

“Polarization is one of the gravest illnesses infecting the US Catholic Church. In fact, Catholics often have an easier time talking with members of other Christian denominations and other religious traditions than with one another. Before we can accomplish anything in our church, we must first be able to talk to one another charitably. This book is an important step forward, as some of the church's most thoughtful men and women lay out the scope of the problem, consider its roots, and point to healthy and life-giving ways to move ahead. Essential reading for Catholics in the United States.”

—James Martin, SJ
Author of *Jesus: A Pilgrimage*

“The volume is a rich collection of essays that offer a diversity of voices on the reality of polarization in the Catholic Church, a polarization that reflects the reality of the broader American reality. The essays offer wisdom drawn from personal experiences of polarization brought to bear on the expertise of religious leaders, academics, and advocates. I encourage anyone interested not only in understanding the phenomenon of polarization in the Church but also in finding insights into strategies to address it to pick up this book. The honest assessments of the wounds in our Church and society are coupled with genuine hope for healing grounded in the various authors' experiences of working toward creating the space for genuine dialogue. This volume is a gift to those of us who long to help create such spaces. It was truly a pleasure to read this work. I intend to bring different essays into my various classes, work with students, and conversations with colleagues.”

—Catherine Punsalan-Manlimos, PhD
Malcolm and Mari Stamper Endowed Chair in Catholic
Intellectual and Cultural Traditions
Director, Institute for Catholic Thought and Culture
Associate Professor, Theology and Religious Studies
Seattle University

“Pope Francis reminds us that ‘open and fraternal debate makes theological and pastoral thought grow.’ We should welcome such debate as evidence of a vibrant Church engaging issues at the heart of our faith. *Polarization in the US Catholic Church* advances this effort, challenging Catholics to remember that ours is a Church of relationship rooted in love and that our discourse must reflect that if we’re to advance our evangelizing mission.”

—Kim Daniels

Former spokesperson for the president of the
US Conference of Catholic Bishops

*Polarization
in the US Catholic Church*

Naming the Wounds, Beginning to Heal

Edited by

Mary Ellen Konieczny,
Charles C. Camosy,
and Tricia C. Bruce



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Introduction

Polarization in the US Catholic Church

Mary Ellen Konieczny

“I am a casualty of two culture war skirmishes—one in the ‘60s, the other in the ‘80s—and I have the scars to prove it. These scars have dogged me over the years. I have never shed the resentments I formed when my deepest beliefs and convictions were disparaged . . . and I have rarely felt safe enough to reengage on contested issues.”

—Michael McGillicuddy, address to Polarization in the US Catholic Church conference, April 29, 2015

Universality—that is, small “c” catholicity—and, therefore, unity amid diversity are fundamental to Roman Catholicism. But in recent years, divisions around issues that are by now all too familiar—perhaps most notably, issues of gender, sexuality, and authority—have rent the Catholic Church in the United States. Divisions over these issues, of course, are not unique to Catholics. We live in a larger society in which divisiveness and vitriol are evident in many of the local churches of religious traditions practiced in the United States. These divisions are often produced in tandem with our public politics and, perhaps, paradigmatically reflected in them. And although conflict is not only sociologically necessary but also often a healthy part of societal interaction, these conflicts appear to be unproductive and intractable.

As a result, rather than the healthy debates characteristic of a living tradition, we have witnessed—in our churches, in our public politics, and in the local context of our everyday lives—an absence of genuine engagement and dialogue. Catholics of good will often feel alienated from one another. As described in the epigraph above, this alienation is not the product of a mere disagreement but of disrespect and dismissal of others. It wounds people. Cardinal Sean O’Malley has described the current climate of polarization as “a cancer in the Church.” This is a disturbingly apt metaphor applied to the church as the Body of Christ. Moreover, it is no surprise that the issues provoking these debates are often described as “neuralgic,” since they are not only long-standing and painful but also difficult to address much less heal.

So what are we, as Catholics and as citizens, to do? This was the question that emerged when Michael McGillicuddy first brought Professor Charles Camosy and me together to discuss cultural conflicts in church and society in the summer of 2013—a collaboration that led us to gather concerned colleagues and friends for a larger discussion and that has resulted ultimately in this edited volume.

The premise behind this book is one that, we believe, suggests a path toward answering the question of what to do. This premise is not new, of course. In our case, it owes a particular debt to the late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin of Chicago, in whose administration I worked and whose work to unify and heal American Catholics has grounded the work of many others. Although particular “hot button” issues—and the relational and emotional climate of debates surrounding them—have divided American Catholics, there is much that yet binds us together both as Catholics and as citizens. In fact, despite the magnified influence those at the poles of these debates can exert, sociological studies of polarization suggest that only a small minority of the population occupy truly polar positions on these controversial issues. Our goal in this book, therefore, is to better understand the social, emotional, and

religious underpinnings of our divisions. With this context, we are better able to explore how what we *do* agree on—our common beliefs and aspirations—can help us heal the hurts our divisions have caused.

This book grew out of a conference about polarization in the Catholic Church with the same underpinnings, held at the University of Notre Dame on April 28 and 29, 2015. Camosy and I gathered nearly sixty Catholic pastors, public intellectuals, and professors—primarily theologians and social scientists—from across the United States. This group of people embodied widely different and often opposing views on divisive issues within the Catholic Church while also being committed to charity, listening, and engagement in dialogue. We included people of Vatican II and post-Vatican II Catholic generations as well as Millennial Catholics. We especially wanted younger, newer, and racially and ethnically diverse voices in the conversation. And we sought to offer a public platform to reach audiences beyond the academy.

The conference and this resulting volume, thus, bring new voices to the conversation. Contributors represent groups in different social locations than those most often engaged in debates around polarizing issues. Consequently, we reorient this debate by opening up new perspectives, avenues less well trod for traversing the landscape of cultural conflict among American Catholics.

We conceived the process of the conference through the “see-judge-act” model of Catholic Action, bringing both theological and social-scientific perspectives into the dialogue. We chose this method believing that if we began with a careful and informed observation and assessment of current cultural conflicts among Catholics and in society more broadly, we could then think creatively about small but concrete steps we might take toward promoting healing and a greater sense of unity among us. This book is one such step in this direction.

To introduce the chapters that follow, I will first briefly set the scene by providing a social-scientific answer to one of the

first questions asked by participants on the second morning of the conference: “Exactly what do we mean by ‘polarization?’” I then explore how reflecting on this question can help us understand what we observe in the cultural conflicts existing in church and society today. In this context, I briefly describe how the chapters proceed, through which we hope that readers will ultimately feel invited to “see, judge, and act” themselves.

What Is “Polarization”?

Open a dictionary to look for the words “polarize” or “polarization,” and you’ll typically find a definition originating in the hard sciences. Polarization describes light, radiation, or magnetism, where particles or forces move in opposite directions. But there is also a parallel, social definition. The Cambridge Dictionary, for example, defines it as “to cause something, especially something that contains different people or opinions, to divide into two completely opposing groups.”¹ It is this latter definition that signals a growing experience of, and concern regarding, social polarization in contemporary societies.

This definition is a good representation of how social scientists understand polarization. Polarized attitudes describe a population comprised of two diametrically opposed positions. The two groups espousing sharply contrasting views are about equally split. In other words, like magnetic poles, polarized groups are opposed to each other and of equal strength. Methodologically, this strength is assessed numerically.

But if we look at American society, oddly enough, the definition mostly doesn’t hold. The most recent social-science debates about polarization began in the late 1980s, with James Davison Hunter’s book *Culture Wars*, which contended that the structure of public conflicts in the United States had become

¹ *Cambridge Dictionaries Online*, s.v. “polarize,” accessed February 16, 2016, <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/polarize>.

increasingly polarized.² Religion played a constitutive role in these conflicts, pitting traditionalists against progressives. According to Hunter, this polarization was evident in several kinds of debates, including those revolving around the family, education, law, art, and politics. But many now dispute this thesis. In fact, scholars have shown that the American public is *not* polarized on most issues. In general, survey research indicates that only between 10 and 20 percent of the American public hold polar positions around most “culture wars” issues. The majority hold more moderate positions. Over the last twenty years or so, only on the issues of abortion and same-sex marriage have researchers found that Americans are truly polarized—that is, that the population is about equally split and clustered at two contrasting poles of these debates.³ From a social-science perspective, it is more accurate to speak of most of these issues as “cultural conflicts” in the public sphere, albeit highly public and potentially polarizing ones.

So why is it that many of us often feel like we live in a polarized society and church? There are a few different answers to this question, I think. Scholars—and perhaps our own observations of social life—tell us that the “culture wars” debates are waged largely by elites. Even casual observation suggests some of the ways in which elites help to create perceptions of a polarized populace, especially since media give the most time to attention-grabbing positions on issues. And in the current cultural climate, sharper positions closer to the poles attract more attention than moderation. The tenor of public debates

² James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991).

³ See Paul DiMaggio, John Evans, and Bethany Bryson, “Have Americans’ Social Attitudes Become More Polarized?,” *American Journal of Sociology* 102, no. 3 (November 1996): 690–755. See also Alan Wolfe, “The Culture War that Never Came,” in *Is There a Culture War? A Dialogue on American Values and Public Life*, ed. James Davison Hunter and Alan Wolfe (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution and Pew Research Center, 2006), 67–84.

in American society has decreased in civility over the last few decades, and extreme statements are often rewarded with media time and attention.

In addition, there is clearly an emotional dimension involved in perceptions of polarization in American society generally and among ourselves as Catholics in particular. As McGillicuddy's remarks reveal, those who feel deeply about their faith can feel scarred by experiences of having their views disparaged. And when this happens, they can become disengaged. We see evidence of this in the recent growth of the number of "ex" or former Catholics.

The social theorist Georg Simmel can help us to understand why disagreements among people of faith may be so intense as to feel polarizing. He explains that antipathy is more intense among disagreeing people who belong to the same group, saying that "antagonism on the basis of a common kinship tie is stronger than that among strangers."⁴ As a church, we often speak in familial images to explain our belonging. This expresses the intimacy involved in religious faith and has consequences for how we relate to one another. Simmel notes that this principle of social interaction is particularly true in churches, where he observes that even small differences can become sources of intense conflict.

Despite differences of class, race, and gender, we as Americans are held together by our many similarities—including, especially, our faith commitments, beliefs, and common sense of belonging—as well as the interpersonal ties we have with Catholic family members, friends, and people in our faith communities. Moreover, according to Simmel, the emotions evoked by the similarities and sense of belonging we share can be heightened when we have disagreements that are logically irreconcilable—even when these differences are relatively

⁴ Georg Simmel, "Conflict," in *On Individuality and Social Forms*, ed. Donald N. Levine (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press), 70–95, here 90.

small. This, of course, is what we find when opposing views are framed as “all” or “nothing.” In these situations, we may find ourselves at an impasse. In response, we might consider another of McGillicuddy’s observations. He exhorts, “It’s extremely challenging to ‘get’ those worldviews that most diverge from our own, yet we must summon the curiosity and humility to do so.”⁵ It seems to me that the authors of the chapters that follow have summoned these virtues in themselves and aim to pique Catholics’ curiosity in describing how they attempt to engage worldviews other than their own.

Plan of the Book

In part 1, six prominent scholars, Catholic leaders, and public intellectuals reflect on how they see the problems and the promise of today’s church from their own particular experiences and point of view. The first five of these brief reflections comprise chapter 1. They were initially presented as opening remarks during a plenary panel on the first evening of the conference. Most Reverend Daniel Flores, bishop of Brownsville, Texas, sees the wounds caused by divisions between Catholics as rooted in “the loss of confidence that the members of the household of the faith actually love one another” and advocates a renewal of charitable and familial relations within the church. Next, Reverend John I. Jenkins, CSC, draws on his experiences as president of the University of Notre Dame to ask and answer the question, “Why does the most caustic [criticism] come from sisters and brothers with whom I share a faith in Christ and am called, in the church, to build a civilization of love?” Then Christian ethicist Julie Hanlon Rubio considers polarization from the point of view of Catholics who are discouraged and disaffiliating, as well as from that of the most committed, concluding that we must talk about sex and gender to heal the church’s wounds. She

⁵ See Michael McGillicuddy’s remarks in chap. 2 of this volume, p. 27.

sees the Synod on the Family as a crucial step in that direction. Sociologist Christian Smith follows in a related vein by noting that most Millennials' perspectives are quite different from those represented by polarizing debates within the church. Finally, Michael Sean Winters, columnist at the *National Catholic Reporter* and US correspondent for the *Tablet*, reminds us that ours is not the only age during which Catholics have waged battles and fiercely disagreed. The church, Winters asserts, needs both liberals and conservatives and "must be comfortable with, walk with, and learn from both kinds of people." The sixth of these brief reflections is presented in chapter 2. It is by Michael McGillicuddy, an active Catholic and a social worker in Chicago who, through his honesty, his earnest desire to take action, and his energy, inspired the conference and this book. He gave the opening remarks on the morning of the second day of the conference. He gives us, so to speak, the "view from the pew."

Parts 2 through 4 of this volume originated in the three sets of panel presentations that formed the basis of conference discussions on day two. In part 2, the authors address how cultural conflicts and polarizing public debates have been experienced among particular groups of Catholics and the resulting wounds that need healing. Chapters 3 and 4 present divergent parish perspectives. In chapter 3, sociologist Tricia Bruce examines the landscape of Catholic parishes, focusing her lens on what we can learn from personal parishes, where we see some groups who occupy positions close to the poles of cultural conflicts in the church. By contrast, Susan Crawford Sullivan, also a sociologist, discusses the everyday routines of many suburban Catholic parishes. Here we glimpse the perspectives and the needs of Catholics who do not seem to engage in, or run from, polarizing issues and public cultural conflicts. Theologian Brian Flanagan writes perceptively in chapter 5 about the challenges and pain experienced by gay and lesbian Catholics. In chapter 6, Holly Taylor Coolman describes how the college students in her courses come to them either ill-informed, misinformed, or

both. They grapple with the church's teachings about marriage and sexuality, not knowing what the church offers. This generation, she observes, finds it difficult to imagine the possibility of a lifelong commitment when speaking about marriage. A polarized church, evident even in the much-needed Synod on the Family, only complicates this situation since, in polarizing discourses, people are presenting positions but not really engaging one another. These four chapters, then, give us a swath of viewpoints and an appreciation of the wounds people may experience, especially when they find themselves close to one pole of debate over issues that are presently controversial within American Catholicism.

The authors in part 3 assess the landscape of cultural conflicts in church and society through three different lenses. In chapter 7, Christian ethicist David Gushee argues from his personal religious history, which includes both evangelical Protestantism and Catholicism, together with the recent political history of US society, that Catholicism is uniquely equipped to resist polarization and present a hopeful sign for the future of the nation. Law professor Amy Uelmen speaks in chapter 8 from the perspective of her membership in the Focolare movement and her experience of teaching young adults, exploring how the "see-judge-act" model might be rethought to better promote authentic listening and direct discussions about polarizing issues. She sees Millennials as having particular strengths for these discussions, especially when given encouragement that claiming one's own positions need not imply the judgment of another's. And in chapter 9, theologian Nichole Flores makes the essential point that "neuralgic" church and cultural issues are not the only ones that can be polarizing. If we focus on them, we egregiously omit the role played by race in conflicts in US society. She uses current issues involving race, and student responses to them, to highlight how shared experience of rituals among those with different perspectives can create bonds and move people away from disengagement in conflict and toward empathy.

Part 4 of this volume looks to social groups who form the future basis of church and society. In chapter 10, journalist Elizabeth Tenety presents a moving account of the Millennial generation. She gives voice to how Millennial Catholics' life experiences while growing to adulthood, including 9/11 and the Great Recession, color their ways of thinking about American society, the Catholic Church, and cultural conflicts in the church. Erin Stoyell-Mulholland, also a Millennial Catholic and recent undergraduate at the University of Notre Dame, gives us another perspective on this generation's concerns and how we as a church might move forward through the lens of her participation in the pro-life movement. In chapter 12, theologian Hosffman Ospino discusses the central position Hispanics will occupy in the future of American Catholicism and how Hispanics' growing presence within the United States has the power to uniquely shape Catholics' concerns in ways that refocus energies positively, uniting them to address both material and spiritual needs. And in chapter 13, theologian Michael Peppard interrogates the relationship between polarization in American culture and politics and polarization among Catholics. The fact that Catholics fight one another so openly, he says, "is paradoxically a sign of Catholicism's general acceptance . . . in contemporary America." He advocates a series of concrete, practical suggestions for appreciating our diversity as Catholics and, at the same time, resisting further polarization among us.

We invite readers to journey with us through these pages, uniting friends, companions, and all who share their thoughts and experiences here. We hope you might join us in reflecting on how engaging those with different views on controversial issues might challenge each of us to revise and incorporate new understandings of the issues that divide us so as to bring healing and hope.

Engaging in dialogue about our differences as Catholics means facing the challenge of connecting differing communities of thought and practice. Those who take up this work are essentially engaging in what some call "translation" and others

“bridging discourses.” In this volume, Amy Uelmen describes something akin to bridging discourse as “a wide horizon for engagement” that “opens when we recognize that discussions are not only about identifying principles and values but also about the human drama, the challenge, and the suffering people experience in trying to live according to these values, as well as how to meet their particular needs with loving compassion.”

Theologian Christine Hinze, who engages in such work, sounds an important note of caution in this endeavor. She says, “Undertaking bridge discourse is risky; one takes the chance of offending, or being written off, by everyone. No matter how sincerely attempted, building bridges or hybrid publics across ideological differences is arduous and uncertain work. But amid our fractious cultures, we are deeply interconnected, and grave issues urgently require our collaborative attention.”⁶ It is my hope that more of us will join others who are already lifting up American Catholics’ growing diversity, together with a renewed sense of unity, in this church that James Joyce once described as “Here comes everybody.”

⁶Christine Firer Hinze, *Glass Ceilings and Dirt Floors: Women, Work, and the Global Economy* (New York: Paulist Press, 2015), 24.

Part 1

This Moment in the Church

1

Reflections on This Moment in the Church

The reflections gathered in this chapter are responses to our request for prominent Catholic thinkers to share their perspectives on divisions that exist in the US Catholic Church today. Their brief essays were originally delivered as opening remarks to the 2015 Polarization in the US Catholic Church conference at the University of Notre Dame.

We asked contributors to respond to the following questions: How do you see the US church today, at this moment in time? From your experience, why might it be important for people with differing views to talk with one another about polarization in the church—and how might we do that? What are your hopes for what such conversations might accomplish? What situations or issues deserve special attention? What strategies might lead us, as a church, beyond polarization?

Each contributor speaks from his or her particular experiences and concerns. Together, they offer a portrait of the problems and promise of the US Catholic Church today.

Reflection by Most Reverend Daniel Flores

There is perhaps too much gravity and not enough levity in our circles these days. I would go so far as to suggest at the outset that until we have reached a point wherein we can

actually laugh together and enjoy the simple and primary gift of being together in the same world, the same church, and the same room, then it is not yet time to discuss the issues that divide. Therefore, I want to take a path through a few key words and phrases and see where that leads.

“Polarization” is an interesting term. We are using it as a stand-in term for something that we perceive as a perduring presence in contemporary church life in the United States. The editors of this volume have described a phenomenon of divisiveness and vitriol in our local churches and in the national discourse within the church.

We are borrowing the term “polarization” from the language of political science, which has adopted it to speak of a tendency for extremes of opposition to at times dominate a political discourse. But political and social sciences appear to have adopted the paradigm from the field of the physical sciences, where the term implies a separation to opposing fields, occurring by a kind of natural repulsion. The term is also used in optic science, as when describing the behavior of light or sound waves. It is worth noting that both magnetic polar behavior and wave patterns are natural and, in this universe anyway, inevitable phenomena.

I suspect that in the social and political sciences, some would argue that the coalescing of extremes is an inevitable manifestation in the generation and degeneration of social dynamics. Perhaps we can examine critically if shadows of inevitable social dynamics color our optics on how we look at church life.

Thus it seems that we want to talk openly about our experience of the church as excessively marked by division into something like polar opposites. Maybe polarization is the best term, or maybe there is a better way to talk about it. I do not know.

As a way of beginning the conversation, though, I should like to invite us to revisit how the Christian theological tradition has attempted to grapple with what we are trying to name

and help heal. Thomas Aquinas would probably identify it with the term *discordia*. Now discord, theologically speaking, cannot be understood in isolation from the Christian virtue it opposes: namely, *concordia*. Concord is an effect of charity that leads to the union of wills. Discord is a disruption of that union of wills. Thomas notes pointedly, however, that concord is the union of wills infused with charity, not necessarily the union of opinions: *Concordia quae est caritatis effectus est unio voluntatum, non unio opinionum*.¹ As far as Thomas is concerned, difference of opinions need not disrupt the union of wills. Related to *discordia*, the contradiction of wills, is the problem of contentiousness, which is the contradictive use of words: saying things that are by design opposed to the charitable union of wills.² And then there is *rixa*, actions designed to undermine the union of charity. This seems to be the extreme in the vices opposed to concord, because it is like an enduring private war.³

Now then, I would add into the mix the fact that familial language was adopted early in the Christian community. Identifying one another as brothers, sisters, fathers, and mothers is profoundly interwoven into the New Testament record. Late Pauline writings speak of the household of the faith. Without entering into a cultural exegesis about what such terms implied in first-century Jewish, Greek, Roman milieu, it seems safe to say that Christians wanted to convey a series of relationships that were stable and had God as author. In Scripture, familial language is complemented, and perhaps corrected, by the language of friendship and the vocabulary of charity: see how they love one another. Taken together, the language of Scripture suggests that we are connected by relationships rooted in a prior bond willed and forged by Christ. Baptism links the members to Christ and, through him, to all the other members

¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 37, a. 1, ad. c.

² *Ibid.*, II-II, q. 38.

³ *Ibid.*, II-II, q. 41.

of the community of believers. These bonds are further characterized by a kind of friendship marked by the New Testament charity of mutual yielding. Charity is the virtue that gives life to the relation willed by Christ. Without it, we are living a show, and the world rightly dismisses us as no different from any other show on television.

I would place on the table my sense that the wounds that divide us are rooted in the loss of confidence that the members of the household of the faith actually love one another. And I think that this loss of confidence is particularly striking when we are talking about relations that imply authority of some kind. In short, we are living in the midst of an ecclesial loss of confidence that fathers in the church love their children and that children love their fathers.

Thus, I think I would name the wound as one that especially strikes at our relation to the father, particularly as the one who is in some way responsible for the governing of the household. If both sons in the parable of the prodigal son had faith in the love of the father, then both would have been at the party. As it happens, only one had that faith; the other is left thinking it over. Hence, the doubt about the love of the father is reflected also in a doubt about whether the children actually love each other. In the parable, there are evidently signs of discord between the brothers; and in the case of the older brother, this is based on a prior discord in his relation to the father. Doubtless, the parable is primarily aimed at forming our perceptions of the merciful God who is Father. Yet if the parable cannot in some way find an analogous application to the mystery of relationality of the church, we are thinking, I think, too univocally.

If the first thing you believe about your father is that he loves you, then the adult conversations you have with him are likely to be of a tone and content not overly marked by easy categorization and facile dismissals. This is true whether we are talking about our natural father or our bishop. If the first thing a father believes about his adult children is that they

love him and are disposed to be patient with him, then the conversations are less likely to be defensive and rancorous.

That our current struggles with discord and contentiousness, not to mention *rixa*, coincide with a wider cultural breakdown in familial cohesiveness is, at least, worth noting. What might be helpful is to begin identifying how cultural categories that are not necessarily compatible with the Gospel have corroded our sense of the primacy of charity and mercy within the household of the church. Right, left, conservative, traditionalist, radical, intransigent, liberal, etc., are all examples of descriptive terms that exempt the person from the trial of actually having to listen to and know the other person, as person, and as person related to me. We should note and then lament the loss of a discourse of respect and affection. All of this leads me to propose that the uncritical adoption of political paradigms for our discourse tragically serves to preempt the Gospel primacy of relation.

For us, the first question is not “what are you?” It is, rather, “who are you to me?” And for the Christian, the answer is always the same; you are my brother, and you are my sister. You are my father, and you are my child. You are my mother, and I am your son or daughter. The relation is prior “in being” to the conversation and to the disagreement. But if the relation is not apprehended at the start of the discussion, what happens then? We might as well ask what happens when salt goes flat.

The Christian primacy of relation should be understood in the context of the wider aim of the New Law, which is the grace of the Holy Spirit. Its aim has always been the infusion of new life into old and wounded relations: relations with God, a Trinity of Persons, and with one another. The praxis of mercy, so central to Pope Francis’s preaching and life, begins at home. The relation is prior, but for us, it is not so easily acknowledged. The father has to ask if he is governing with the mercy of the kingdom and accept the fact that his adult children may rightly ask him that question. The son or daughter outside the party also has to ask for a grace to see things differently: that,

in the end, a father who loves can make many mistakes, but he will not cease being my father, in the full affectionate use of the term. Without a renewal in the primacy of relation in our dealings with one another, the church fades into the grey pragmatism of ordinary life, indistinguishable from a world convinced that social dynamics and human relations are governed by some social law unaffected by the redemption.

Reflection by Reverend John I. Jenkins, CSC

As a university president, I get letters. Many of them complain about everything from the cost of higher education to the win-loss record of our football team. But I'm struck by the fact that often the most personal and vitriolic letters come from fellow devout Catholics.

Of course, committed Catholics are more likely to be the ones who care most about what the priest-president of a major Catholic university does or does not do. And I accept that many of my decisions merit scrutiny and criticism. So I understand why they write. But why is the language so harsh . . . so personal? Why does the most caustic language come from sisters and brothers with whom I share a faith in Christ and am called, in the church, to build a civilization of love?

Now Catholics certainly do not have a monopoly on polarizing rhetoric, and I think our divisions are best understood in the context of wider polarization in society that leads to much of the nastiness in the public forum and political dysfunction. What is it at work here? Harsh, polarizing rhetoric in the political sphere is not formulated to convince those who are the target of the attacks. No clear-thinking politician thinks he is going to win over opponents by calling them depraved and misguided. The language is intended, rather, to galvanize the like-minded in a common antipathy. Why? A political tactician knows that she needs only 50 percent plus one vote of those who go to the polls to actually vote. There is no point

to gaining favor with those on the other end of the political spectrum. Moreover, she or he needs to sufficiently motivate supporters to give money, to campaign, and to go vote. The polarizing language identifies a threat that must be defeated; it aims to motivate the like-minded to bond together in vanquishing the threat.

Catholic America often mimics, I think, the practices of our political life. And it stands out in the degree to which it possesses one important resource to make the rhetoric effective. Vilification of opponents requires a rich, common moral framework. It demands the language of ultimacy. I can only convince you that someone else is evil if you and I agree on what is good and evil and that what is at stake is of great significance. The issue may be abortion, the plight of the poor, the nature of marriage, or the centrality of the family. In these and other cases, religion generally, and Catholicism in particular, gives a rich, moral framework to motivate the like-minded and to portray opponents as misguided people, threatening all we hold most dear.

I would add that these tendencies become particularly virulent, I think, when a religious agenda becomes adjoined to a political agenda. The United States is a religious country, and political leaders have always used religious language to describe our national aspirations. Politicians have a great interest in marshaling religious groups for their purposes, and religious leaders, understandably, want to exert influence through ascending political leaders and their movements. Politicians, however, naturally think in election cycles and may not worry much about the collateral damage of losing political campaigns as long as they win.

Religious leaders, on the other hand, should think in terms of the cycle of salvation history and be concerned with building a church that witnesses to Christ as we wait for his return. I believe that when the church has aligned itself throughout history, when it has aligned itself too closely with political leaders, movements, and regimes of the left or the right, it has

usually been the church that has suffered in the long run. We must, of course, be engaged in the world and its issues, and that means being engaged in political discussions. But I recommend that we all periodically engage in an examination of conscience regarding our rhetoric and whether it serves, truly, the unity we have in Christ, who is the only King.

Now, a political realist may respond to these reflections and say, “Look, politics in a democratic society is a full-contact sport. Not a game for wimps.” And the history of Christianity is certainly full of violent conflicts, even of killing one another, as Christians in previous generations did. So, the realist tells us, “Stop your hand-wringing and save your pious platitudes. Man up,” as our students say, “and jump into the fray and the joy of mudslinging.”

What are we to say to that? I find an analysis of Robert Putnam and a colleague of ours, David Campbell, here at Notre Dame, in their book *American Grace*, persuasive.⁴ According to them, the social revolution of the 1960s brought two aftershocks. The first was the conservatism of the 1980s, led by Ronald Reagan, which set up the culture war conflicts. The second, however, was the movement, particularly among young people, away from established religion and the growth of the “nones,” those who, when asked about religious affiliation, say they have none. Fed up with conflicts surrounding religion and its values, it seems, these young people are checking out of organized religion, leading to the weakening of our churches.

The church is viewed among many, as in the words of my friend and colleague, John Cavadini, as something less than the sum of its controversies. Seen that way, who needs it? So while polarizing rhetoric is used effectively by people to serve their interests, I believe it’s poisonous for the church. I think Pope Francis is right when he says that people come to the church through attraction. But the acrimony of many of our

⁴ Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010).

conversations obscures the beauty of the church; it attracts few and drives away many. We must act to serve our true interest, which is the true salvation of our souls and the coming of the reign of God.

Reflection by Julie Hanlon Rubio

Those of us who want to see more unity in the church hope that we can get “beyond polarization.” One key assumption for us is that people perceive more division than there actually is, in part because they focus on so-called “hot button” issues. This is important, because if we are closer together than we realize, constructive dialogue is more possible than it sounds. To some extent, I share this presumption. For most of my career, I have avoided “hot button” issues in my field of family ethics. I have found that when it comes to dilemmas of ordinary life, most Catholics have shared hopes and worries. There is plenty we can talk about.

Still, I don’t think it is possible to ignore “hot button” issues. For we also presume that in order to heal, we have to name the wounds that push us apart. Issues related to sex and gender are sources of wounds for many Catholics. We have to talk about them before we can move toward common ground in the church.

What do we mean by “church”? Do we include those who do not attend Mass regularly, as well as those who have in some way distanced themselves from the church, those to whom some researchers give the labels “disaffiliating” or “de-converting”?⁵ Many of these people still have some relationship to Catholicism. My inclination is not to exclude them when we talk about polarization in the church.

⁵ Patrick Hornbeck, Tom Beaudoin, and William Portier, “Deconversion and Disaffiliation in Contemporary US Roman Catholicism,” *Horizons* 40, no. 2 (December 2013): 255–92. Beaudoin defines deconversion as “[T]he process by which baptized Catholics change their ways of affiliating with the Church or the faith.” *Ibid.*, 256.

If we talk to those on the edges, we will hear a lot about sex and gender. The sexual abuse scandal is, by many accounts, their most pressing concern.⁶ Many are alienated by Catholic positions on issues of sexual ethics. Some are very uncomfortable being associated with an institution that has an all-male leadership team.⁷ Even if people do not always cite these issues as primary reasons for their distance from the church, when they criticize the church for “hypocrisy” and “focus[ing] too much on rules,” they are probably not thinking of Catholic Social Teaching.⁸ Wounds relating to sex and gender lead many to walk away, even if not to completely shut the door.⁹

But even if we go to the most committed, we will still find concern about sex and gender. Polarization can be most

⁶ Pew Research Center, “U.S. Catholics See Sex Abuse as the Church’s Most Important Problem, Charity as Its Most Important Contribution,” *Pew Forum*, March 6, 2013, <http://www.pewforum.org/2013/03/06/us-catholics-see-sex-abuse-as-the-churchs-most-important-problem-charity-as-its-most-important-contribution/>.

⁷ See Patricia Wittberg, “A Lost Generation?,” *America* magazine 206, no. 5 (February 20, 2012), <http://americamagazine.org/issue/5129/article/lost-generation>, for one sociologist’s account of why Millennial women are practicing less than their male counterparts even though they are more spiritual. See Helen Alvare, *Breaking Through: Catholic Women Speak for Themselves* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2012) for an account of the joys and difficulties experienced by more traditional Catholic women. For more progressive voices, see Kate Dugan and Jennifer Owens, *From the Pews in the Back: Young Women and Catholicism* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009); Angela Bonavoglia, *Good Catholic Girls: How Women Are Leading the Fight to Change the Church* (New York: HarperOne, 2006).

⁸ See Beaudoin, Hornbeck, and Portier, “Deconversion and Disaffiliation,” and Pew Research Center, “‘Nones’ on the Rise,” *Pew Forum*, October 9, 2012, <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/>. Around 60 percent of the unaffiliated do not attend services because of disagreements with the church, “hypocrisy,” or overly demanding leaders who “focus too much on rules.” In all likelihood, sex is the key area for disagreement.

⁹ Pew Research Center, “Changing Attitudes on Gay Marriage,” *Pew Forum*, September 24, 2014, <http://www.pewforum.org/2014/09/24/graphics-slideshow-changing-attitudes-on-gay-marriage/>.

pronounced among those who are most deeply invested. In a recent book comparing two representative Catholic parishes, one traditionally conservative, the other self-consciously progressive, sociologist Mary Ellen Konieczny found that views and practices related to sex, marriage, and child-rearing were crucial to the religious self-understanding of both groups and to their alienation from those on the other side.¹⁰

At the same time, polarization may look different for African American and Latino Catholics. In many of their communities, concerns about inequality, immigration, hyperincarceration, and racism trump or reshape concerns about sex and gender. These issues are often not prioritized by white, middle-class Catholics who champion or question family values, yet they affect people's ability to form and sustain strong families.

This is precisely why the Synod on the Family was so important. Pope Francis understood that it was in relation to family that people most needed the church to be merciful. The synod was significant because of its process. In preparation for it, Catholics throughout the world were given the opportunity to answer survey questions asking them if they understood and accepted Catholic teaching. Many were happy to see the church open itself to conversation and encourage vigorous debate among the bishops.¹¹

Yet the synod also suggests the difficulty of moving beyond controversial issues. Attempts to soften the language used to talk about gay and lesbian Catholics, as well as proposals to allow some divorced and remarried Catholics to return to the sacraments, were greeted with jubilation by some and great consternation by others. One commentator wrote that if these proposals were accepted, it would "put the Church on the brink

¹⁰ Mary Ellen Konieczny, *The Spirit's Tether: Family, Work and Religion among American Catholics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

¹¹ See Julie H. Rubio, "U.S. Catholic Hopes for the Upcoming Synod on the Family," *INTAMS Review* 20, no. 1 (2014): 13–18.

of a precipice,” encouraging doubt and confusion.¹² Meanwhile, others worried that the synod would conclude without changing anything.¹³ Controversy divided us once again.

While it is tempting to look the other way, we can't dismiss sex and gender issues. We have to listen: to those deeply wounded by sexual abuse; to young adults alienated by church teachings on premarital sex and cohabitation; to married couples who see contraception as consistent with their strong commitment to self-giving love and fruitfulness; to single parents struggling against the odds; to all who long for a church with women leaders; to gay, lesbian, and transgender Catholics who experience the pain of exclusion.

Yet we also have to listen to those who stand with the church and against the culture on these very same issues and, increasingly, feel unable to speak lest they be labeled intolerant. It is in relation to sex, marriage, and gender that people feel judged, excluded, and alienated, no matter which side they are on.

Of course, we cannot stay here, not if staying means debating rules. Instead, we have to bracket some debates and move to a space where progress is possible.

On sexuality, can we talk about just and loving relationships? Can we follow Pope Francis and “care for the grain” without “grow[ing] impatient at the weeds”?¹⁴ Can we talk

¹²Ross Douthat, “The Pope and the Precipice,” *New York Times*, October 25, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/26/opinion/sunday/ross-douthat-the-pope-and-the-precipice.html?_r=0. See also Jeanne Smits, “Exclusive Interview: Cardinal Burke Says Confusion Spreading among Catholics ‘in an Alarming Way’,” *LifeSiteNews*, March 24, 2015, <https://www.lifesite news.com/news/exclusive-interview-cardinal-burke-says-confusion-spreading-among-catholics>.

¹³ Elisabetta Povoledo, “Women See Themselves as Left Out amid Talk of Change in the Catholic Church,” *New York Times*, March 6, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/07/world/women-see-themselves-as-left-out-amid-talk-of-change-in-catholic-church.html?_r=0.

¹⁴Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (On the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World), November 24, 2013, <http://w2.vatican.va>

about how to help people increase their capacities to express love and practice fidelity, in and outside of marriage? Can we talk about the social structures that are needed to support families living in poverty?

On gender, can we focus on discipleship? Can we talk about how women and men can best utilize their gifts in their families and society? Can we work together to reduce sexual violence and abortion, to find space for women leaders in the church?

I do not mean to suggest that this sort of bracketing is easy or without controversy. But is it possible? If it is possible, if we manage to make any progress during this moment and beyond, it will be because we embrace Pope Francis's profound understanding of church. Near the end of *Evangelii Gaudium*, the pope exhorts us to cultivate "a willingness to face conflict head on," "to build communion amid disagreement," and "to see others in their deepest dignity."¹⁵ This is what we saw him encourage at the synod.

In his final speech, after claiming, remarkably, that it would have been "disappointing not to have debate like this," he said,

This is the Church . . . who is not afraid to roll up her sleeves to pour oil and wine on people's wounds; who doesn't see humanity as a house of glass to judge or categorize people. . . . It is the Church that is not afraid to eat and drink with prostitutes and [tax collectors]. The Church that has the doors wide open to receive the needy, the penitent, and not only the just or those who believe they are perfect!¹⁶

/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html, 24.

¹⁵ Ibid., 9, 10.

¹⁶ Francis, "Address of His Holiness Pope Francis for the Conclusion of the Third Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops," October 18, 2014, https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/october/documents/papa-francesco_20141018_conclusionone-sinodo-dei-vescovi.html.

This is the church. This is the vision we have to keep in front of us. It will give us courage to name the wounds as we know them and seek healing not in walking away but in striving for unity.

Reflection by Christian Smith

My perspective—and the point I want to make in this larger conversation—is very specific. I do not speak as a theologian or a pastoral leader but as a sociologist. We in social science have the idea of the need to always do first what we call “establish the phenomenon.” That means that, before explaining and responding to something, it is necessary to take the time to really figure out *what* exactly the something *is* that we think we are explaining and responding to. There is no use explaining something that is not true or is different than what we think we are explaining. Helping in one specific way to more precisely “establish the phenomenon” of polarization in the Catholic Church for this constructive conversation is the one contribution that I want to make here.

My view can be summarized by saying that the polarization we are discussing is not evenly distributed across age cohorts of Catholics. Different generations of Catholics can and often do have different issues that concern them. So it is important that Catholics of certain age cohorts not project onto those of other ages “their issues,” assuming that everyone else cares as much about their issues as they do. Here, I am using the language of generations. A group of good Catholic sociologists have studied American Catholicism long before I came along, people like William D’Antonio and James D. Davidson, who have made the idea of *generations* central to their analyses. I commend their work because I think generation is an important lens through which to understand issues like polarization.

Here is my main point: the kind of polarization we are talking about in this conversation, I think, often revolves around certain issues that were salient in the Vatican II era

and its aftermath. For a certain generation, especially Baby Boomers, Vatican II opened up new possibilities and raised hopes and expectations, and for some, those were disappointed. Many Catholics of that era responded by veering leftward and rightward and have been in disagreement and conflict ever since. The next generation, typically called Generation X, followed by heading in many directions, too. Some simply dropped out of the church entirely, on the one hand, and others, inspired by Pope John Paul II, became even more conservative than their parents.

But the generation I wish to focus on here is even younger: those we call Millennials, or youth who are now in their twenties and early thirties. For the most part, compared to earlier, Vatican II-oriented generations, the vast majority of Millennial Catholics simply do not care that much about the Roman Catholic Church as an institution, its official policies and politics. They are not generally hostile to the church, not antagonistic or fundamentally dissenting. It is more a matter of general indifference. Conflict in polarization requires expending resources for some issue about which one really cares. Most Millennials simply do not care or know enough about the church to engage in that kind of conflict.

For many Catholic Millennials, even committed Catholics, one common background assumption they make that neutralizes their taking sides in polarized debates is that any religious faith is very personal, even individual or private—not something institutional or shared. They are aware, of course, that religions are institutionalized, but as far as the vast majority of young Catholics today are concerned, the institution of church is sort of like its packaging. What really matters is what is “inside,” which may seem most authentic. The packaging can end up in the recycling bin, for all they care. And so they are not so invested in some of the issues and politics over which other Catholics are contentiously polarized. Many perceive that these are institutional, bureaucratic matters; and, as far as they think, their religious faith and practice is an individual,

personal matter that does not have to engage larger collective policies and practices of the church.

Millennials are also generally sick of culture wars. Anything that smacks of culture warring simply does not interest them. If something feels culture wars-y, for the most part, they turn off. Most are tired of conflict and just wish everyone could get along. Part of this, I think, stems from a legitimate weariness of interminable adult fighting. Another part of it grows out of strong forms of relativism about knowledge and morality, which they have deeply imbibed. Most Millennials believe that each person can decide for themselves what they think, which is fine, but that nobody has the right to be judgmental in criticizing what anyone else thinks. Most views that people might hold are thought to be legitimate “for them.” And if differences of views among people create problems, then everyone should just back away, keep their beliefs quietly to themselves, and just get along pragmatically.

Related to the issue of their individualistic approach to faith, many young Catholics are very localist in the way they understand life, not really tuned into issues in the Catholic Church broadly. For example, we first interviewed teenagers right around the time that the priest abuse scandal was all over the news. We were expecting to hear a lot of blowback and anger from them about it but, to our surprise, the vast majority of Catholic teenagers were not disturbed. They often said something like, “Yeah, there are always some bad people in any institution, but it’s not a big deal. My priest is a great guy; I like and trust the people I know.” That was the standard attitude. When people live in such very local worlds, there is less on their horizon about which to become polarized.

Furthermore, more than a few American Catholics of the Millennial generation literally do not understand much about the content of polarizing issues, because they were never educated much in specific church teachings. I know that, given the stereotypes, this may sound amazing, but I have interviewed young American Catholics who with straight faces reported to

me that as far as they knew, the Catholic Church has no particular teaching on sexual issues. They do not dissent against church teachings because they have not been educated well enough to know even what they might or might not dissent against.

Of course, to balance this view, we must also recognize that there exists a serious, committed minority of Catholic Millennials who are very invested in the church and its policies and politics. We might think of them as “JPII-type” of youth, following behind their counterparts in the Generation X age cohort, and many of them *are* polarized, most often on the right. But statistically, they are quite rare. As a proportion of the whole, they are very small. To some Catholic leaders, they may appear more numerous, because such youth tend to gravitate to places where the leaders live and work and to be drawn to certain kinds of older Catholics with whom they identify. But, in that case, this means that those older Catholics likely have what we in social science call a “bad sampling bias.” That is, they think the world is a certain way based on their limited sample, but that view is biased because of the particular kind of people that tend to surround them. So, while there does exist an important minority of younger Catholics who would fit the polarization model, we should not lose sight of the fact that they are a small minority. For the vast majority of Millennial Catholics, the question is not fighting for issues they believe in within a church framework but general indifference and disconnection.

Consider this one statistic from a report I recently helped to produce along with the University of Notre Dame Institute for Church Life. I conducted a study over ten years of a nationally representative sample of teenagers, the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR), which we followed as they grew up into their twenties. Of all those who identified as Catholic as teenagers, ten years later, one-half of them no longer identified as Catholic. That is a 50 percent attrition rate for young Catholics. That loss speaks volumes about how invested Catholic youth

are in their church. Many—if not most—young people being raised as Catholics today have concerns, orientations, and assumptions that are disconnected from many of the things that older generations of Catholics care about. The challenge is not whether polarization among them can be reduced, but whether they know and care enough about anything related to the church to invest in taking any stand on any of it.

To summarize, the kind of issue-polarization among US Catholics that has concerned many within the church is not evenly distributed across age cohorts of Americans. I suggest that it is most intense among American Catholics of the Vatican II generation and probably some of their children, as well as a minority of Generation Xers. Findings from my research suggest that, by contrast, Catholic youth today, with some exceptions, do not seem particularly caught up mentally or emotionally in issues that often polarize older Catholics. This is explained by a set of related facts. First, relatively few young US Catholics are invested enough in their faith and church to care very much about issues that divide Catholics. It simply does not mean enough to most of them to get worked up about such issues. Second, most Catholic teenagers and emerging adults already know what they personally believe about contentious issues and—operating something like “opinion libertarians”—feel no need to struggle to convince others to share their views. Very few assume that the church has binding teaching authority to shape conscience, so they are comfortable with a “live and let live” attitude. Third, many Catholic youth are so poorly catechized or otherwise informed that they may not know exactly what the Catholic Church teaches on specific issues and what the reasonable possible alternatives are. Fourth, more generally, most American youth, especially Catholic youth, have absorbed a normative belief in a version of tolerance that makes them reluctant to get into arguments or “judge” anyone else.

Catholicism for most American Catholic youth is thus one identity and set of practices among many others that they may

or may not care very much about or wish to invest in. The few exceptions to the above generalization are those teenagers raised by parents who are very invested in Catholic culture, and often culture wars issues, and who identify with their parents' views closely enough to care to make issues of them. But those Catholic youth are relatively very few.

In short, Catholic polarization presupposes minimum levels of investment, commitment, and knowledge for such polarizing conflicts to make sense and be worth fighting over, conditions which seem to have pertained among some Baby Boomer Catholics, some of their children, and some in Generation X, but generally do not among Millennials today.

Reflection by Michael Sean Winters

French Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain once said that we are born into the world with a liberal heart or a conservative heart; it is not something we can change. But he also suggested that we spend considerable time acquainting ourselves with the kind of heart with which we were not born, to study and sympathize with the concerns that grow from that other kind of heart, in our search for wisdom.

I think that it is incumbent on us, as Catholics, to follow Maritain's advice insofar as we wish to acquire wisdom. I also think that this exercise helps build up the unity of the church. None of us has a monopoly on wisdom, and all of us benefit from forging friendships with those who are different from us. The more we recognize this, the more likely a difference of opinion will not eat at the unity of the church. But that effort does not obliterate the fact that good Catholics do have different kinds of fundamental dispositions.

Sometimes these dispositions are rooted not in our birth but in our circumstances. In his new book, *The Archaeology of Faith*, Fr. Lou Cameli writes about his grandparents who were sharecroppers in Italy. He writes:

Take for example, the conservative mind-set that quite naturally belongs to farmers. Time and work on the farm are keyed to a steady rhythm of the seasons with planting, growing, harvesting, and letting the land lie fallow—until the cycle begins again. Even individual days have their fixed set of routines from sunrise to sunset. Fixed cycles and predictable patterns enable farmers to live from the land. When the unexpected breaks in, disrupting a set routine—such as accidents that disable workers or bad weather that halts the growth of crops—farmers feel a deep sense of devastation, perhaps accompanied by anger or hopelessness.¹⁷

Farmers are naturally conservative, but most of us are no longer farmers. And, when I read his comment about bad weather producing anger or hopelessness, I thought of Cardinal Kasper speaking at Catholic University last autumn, when he said many churchmen look at the current papacy as a bit of bad weather, and they are just waiting for it to pass. My point is that insofar as the church is a human institution, it is not helpful to paper over differences that are real. The current practice at *America* magazine of forbidding writers to use the terms “liberal” or “conservative” seems foolish to me. Adjectives, like all metaphors, can either enlighten or obscure. But I do not see how the cause of unity is furthered by making poor James Martin, SJ, write, “some writers, like George Weigel and Robbie George,” rather than just writing, “some conservative writers.” Adjectives can be misused, but that does not mean they are useless, only that they should be used with care. So let’s not forget that human beings tend to incline toward a more conservative sense of the world or a more liberal sense of the world, and the church must be comfortable with, walk with, and learn from both kinds of people.

My second point follows from the first. I want to push back a bit against the idea that polarization today is such a

¹⁷Louis J. Cameli, *The Archaeology of Faith: A Personal Exploration of How We Come to Believe* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press 2015), 35.

huge problem. As much as we moderns flatter ourselves that our problems are singularly more difficult than those faced by previous generations of Catholics, on this issue, the case cannot be made.

In the last years of the nineteenth century and first years of the twentieth, a woman named Ella Edes worked in Rome at the *Propaganda Fide*, which then was in charge of episcopal appointments in the United States. Thankfully, her correspondence was largely preserved, and I rely here on Gerald Fogarty's history of relations between the Holy See and the American hierarchy to tell the tale.¹⁸ When the rector of the North American College, Monsignor—later Cardinal—William Henry O'Connell was conniving to have himself appointed the bishop of Portland, Maine, Edes wrote to Michael Corrigan, the archbishop of New York. "Monsignor Pomposity is so invariably rude, ill-bred, and disobliging . . . I do not suppose he knows any better, being low-born and common, pitch-forked, suddenly, to a position which has turned his head. Like all under-bred Paddies, I am not, in his eyes, sufficiently rich, or fashionable to be treated with even ordinary courtesy."

Her judgment of the rising cleric did not soften with time, and when, in 1906, O'Connell got himself named coadjutor to Archbishop Williams in Boston, she wrote to Bishop McQuaid of Rochester, "I have no doubt that Pomposity paid well, Falconio, Merry del Val, and especially, Satolli, and that they seized the moment when Cardinal Gotti is lying at the point of death to carry out their designs." She urged the bishops of the Boston Province to "resolutely show their teeth, and not suffer their noble Metropolitan to be thus grossly insulted & shamefully treated, simply to promote the selfish aims and inordinate ambition, and gratify the shameless cupidity of Italian cardinal & Roman officials!" She proposed a remedy, telling McQuaid of an Irish bishop who brought to mind the

¹⁸ Gerald P. Fogarty, *The Vatican and the American Hierarchy from 1870 to 1965* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1985).

names of recalcitrant priests at Mass and mentally placed them in the chalice, leaving them to God's disposition. "And they die off like flies!" Journalists today would be fired even if they tweeted such sentiments.

I do not suggest that we all imitate the special viciousness of Ms. Edes in her letters. But her forcefully stated views were not idiosyncratic. Divisions within the church in the United States at the turn of the last century were real, and the fights were fierce, with the Americanizers like Gibbons, Ireland, and Keane on one side and the conservatives like Corrigan allied with German Catholics on the other. They fought about everything. Cardinal O'Connell really did try and have Rome squash the nascent bishops' conference. Ms. Edes was deeply personal in her invective, though it should be noted she was often right. Cardinal O'Connell really was pompous.

There are times, I admit, when I feel a similar desire to lash out at another person. But it is best to confine the lashing out to differing ideas and arguments and not to the person. Sometimes people, especially commentators, receive an attack on their argument as an ad hominem attack because our arguments are so close to our personalities that we have difficulty distinguishing. The old yarn about "hating the sin but loving the sinner" always was, and still is, cold comfort. But some of my regular disputants deploy the "hate the sin, love the sinner" line against those whose sexual behavior does not match the Christian ideal, and surely sexuality is as close to a person's personality as their arguments are. Here is my rule of thumb: Try to keep the focus on the arguments, but if you decide the situation deserves a sharp elbow, remember the sage advice that if you are going to sin, sin boldly. To get under an ideologue's skin, make sure you mock. It drives them nuts.

My third point has to do with the special role of the Catholic commentariat: people like myself who police the culture and traffic in opinions. I do not think we should shy away from good, passionate debate. Dull prose is as much of a literary sin as throwing a sharp elbow is a sin against church

unity. It is the shape of the debate that matters. Our public discourse benefits not only from debate but also from debate that seeks deeper understanding and, hopefully, eventually, even fleetingly, consensus. I like to say that while people at the extremes are certainly capable of making important and interesting arguments, they also are usually incapable of driving the discussion in fruitful or practical ways. It is at the center of American church life that the important conversations have to happen—and there has been very little room in the center. One of the important failings of the American hierarchy has been their willingness to coddle the extremes on the right, such as LifeSiteNews, or the Becket Fund, or EWTN. The “center” is pretty far to the right at the moment. But the winds have changed, and some of us view the current pontificate not as bad weather but as a time of sunny skies. It is my hope that the leaders of the church will use this change of weather to create the space and the climate for a discussion in the center. Pope Francis is encouraging debate and discussion. I commend the editors of this volume for attempting to do precisely that.

I would submit that there should be a price of admission to that conversation. Actually, two prices. First, participants must be Catholics first, people who do not distort the church’s teachings to serve an extraneous ideological or political agenda. They must operate intellectually from what Fr. Robert Imbelli calls the “Christic imagination” and have their arguments rooted in our Catholic intellectual tradition. Second, participants must be willing to call out their own side, their own team, and to do so with some regularity. We journalists hold forth the ideal without fear or favor, and this should apply especially to members of the Catholic commentariat when the teachings of the church challenge those with whom we tend to agree on any political or social issues. Once those two prices of admission are paid, I think a fruitful dialogue can take place.

So, two cheers for attempts to constrain polarization within the church. But, I also have to say: When George Weigel calls that beautiful Mass at the border last year—with those powerful

images of Cardinal Sean O'Malley and Bishop Jerry Kicanas distributing Holy Communion through the slats of the border fence—when Mr. Weigel calls that Mass “an act of political theater,” I am going to call him out on it, and if that increases the degree of perceived polarization, so be it. As long as we walk through this vale of tears, sometimes our values are incommensurate. Thank you, Isaiah Berlin. We know that we seek, but will never attain, the unity of all knowledge. And in the meantime, sometimes we need to have strong, even polarizing, debates about the state of our church and the issues that should concern us as followers of the Master.

Let me end on a more cheerful note. A couple years back, I had to write a review of a book that I found not very good. The author, whom I did not know, replied. I replied. Polarization in spades. Then, last December, the Holy Father gave a talk in which he called all of us to reach out to those in the church from whom we were alienated. Through the good offices of a mutual friend, I reached out to this author and suggested we grab a cup of coffee together. We had a thoroughly enjoyable two hours of engaged, nonconfrontational conversation and pledged to do it again. I look around the room here and see people whom I met originally because of a disagreement about something they or I had written. They have become not only good friends but also people to whom I turn when I wish to deepen my understanding of a contentious issue. I always learn something from my encounters. They help me follow the counsel of Maritain I cited at the beginning. I am a better writer and a better Catholic for these friendships. But, I think the fact that we first met on the occasion of an instance of polarization shows that it is possible to move forward, not into any homogenized Catholic identity or shared intellectual agreement, but into our respective Catholic identities, more intelligently as well as more kindly, by engaging. We should fear the isolation and separation of different groups within the church as much as we fear the inevitable polarizing conflicts that come with engagement. And, at the end of the day, we will all throw ourselves on the mercy of God.