all find ourselves. Like other Catholics, some are so concerned about issues like abortion that they have made a series of political calculations for many years, all of which have aimed at something good but that now have culminated in the election of Donald Trump. Many are uncomfortable with where a near-single-issue focus has led us. This was a road on which Catholics embarked with the best of intentions. The US Catholic bishops and the people they lead wanted to promote the dignity of human life, and they have sought to advance a consistent ethic of human life all along.³ But this road American Catholics have walked since *Roe* is not the only way to advance the cause of life. There always are alternatives. To reconsider our path and find another requires us first to retrace our steps and learn how we have gotten to where we are.

Chapter 1

Catholic and American

It is an irony of history that the first Mass in what is now the continental United States was celebrated in 1509 by Spanish explorers in the party of Juan Ponce de León. While the United States ultimately would declare their independence from an English king and the influence of English-speaking Irish immigrants would shape Catholicism in the US, the story of Catholicism in the US begins with Spain.

The irony is more than an amusing curiosity. It raises issues central to the story of American Catholicism. It reminds us that every Catholic on these shores is a newcomer, and the story of American Catholicism is a story of immigrants even from the beginning. In a way, it also underscores the strange position of Catholics as outsiders throughout most of American history. As Protestantism came to the Massachusetts Bay and Jamestown settlements some time later, dominating respectable American culture for centuries that followed, Catholics long would labor to establish their bona fides as Americans, striving to find their place in an establishment disposed to regard them as interloping newcomers with their strange papist beliefs. The irony is all the greater since it is clear that the Spanish brought Catholicism to the American shores decades earlier than Protestantism arrived.

That striving is important to the story of American Catholicism. Catholics have been big city mayors and governors, cabinet officers and members of Congress, justices of the Supreme Court, vice president, and president. Yet somehow, the challenge of being American always plagues Catholics. Seventy million Catholics fill every level of American society, Catholics make up the largest religious denomination in the United States (the most-churched developed nation in the world), yet the question of integrating into American life never goes away. A barrier seems to separate Catholicism and Americanism, and there have been many attempts to explain it. Cardinal Francis George of Chicago observed that Americans are inevitably “culturally Calvinist,” owing perhaps to America’s pilgrim origins at Plymouth Rock, and no matter how far they have come, how much more diverse the United States has become, that includes Catholics. Perhaps, like Judaism, Hinduism, Islam, and many other ancient faith traditions, Catholicism is too big to integrate fully into American history and culture.

In a peculiar way, that has been a strength of American Catholicism. European Catholics have spent the centuries since the Reformation on the defensive, in retreat. The European forebears of America’s immigrant Catholics did not need to grapple with the fretful compromises of worldliness like the followers of such Reformers as Luther, Calvin, or Henry VIII did. Outsider status may have helped American Catholics, with no historically inspired expectations of political hegemony, to imitate better the example of the early church. As St. Paul admonished the Christians of Rome not to conform themselves to the world and St. Augustine reminded Christians they only are pilgrims on a sojourn in the world, American Catholics have been a people apart.¹ Their relative isolation nurtured something unique. American Catholicism is different from Catholicism in other parts of the world, and it has given gifts to the church that, perhaps, could not have come from another people.²

It is this struggle between American Catholics and their national home both to preserve and to overcome that defined the experience of Catholics in the United States both in and out of politics throughout most of American history. Yet, naturally, politics is an important sphere of life in which values are contested and decisions have far-reaching social and moral consequences. Especially as American Catholics emerged from the Catholic ghetto in the 1960s and entered the American mainstream during the 1970s, the question of distinctiveness began to present leaders within the Catholic Church with a crisis. In early days, perhaps the crisis was more subtle—felt or sensed, rather than known. Still, the fact was that it was growing easier for American Catholics to distinguish their commitments of faith from their public acts as citizens or as elected officials. It is important to say that neither the Democratic Party nor the Republican Party ever offered Catholics a comfortable home in terms of issue positions. Yet, the group behavior of Catholics for a long time reflected a struggle all their own to accommodate their beliefs to their political alternatives among candidates and parties. Once Catholic political behavior became indistinguishable from that of non-Catholics, an obvious conclusion to draw was that Catholics were not struggling in quite the same way anymore. Being Americans had won out over being Catholics for some number of Catholics, or at least it might have seemed that way to American bishops as the 1970s began.

To approach the choices made by American bishops since the 1970s as they have taught Catholics about social or political questions requires that we should understand some of that background. Before we can understand why the decades since *Roe v. Wade* have unfolded in the way that they have among American Catholics, we need to see clearly how the landscape had changed between American Catholics and non-Catholics, between Catholic bishops and the people in the pews, across a long arc of American history.

A Catholic Ghetto

Catholics briefly had a home in the United States when George Calvert, the 1st Baron Baltimore (1579–1632), received the charter for the Maryland colony from King Charles I in the years leading up to the violent outbreak of the English Civil War. England would be overcome by religious conflict throughout the next four decades as Anglican and Calvinist Protestants vied for hegemony. Those bloody years eventually would give birth to a tradition of religious toleration, but not right away and not really for everyone. The author of religious toleration in the English-speaking world, John Locke, extended toleration widely but not to Catholics.³ Even on the other side of the Atlantic, Calvert's colony for refugee English Catholics would not be safe for long. By 1644, Puritans who had settled in Providence (later renamed Annapolis) began to exert territorial pressure as the Maryland colony became a theatre of the English Civil War. When the Civil War ended in 1688 with the accession of William of Orange (the Glorious Revolution), Catholics began to suffer legal proscriptions in what had been founded as a safe haven for them. Catholic worship was forbidden and, in 1704, the Puritan government passed an "Act to Prevent the Growth of Popery."

By the late eighteenth century, as the United States declared independence in 1776 and began its government under the Constitution in 1789, the situation for Catholics was little easier. Barely 1 percent of the whole United States worshipped as Catholics, most of them concentrated in Maryland (where, perhaps, they amounted to 10 percent of the population). At the time of Independence, Maryland's Charles Carroll (1737–1832) became the only Catholic to sign the Declaration. Yet even as Carroll affixed his name to Jefferson's parchment, the Mass still had to be celebrated privately and Catholics were taxed onerously at double the

rate for other Marylanders.⁴ Prejudice against Catholics in Revolutionary America was so widespread, the eminent historian of Catholicism in America, John Tracy Ellis, recorded that there were outbursts of anti-Catholicism even in Washington's Continental Army.⁵ Catholics found a comparatively peaceful home elsewhere in Pennsylvania, where the Quaker William Penn had founded his colony on principles of toleration, and in the mid-1700s the Jesuits began sending missionaries, first to Philadelphia. The Catholic community nurtured at Philadelphia by the missionary Jesuits would mark a turning point in American Catholic life.

The Jesuits had provided a lifeline to persecuted Catholics in nearby colonies, giving twelve priests to the sixteen thousand Catholics of nearby Maryland and operating a number of schools there. At one of those schools in Cecil County, a young cousin of Charles Carroll fell under the influence of the Jesuits. He would go on to be educated at the Jesuit college in St. Omer (Belgium) before joining the Society of Jesus himself. John Carroll, SJ (1735–1815) would become not only the first bishop of Baltimore, but the first American bishop in 1789. Vigorous Catholic support for the War for Independence had created a friendlier climate for Catholics in the new United States, and by the time of the Constitutional Convention in 1787 many states already had loosened the laws persecuting Catholics. Up to this time, Catholics had feared that the appointment of a bishop to America by the pope would stir a backlash. The appointment of the first Anglican bishop of the United States in 1783 began to raise Catholic hopes that they might be permitted a bishop of their own, and Carroll, as the superior of all of the missions in the US, appealed for a bishop to Rome. An eye-catching detail in Carroll's request may surprise contemporary readers, however. Aware of American suspicions about the influence of the pope, Carroll thought

it wiser for the priests of the United States to elect their first bishop from among their own number. Sensitive to the circumstances, Pope Pius VI agreed. John Carroll was elected to be the first Bishop of Baltimore by the priests of the United States, carrying twenty-four of twenty-six votes.⁶

Catholicism would grow slowly at first in the United States during the next century. It is difficult to describe the numbers meaningfully in the early part of the nineteenth century. Census data would not make any effort to track religious affiliation until 1850, and then it relied on reporting from churches. As a result, estimates tended to be “incredibly inflated.”⁷ We cannot be precise about the numbers, but in a greater sense the statistical picture does not really require us to be precise. The scale of the late-nineteenth-century growth of Catholicism in the United States, owing to the waves of Catholic immigrants who entered the US after the Civil War as industrialization got under way and created an unquenchable demand for labor, brought rapid and geometric growth. By 1870, the percentage of Catholics in the United States had doubled the number before the Civil War.⁸ By the dawn of the twentieth century Catholics were 17 percent of the population, nearly quadrupling in fifty years, and that percentage would still increase throughout the 1900s.⁹

But numerical progress was not the same as social progress. Especially as Catholicism came to be identified with the strange new immigrant cultures entering the United States from Ireland, Italy, Bohemia, and elsewhere, prejudice against Catholics grew worse for a long while as their numbers grew larger. Nativism took hold early in the nineteenth century, when “native”-born Americans struck out against the immigrant Catholics whom they regarded as foreign strangers. An Ursuline convent in Massachusetts was burned in 1834. Ugly tracts were published against Catholics.¹⁰ In 1844, riots in Philadelphia saw two Catholic churches burned

along with the homes of many Irish immigrants. By the 1850s, the Know-Nothing movement took hold. Several anti-Catholic secret societies (for example, the United Sons of America in Pennsylvania, or the Order of United Americans in New York) formed whose members, when questioned, replied that they “know nothing,” a term that stuck as a label. The Know-Nothings claimed the name and formed a political party with brief success. A short while later, in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War, the so-called Christian Knights of the Ku Klux Klan emerged to terrorize not only freed slaves, but also immigrants, Jews, and Catholics. The Klan was founded in the South, though it was active as far north as Michigan and Pennsylvania in the later decades of the nineteenth century.

It may, for these reasons, seem understandable that American Catholics did not spend the 1800s emerging from the shadows so much as scrambling deeper into them. Catholic communities around the United States built for themselves a parallel social, economic, medical, and educational world that was unknown anywhere else in Catholic experience. Catholic schools offer the best example. John T. McGreevy opens his book *Catholicism and American Freedom: A History* by recounting a Boston episode both extraordinary and typical (“The Eliot School Rebellion” in 1859, as it was known) wherein the hands of a ten-year-old Catholic boy, Thomas Whall, were struck by a school official with a cane “for half an hour” because he would not recite the King James Bible translation of the Ten Commandments, as the law required in a public school.¹¹ A conflict opened between Catholics and Protestants in Boston that saw hundreds of Catholic students discharged from public schools, transfixed the community, and was preached about from practically every pulpit in Boston. Little surprise that the beginning of the twentieth century saw seventy-six parish schools established across the Archdiocese of Boston, which became one

of the largest Catholic school systems in the United States. The pattern, of course, would be replicated elsewhere, and not only in schools. Catholics in the United States spent much of the late nineteenth century constructing their own separate world, one in which their children and their sick would be cared for away from the harsh conditions of Gilded Age capitalism and the unwelcoming attitudes of their fellow citizens.

Yet, it should be remembered that turning inward by constructing a Catholic ghetto was not just a response to unwelcoming conditions faced by so many ethnic groups who brought their Catholic faith to the United States in the late 1800s. In fact, it was an affirmation of an already-ingrained instinct among American Catholics. While we might name many leaders of American Catholicism in the nineteenth century, it would be good at this point to remember two for how they help us understand the unusual and distinct flavor of American Catholicism.

The first is Orestes Brownson (1803–1876). Brownson was a convert, received into the Catholic Church when he was forty-one years old. By profession, Brownson was a teacher before he was ordained as a Universalist minister in 1826. He fell out with the Universalists after he became interested in social reforms, and he moved to Unitarianism because they would tolerate his desire to work among, with, and for laborers to seek economic and social reforms. To that end, he began publishing a magazine that brought him wide renown. His literary interests gradually drew him into the orbit of Catholic thinkers, leading to his conversion in 1844. Brownson, we might say, was the first widely known convert to Catholicism in the United States, and that gave him an outsider's perspective on how his fellow Catholics approached being Americans. Brownson found it perplexing that so many in the Catholic world sought "to keep Catholics a foreign colony in the United States."¹² Even in those

long-ago days, the impulse to maintain a Catholic identity as “a people apart” was strong. Brownson’s most important book, *The American Republic* (1866), went further to argue that it is “the special mission of the United States . . . to continue and complete in the political order the Graeco-Roman civilization” that was continued in the Catholic Church through the Middle Ages and gives to the US its foundation in “real catholic, not sectarian principles” that permit the church to “exert her free spirit, and teach and govern men by the Divine law.”¹³ Catholicism and American political life, far from being different, in fact reinforced and needed each other. Brownson lies buried today in the Basilica of the Sacred Heart at the University of Notre Dame.

As much as Brownson believed in a Catholic Church in the United States “no longer . . . encumbered with the obsolete forms of the Middle Ages,” one open to “what is true and just . . . [in] Liberalism and Socialism,” Father Isaac Hecker (1819–88) also strained against the fearful tendencies of the Catholic ghetto.¹⁴ Hecker founded the Paulist Fathers, the first religious community of men to originate in the United States. Although born in New York, Hecker was something of a missionary to American Catholics. He had a boundless confidence not just in Catholicism, but specifically in the American church. In 1870, Hecker wrote that “Europe may find not only her political regeneration in the civilization on the other side of the Atlantic, but also the renewal of Catholicity.”¹⁵ Hecker was unabashed to see the future of Catholicism in the United States, and he was bold to call American Catholics out of their ghetto.

Looking back from the perspective of today, it is difficult not to hear something prophetic in Brownson’s and Hecker’s confidence. Their determination to bridge the distance between Catholic faith and American principles seems to have anticipated the American contribution to debates about religious liberty in the twentieth century and the way that

Catholics leaped into the mainstream of American life. At the same time, among Catholics of the 1800s in America or elsewhere, Brownson and Hecker were unusual. The path to acceptance would be bumpy and it would plunge the church in the United States into controversy. It also sketched out the shape for how American bishops would lead their people.

A Flock of Shepherds

Jesuit Father Thomas J. Reese agreed with the judgment of historians that the church in the United States is unusual in global Catholicism at least in one way, its bishops have worked closely together since the time of Bishop John Carroll.¹⁶ The apostles called by Jesus in the early church gathered around one table at the Last Supper and made decisions together in the Acts of the Apostles. By the Middle Ages, a bishop of Rome had become the “first among equals” who made decisions for the whole church while bishops, who had acquired lands and temporal power, took on more the character of individual princes who rarely interacted than that of the Apostles who shared all things “in common” (Acts 2:44).

The isolation of medieval bishops was as much an accident of history as was the close collaboration of American bishops that emerged from a unique set of circumstances in the United States. Almost from the beginning, the bishops of the United States were close collaborators mostly because they each had vast responsibilities in new dioceses that reached over state boundaries at a time before rapid forms of transportation or easy communication, and because their problems in that situation were so similar. Apart from exchanges of letters, in the years between “1783–1884, the entire American Church met in three general chapters of the clergy, a synod, a bishops’ meeting, seven provincial

councils that were also national councils, and three plenary councils.”¹⁷ That was an extraordinary amount of contact among Catholic priests and bishops in those years that made the church in the United States something unusual, and something that would exert an influence on global Catholicism. But perhaps it also is worth describing what those meetings were.

A general chapter of the clergy referred to a meeting of priests. A chapter meeting might invite every priest, but more typically priests in individual regions would choose representatives who would attend the chapter on their behalf. A synod is a “conference of the bishops of a nation” that discusses “religious and other matters,” and whose decisions must be approved by the Holy See. A synod also might be called a national council. A provincial council is a meeting of the bishops in a province. Each archbishop governs his own archdiocese, but his archdiocese is the center of an ecclesiastical province that includes other, usually smaller dioceses. (For example, today the Archdiocese of Baltimore is the center of a province that includes the Dioceses of Arlington, Richmond, Wheeling-Charleston, and Wilmington.) A provincial council, therefore, would be a meeting of the bishops in a province. A plenary council calls together the bishops of a nation in the way a synod does, but it must be called by the Holy See and a representative from Rome presides over a plenary council.¹⁸

While all of the meetings among American bishops were important, perhaps none was more important than the three plenary councils that met in Baltimore during the nineteenth century. The First Plenary Council of Baltimore (1852) produced twenty-five decrees that included the first provision for widespread seminary education in the United States and issued requirements for the administrative organization of dioceses that still are in place today. The Second Plenary Council of Baltimore (1866) dealt with a range of technical

issues—matters of canon law—and also encouraged American Catholics in the veneration of Mary and the saints. That Second Plenary Council may be more important to recall as the first gathering of several bishops who would leave a deep mark on the church in the United States, including Father James Gibbons, who made his first acquaintance with the American bishops at that meeting. Later, as Archbishop James Gibbons, he would oversee the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore (1884) as the apostolic delegate, the pope's representative. Eventually, Gibbons would become a cardinal and the most important voice in American Catholicism. That Third Plenary Council was a significant event in the history of American Catholicism, not only because it founded a national Catholic university, encouraged the creation of parish schools, and consecrated the United States to the Immaculate Conception, but also because it occurred on the threshold of a uniquely American controversy in the church.

The Americanist Crisis—what one leading historian of American Catholicism called *The Great Crisis in American Catholic History*—began from an almost trivially small event. In 1891, a French theologian wrote an introduction to a French-language biography of Isaac Hecker, one that suggested that Hecker's American-influenced theological ideas denied the authority of the church. The essay sparked quick and furious controversy not just in Rome but throughout the world, mostly because the controversy was not about Hecker at all. Abbé Felix Klein, the author of that essay, hijacked Hecker's ideas to continue an old argument about the role of the church in the Catholic nations of Europe, particularly France. It was a touchy subject in the nineteenth century, so soon after the French Revolution had ransacked sanctuaries and seized church lands as part of its effort to banish religion from public life. Hecker's ideas, particularly his convictions about religious freedom, seemed to cast

Americans on the side of European secularists (modernists) in Klein's telling of them. Before long, Hecker's defenders were labeled Americanists, and Americanism was a great crisis in the church that questioned seriously for the first time whether the church could accept an American-style separation of church and state.

The Americanist controversy divided even American bishops. Some bishops defended the American separation of church and state. They included Archbishop John Ireland (1838–1918) of St. Paul, Bishop John Keane (1839–1918), rector of The Catholic University of America, Bishop Denis O'Connell of Richmond (1849–1927), Bishop John Lancaster Spalding of Peoria (1840–1916), and Cardinal James Gibbons (1834–1921), the archbishop of Baltimore. Others who were suspicious of the new constitutional arrangements in America included Archbishop Michael Corrigan of New York (1839–1902), Bishop William McCloskey (1823–1909) of Louisville, Bishop Bernard McQuaid (1823–1909) of Rochester, New York, and Archbishop Patrick Ryan (1831–1911) of Philadelphia. The Americanist controversy drove to the heart of the questions facing Catholics in the United States. Could Catholics accept a system of government that did not recognize the authority of the church? Was the American-style separation of church and state beneficial for Catholics, somehow different from European ideas about secularism? At the same time, Americanism also raised questions for Roman authorities. For centuries in Europe, the church always had been able to assume it would occupy a privileged place in social and political life. The decades since 1789 had plunged that idea into doubt, and the church was unsettled by the change. Could this new American arrangement suggest a new way for the Catholic Church to think about its place among the nations of the world?

At first the church chose caution. Americans like O'Connell, Ireland, and Gibbons who favored the American-style separation of church and state found themselves out in the cold

when Pope Leo XIII published his apostolic letter *Testem Benevolentiae* (1899). Pope Leo called attention to “certain things which are to be avoided and corrected,” among which he included the idea that there could be “a church in America that is different from that which is in the rest of the world,” and that “the passion for saying and reviling everything, the habit of thinking and of expressing everything in print . . . [has] cast such a deep shadow on men’s minds” that the authority of the church is more needed than ever before. *Testem Benevolentiae* offers a rather stunning rebuke against the American political system, its protections of speech and press, and its protections against a religious power to censor. Subsequent decades would see the church develop its thinking about civil liberties dramatically and in a different direction. Yet, as the twentieth century dawned, Pope Leo’s letter nurtured suspicion of prominent American bishops in Rome as much as it would hang over US–Vatican relations until the Reagan administration, when the United States would open full diplomatic relations with the Holy See for the first time in US history.

John Tracy Ellis presents *Testem Benevolentiae* in a more moderate light, noting that “each side maintained it had been vindicated,” with one side acclaiming the condemnation of heresy while the other, like Gibbons, cheerfully observed that the celebration of dangerous errors Pope Leo condemned had “nothing in common with the views, aspirations, doctrine and conduct of Americans.” In fact, Ellis concluded, “From the perspective of over a half century . . . [not] a single American Catholic was known to have left the Church because he refused to give up the errors which the pope had reproved.”¹⁹ Historical opinion generally agrees today that Pope Leo misjudged what Americans were saying amid his own anxieties about conditions in Europe, and the whole Americanist episode amounted to what one historian has called a “phantom heresy,” a mis-

understanding.²⁰ It did not seem that way in 1899 when, for example, Archbishop John Ireland spent a “gloomy spring in Italy” following publication of *Testem*, haunted by “insinuations from [Vatican] officials” and watching the resolve of fellow American bishops like Keane and O’Connell waver.²¹ Those seemed like dark days. Still, from where we are today, what was important was that the episode had brought American bishops together to defend themselves in a way that would galvanize a sense of community among them throughout the twentieth century. After the Third Plenary Council, the bishops had agreed to hold a meeting each year.²² These regular meetings soon would become formalized.

Events that would diminish the effects of *Testem* intervened only two decades later with the American entry into World War I. The Wilson administration and their congressional supporters were eager that Catholics should support the war, and they appealed to the bishops in the hope that they would win support from ordinary Catholics. In response, Paulist Father John Burke formed the National Catholic War Council in 1917 to coordinate the bishops’ efforts to aid the war effort with the federal government. Supported by Cardinal Gibbons and other key members of the American hierarchy, Burke’s success at developing a bishops’ national response to an important issue impressed everyone. Made bold by success, Burke sought permission from the bishops to create a permanent organization. In particular, Burke zeroed in on a point that would shape the future of Catholicism in the United States. Burke realized that a national organization for bishops headquartered in Washington could help the bishops become an effective group of lobbyists. “Without a voice in Washington,” Burke worried, the Protestant churches already working as a Federal Council of Churches would go unchallenged as “the ruling power in all legislation that affected religious and

moral interests," leaving "the field clear to our opponents and the opponents of our Church."²³

The National Catholic Welfare Council (NCWC) was born in 1919, providing a new purpose for annual bishops' meetings after the war's end, and a permanent staff was hired to oversee the NCWC's work on a full-time basis. In short order, Catholic Relief Services and the Catholic Health Association would begin to take their earliest shapes as the bishops directed the charitable good works they had begun during World War I domestically toward the needs of Americans at home. The NCWC would not have an entirely easy time. There was no other organization of bishops like it in any other nation in the world. The NCWC was so exotic that Pope Pius XI made a brief and unsuccessful effort to suppress it in 1922, shortly after his election. The Holy See relented to American appeals that the NCWC was necessary to press Catholic interests in the United States, although Pope Pius did manage to compel a name change: the National Catholic Welfare *Council* became the National Catholic Welfare *Conference*, its third name in five years. Even so, the conference would stabilize and grow during the next forty years.

The most significant changes to the national bishops' conference came in the years immediately following the Second Vatican Council, when the conference took its definitive and contemporary shape. The documents of Vatican II clarified the status of national bishops' conferences. It was in *Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, where the relationship was described between a bishop's authority in his own diocese, in collaboration with other bishops regionally or nationally (such as in conferences), and globally as the whole college of bishops in union with the pope. In the Decree on the Pastoral Office of Bishops in the Church (*Christus Dominus*), the Council fathers observed:

It is often impossible, nowadays especially, for bishops to exercise their office suitably and fruitfully unless they establish closer understanding and cooperation with other bishops. Since episcopal conferences—many such have already been established in different countries—have produced outstanding examples of a more fruitful apostolate, this sacred Synod judges that would be in the highest degree helpful if in all parts of the world the bishops of each country or region would meet regularly. (37)²⁴

Despite the reservations of Pope Pius XI and the suspicions that swirled during and after the Americanist controversy, and despite (or perhaps because of) the newness and unusualness of the Catholic Church in the United States, Americans led the way into the establishment of national bishops' conferences that were found to be so useful as now to be institutionalized permanently by the Council.

The NCWC was renamed again in 1966, becoming the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (NCCB), and over the next five years the NCCB set about the difficult task of writing statutes by which to be governed and of reorganizing its staff. While another name change still lay ahead—today, the organization is known as the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB)—the conference had reached its mature shape since the final adoption of those revised statutes in 1972 under the leadership of the conference's general secretary, Bishop Joseph Bernardin.²⁵ Already in the years between the Second Vatican Council and the final adoption of those statutes in 1972, the conference had been engaged in lobbying efforts, issuing statements against states that relaxed their legal restrictions on abortion. The bishops' conference became a well-organized, carefully structured organization, capable of applying political pressure, just as the United States Supreme Court neared its decision in the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* case. The Catholic voice would be heard by officials in Washington, and Catholic

women and men who vote would hear a consistent message about the issues of the day in the pews of their local parishes. The bishops' conference had become an effective way to leverage the roles played by bishops together in the national conference and alone, singly in their home dioceses.

The conference was not only a lobbying organization, of course. The national conference still supported the efforts of Catholic schools, Catholic hospitals, and Catholic charity as it had since the first organization of the conference in 1922. In fact, since the Third Plenary Council brought the bishops together to promote the building of parish schools, there had been increasing coordination of national efforts to see to the needs of Catholics from the cradle to the grave (literally, with the development of Catholic cemeteries). Those institutions had become the ramparts of a Catholic subculture in the United States under the administration of the NCWC between 1922 and 1966, a response to the suspicion and rejection that had greeted Catholics in American life since the days of Charles Carroll's Maryland colony. Those were the years John Tracy Ellis had described as characterized by a "pervading spirit of separatism" during which Catholics "suffered from the timidity that characterizes the effects of a ghetto they have themselves fostered."²⁶ Their bishops fostered it with them. Yet, as Catholics emerged from that ghetto in the 1960s and began to enter the mainstream of American life, the bishops' conference turned outward with them. Not only did institutions like Catholic schools and hospitals begin increasingly to serve non-Catholic populations, but the bishops' conference became more activist with regard to social and political questions, moral issues in American life. In other words, this emergence from the ghetto occurred just at the moment when *Roe* splashed abortion into the center of national political debate. The bishops' conference made the transition right alongside the emergence of the abortion issue, and

just as it confronted ordinary Catholics. Those forces converged in 1973.

Catholic Identity

Russell Shaw is a Georgetown-educated journalist. He got his start working for the Archdiocese of Washington's (District of Columbia) newspaper, but went to work shortly thereafter for the NCWC in the early 1960s. When the conference became the NCCB/USCC in 1966, Shaw became the director of publications for the National Catholic Education Association before returning to work for the conference in 1969, where he remained for most of the next twenty years overseeing publications and media relations. Shaw was in charge of communicating the conference's message to the world during the earliest years when the national conference had taken its mature shape and had become an important actor in national political debates, and while American Catholics had become more acceptably mainstream than any Catholics before them in American history. Perhaps it should not surprise us that Shaw has written a book.

In *American Church: The Remarkable Rise, Meteoric Fall, and Uncertain Future of Catholicism in America*, Shaw deals with many of the topics covered here so far.²⁷ Indeed, in many ways, his purpose is not so different from the intentions of this book. Shaw accounts for where Catholics stand in American life and how they got there. He describes the early colonial experiences of Catholics and reviews the Americanist controversy and the role that bishops' meetings played throughout the history of American Catholicism. Shaw gives us another perspective as well, however. It may be his most important contribution to a conversation about American Catholics, even if it was an inadvertent contribution.

Shaw was born in 1935. He was raised inside the ramparts of a Catholic enclave and formed his earliest ideas about

the world and the church from that perspective. His recollections of being like “most kids growing up American Catholic in the 1940s” are affectionate. They include memories of his own parish neighborhood in the Mount Pleasant section of Washington, where the Knights of Columbus erected a statue of Cardinal Gibbons in a public park, and where he experienced “the celebration of the Eucharist in its pre-Vatican II form.”²⁸ More interesting for us than Shaw’s recollections of his personal past are his descriptions of the changes that came in the 1960s and 1970s, changes he observed up close at the national conference.

Shaw laments the cultural and sexual revolutions of the 1960s, mostly for how they “bowled over” Catholics who “succumb[ed] to an aberrant zeitgeist.”²⁹ He questions John F. Kennedy’s pledge to voters in 1960 (“Whatever issue may come before me as president . . . I will make my decision . . . in accordance with what my conscience tells me is in the national interest, and without regard to outside religious pressures”) as defining the national interest according to “the private judgment of the president without reference to moral principles from religious sources.”³⁰ Perhaps most revealing of all is what Shaw described as a “blunder”:

At the American bishops’ post-Vatican II meeting held in Washington, DC, in November 1966, the bishops, acting with little or no advance public notice, abolished the rule requiring Catholics to abstain from meat on Fridays. A small thing in itself, fish on Friday nevertheless had been a highly visible feature of Catholic religious identity for generations, helping to set Catholics apart from others and making a statement to the world: “We’re Catholics, and we aren’t like everyone else.” Now abruptly abolishing Friday abstinence sent a very different message: Things the Church previously had emphasized could be discarded like a pair of worn-out shoes.³¹

Shaw appears to give great weight to the custom of Friday abstinence and sees danger in abandoning it. Like the disciplines of Lent, Friday abstinence certainly is a beneficial penitential practice. But it remains true that those practices are not the same as being Catholic. They are not *essential* to the faith. They are only customs grown up over long usage, still as susceptible to change as priestly celibacy or the distinctive clothing worn by members of religious communities and priests (the habit, the Roman collar, the cassock). Our faith is found in the Creed, the dogmas and doctrines of the church. For many Catholics in the United States like Shaw, the importance of these customs has become magnified not because they are essential to Catholic faith, but precisely for the reason that Shaw named so specifically. They say, "We're Catholics, and we aren't like everyone else."

It is a peculiar and distinctive feature of Catholicism in the United States, which developed in opposition to a prevailing Protestantism, to think in terms of identity like this, to define Catholic faith *against* other things rather than to conceive of it as *for* something. That judgment is not a novel one. Charles R. Morris described "The foundations of American Catholicism" and the attitudes of bishops like Gibbons and Ireland—"in America, vehemently *for* America, but never *of* America."³² We find that sensibility also in the descriptions of Jay P. Dolan ("religious and ethnic conflict tended to harden the lines of the Catholic cultural ghetto . . . [shaping] Catholicism into a very ethnocentric and religiously exclusive community"), John T. McGreevy ("Catholics obviously lived *among* Americans, but were they *of* them?"), and Timothy B. Neary ("Roman Catholics . . . remained segregated in clearly defined ghettos").³³ As the twentieth century unfolded, open prejudice against Catholics continued to be acceptable in the most respectable circles. Paul Blanshard, an editor at *The Nation*, published a series of bestselling books in the 1950s and 1960s that

described Catholics in terms that would be familiar today if they were used to describe Muslims:

What would happen to American democracy if our alleged twenty-six million Catholics grew to be a majority in the population and followed the direction of their priests? . . . The democratic *form* of our leading institutions might not be altered very much. Probably the most striking effect of Catholic control would be apparent in the *spirit* of those institutions and the *use* to which they would be put. . . . There is no Catholic plan for America distinct from the Catholic plan for the world. . . . [T]he master plan is only one plan and the world-wide strategy is directed from Rome. In a Catholic world *every* national government would establish the Roman Catholic Church in a unique position of privilege, and support its teachers and priests out of public revenues.³⁴

Blanshard laid out a series of constitutional amendments allegedly sought by Catholics that sound a lot like more contemporary claims about *Shari'a* law. Much like those inflated claims about Muslim plots today, the treatment of Catholics throughout American history—especially in the mid-century—had an effect. It both made Catholics determined to prove themselves as Americans and, simultaneously, cultivated a sense of being permanent outsiders.³⁵

During the Cold War, working-class Catholics found an opportunity to prove their patriotism, and they seized it. Following the New Deal years and World War II, the elite institutions of the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant establishment increasingly came to be thought of as liberal. In the fever of the 1950s Red Scare, to be liberal was the next thing to socialism. Those were the days when Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan (himself an Irish Catholic) observed that “Harvard men were to be checked; Fordham men would do the checking.” Suddenly, Catholics were to be trusted to

be good Americans *because* of their faith, not despite it. In 1960 Jesuit Father John Courtney Murray published his landmark book *We Hold These Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition*, in which he argued that the same principles of the natural law taught for centuries by the Catholic Church “furnished the basic materials for the American consensus”: drawing from the same faith in a “truth that lies beyond politics,” Catholicism and the US Constitution pose no serious conflict with one another.³⁶ John F. Kennedy overcame the long-standing suspicions and fears surrounding Catholics to become president of the United States, and it seemed that Catholics finally had arrived. In many ways they did. Yet, in another very important sense, nothing fundamentally changed at all.

Study after study for more than twenty years has confirmed the same result—there is no such thing as a “Catholic vote.” Catholics do vote, but their voting behavior is not distinctively different from any other group of Americans. They vote for Republicans or Democrats in nearly the same proportions as other groups of Americans. That would appear to confirm how much Catholics have entered the mainstream and lost their distinctiveness. But something more subtle is at work. In the years following JFK’s election, the Second Vatican Council, the Vietnam War, Watergate, and everything else that divided the United States so firmly into conservative and liberal camps, the polarization among Americans more widely imprinted itself on Catholics.³⁷ Like their fellow Americans, Catholics also are polarized and, now, the question of Catholic distinctiveness is a division within the Catholic community of the United States. It can be heard in Russell Shaw’s laments about meatless Fridays and it can be seen in the differences among parishes that conform to the pre-Vatican II liturgical practices and those who embraced the reforms of the Council. Some Catholics cannot distinguish their longing for the lost distinctiveness

of being Catholic from *being Catholic*. Perhaps nowhere does that political division cut more deeply into the Catholic community than on the so-called culture war issues such as abortion, marriage, euthanasia, and others. And, perhaps, no result is more tragic than the feedback loop that came next: as polarization became a part of American Catholic thinking, American Catholics retained and reinforced that polarization in American politics.

The dawn of the twenty-first century found two groups of American Catholics opposed to each other. Those groups took shape during the closing decades of the twentieth century. One group of Catholics had assimilated, entered the mainstream of American life comfortably, and found ways to sort through the conflicts between faith and worldliness that arise in daily life, especially in political life, much like their forebears Hecker, Brownson, Gibbons, and Ireland. These Catholics would say they only have located a harmony between being American and being Catholic that always was there. The other group of American Catholics has resisted assimilation and has identified certain markers of a Catholic identity—from meatless Fridays to an uncompromising and specific political and legal position on abortion—as essential and nonnegotiable characteristics of an American Catholic. Distinctiveness is their preoccupation, not harmony. Where others seek to build a bridge to American life, these American Catholics seek to confront and disrupt those things in American life that do not correspond closely to church teachings. Both groups are made up of people who are intensely patriotic, devoted to being good Americans. Both are committed to their Catholic faith, one group emphasizing demands of faith that distinguish Catholics from the American mainstream while the other emphasizes how a Catholic perspective interacts and harmonizes with mainstream, American life. The irony is that, gazing across the polarizing division over Catholic identity

at one another as they are, these two groups of Catholics are both engaging in a characteristically American pattern of behavior. Their Left/Right polarization has every characteristic in common with what prevails in American politics, and it is recognizable that way even to a non-Catholic. In this worst way possible, both liberals and conservatives have joined the American mainstream; they have assimilated.

The conflict over the place of Catholics in the United States has become a conflict between Catholics. It is fought less over what it means to be an American than over what it means to be a Catholic, and it has taken on the characteristics of the American political polarization. That conflict still reflects the strivings of the immigrants in the American Catholic past, the struggle to bring the old world to the new world and to overcome the differences between them. As that conflict has transformed across decades of American history, the US bishops and their conference have grown and matured in their own approach to American life and the problem of Catholic identity.

This new phase of the conflict over how to be Catholic in the United States has not taken shape apart from the bishops. They are Americans, too, and their responses are conditioned by the same history and memories. We know that "culture has a historical character," and the American bishops belong to American Catholic history and culture as much as any of us.³⁸ In their ministry, bishops must take "a deeply balanced approach" that proclaims the Gospel authentically in ways that are suited to "the social and cultural conditions in which they live."³⁹ The challenges facing American bishops against the historical background of American Catholicism are daunting. Those challenges presented themselves in the early 1970s as the *Roe* decision was published. Those were the earliest moments of maturity for the new national conference, and they came in a cultural moment fraught with

destabilizing changes. The Second Vatican Council had upended church life while dizzying social upheavals unfolded and, for good measure, the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal were undermining American confidence in basic institutions. Catholics were among those Americans being buffeted by change and scandal, and it could not fail to influence and shape how American bishops replied to the new challenges facing them.

The history of striving and struggling to integrate into American life and to be heard had shaped Catholic life in the United States for a long time before *Roe*. That history would, in turn, shape the responses of the bishops, individually and as a group, in the decades that followed *Roe*. The influence can be seen reflected in the language of the conference's 2016 *Faithful Citizenship* statement in which the bishops describe a "dual heritage as both faithful Catholics and American citizens" and highlights its "distinctive call" that comes in a distinctly Catholic voice that proclaims how "the Catholic community brings important assets to political dialogue about our nation's future."⁴⁰ "[P]olitics in our country often can be a contest of powerful interests, partisan attacks, sound bites, and media hype," the bishops write, and that is far from the "responsible citizenship" and "participation in political life" cultivated by "the Catholic Tradition."⁴¹ The bishops are not saying anything particularly surprising about American politics. The contrasts they are offering would describe politics in any place or time. They echo St. Augustine's laments about the late Roman Empire because politics and human nature are always the same. What is unusual is the emphasis on being different—from what is worldly in any ordinary or general sense, but on Catholic distinctiveness from what is American. In fact, it is not a mere distinctiveness but a suggestion that Catholic faith may even be essential to a better sort of citizenship. As Harvard men were to be checked, Catholics with well-

formed consciences have a deeper insight than their non-Catholic fellow Americans.

A stew of ingredients had simmered together in the kettle for a long time when abortion bubbled to the surface in 1973. Abortion emerged to be the central issue in the encounter between American Catholics and their country because it raises essential questions in moral theology and constitutional law, but also because it arrived at a moment in American Catholic history when the bishops were equipped and felt so emboldened as to address it directly. Like a crack in a piece of ice or a window, abortion sits at the central point of impact but its fracture lines spread out away from abortion to touch the other culture war issues of euthanasia, marriage, religious liberty, the death penalty, war, and peace. Yet, the emphasis in each political cycle's argument since *Roe* has never strayed from abortion. On the question of abortion, Catholics have differed with one another about the right way to be Catholic in ways that mirror the polarization outside the church even as the argument over abortion also is tinged with the same old Catholic struggle to integrate with American life.

From the beginning of the national debate about abortion in 1973, the abortion question has been about more than just the moral and legal status of unborn children. As expansive as that issue is in its reach across the political debate, it has had an inverse tendency to reduce and simplify political conversations down to one issue. Voting only on the issue of abortion has been under discussion at least since the second presidential election cycle after *Roe*, in 1980.⁴²

If perhaps half of American Catholics embarked on the 2016 election feeling moved more by the promise of a pro-life justice on the US Supreme Court than by any other consideration, they were responding to something under way since the *Roe* decision but also from long before *Roe*. So were their bishops. To understand that better demands an even

deeper examination of the history of being Catholic and American since *Roe*.