

The American Catholic Church



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In 1775, there were armed clashes between American and English forces in Lexington, Concord, and Bunker Hill. The next year, 1776, as Americans know well, the insurrection became a rebellion and a revolution. One of the great documents of human history, the Declaration of Independence, called for a new nation. The Declaration was a revolution in its own right. It affirmed God but not the Churches, stressed the Enlightenment but not Tradition, and its underscored inclusivity as the operating principle of the new nation (“all...are created equal”). Never before or since was a nation formed with so much boldness and imagination.

In that fateful year, 1776, the Continental Congress sent a small delegation to Canada to elicit Canada’s support in the revolution. For a number of days, Benjamin Franklin and two prominent Catholics traveled north together.

One of these Catholic was a layman, Charles Carroll of Carrollton, the richest person in the new nation. He had signed the Declaration of Independence, willing to face execution for treason if the revolution failed. He had also put his vast fortune at the service of the new nation. He had nothing to gain from this revolution. He supported it as an act of conscience. The founders of the new nation were impressed mightily by this Catholic commitment to what was then a very risky enterprise.

A second Catholic in the coach with Franklin was Charles Carrollton’s cousin, John Carroll, a priest, forty-one years of age. He was destined, as well shall see, to bring the principles of the American Revolution into the structures of the American Catholic church.

Benjamin Franklin, a believer in God by not in denominationalism, a humanist who distrusted organized religion, a very shrewd judge of human character, grew to respect John Carroll in their time together.

We should focus on this journey north, inclusive, tolerant and brave. Catholics were not deemed dangerous by the founders of the nation. They were sent on this congressional mission of the highest urgency in the hope that Franklin’s diplomatic skills and the Catholic sensitivities of the Carroll might bring strongly Catholic Canada in on the American side.

Let us move our story eight years forward. In 1784, the American Revolution has proved victorious against incredible odds. The Constitution for the new government will be written and ratified five years later. It is very early in the life of the new republic. It is 1784.

Benjamin Franklin learns that the Pope is seeking to appoint a priest superior of the American Catholic Church. Since this is an age when government leaders were expected to nominate Church officials, Franklin writes the Pope and highly recommends that John Carroll be that person. The Pope agrees.

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Benjamin Franklin, a humanist, was then a key influence in the founding of this nation and a catalyst in the organization of the American Catholic Church. John Carroll, unmistakably Catholic, was comfortable with Franklin, unmistakably Deist. They found common cause in the life, liberty and equality of the Declaration of Independence, which brought them together and helped to define both of them.

With this scene in mind, I would like to consider the American Catholic Church in what I see as the three significant phases of its development:

The American Phase...1634-1850

The Roman Phase...1850-1960

The Catholic Phase...1960-present

The American Phase 1634-1850

After a voyage of four months, two ships, the Ark and the Dove, land in present-day Maryland. It is March 5, 1634, fourteen years after the 1620 founding of Plymouth Plantation farther north. Catholics and Protestants crossed the ocean and together they created a colony where Catholics were free to worship. John Carroll will be born in that colony a century later in 1735. When Carroll becomes the first American bishop, in that same colony, in 1789, there were 35,000 Catholics in a national population of four million (about 1%).

I have designated this time period the American Phase, in the first century and a half, Benjamin Franklin recommended John Carroll for a Church office and Protestants were willing to do this just about a century after the bitter excommunication of Martin Luther in 1520. In America, Protestants gave land for Catholics to build Churches and later sent their children to Catholic schools.

We need to inquire why these promising beginnings did not continue.

There could hardly have been a better choice than John Carroll to lead the American Catholic Church. His family heritage and culture were steeped in democracy and, as we shall see, in many of the characteristics were now identify as typically American.

Immediately after the American Revolution, in 1782, Carroll drafted a "Constitution for the Clergy" in White Marsh, Maryland, after a series of three meetings over a two-year period.



The "Constitution" gives priests voting privileges in determining their ministry and their leaders. In 1783, Carroll writes that "...in the United States our religious system has undergone a revolution, if possible, more extraordinary than our political one." It is clear, then that Carroll is deliberate and intentional in these innovations and that his model is the emerging American philosophy of Government. In 1784, his model is emerging American philosophy of government. In 1784, Carroll is named "Superior of the Catholic Clergy in America" at Franklin's suggestion, as we have noted. When Rome nominates him as the first American bishop a few years later, he demurs. He tells Rome that bishops appointed by a foreign government, albeit papal, will not have credibility in the new Republic.



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He asks that the clergy choose their own bishop. An election takes place on May 18, 1789 and Carroll is chosen 24-2. In 1789 the United States Constitution is ratified, George Washington is inaugurated, John Carroll becomes the first United States bishop and Georgetown is established by Carroll as the first Catholic institution of higher learning.

Carroll allows English in the Liturgy and he supports a strong voice for the laity in the American trustee system. There are three characteristics of this trustee system:

The laity nominates candidates as pastor and the bishop appoints

- The bishop has limited rights to dismiss a pastor
- Disputes are settled in an arbitration committee, half of whose members are lay

Carroll, furthermore, promotes open discussion and allows the dissent which accompanies it. He observes that "...a free circulation to fair argument is the most effectual method to bring... Christians to unity..." Notice the words: the best method is open discussion; this discussion does not promote division but unity. It sounds counter-intuitive to Europe; Americans know it works.

As we take our leave of Carroll, we note that a number of initiatives are in place:

- A substantial voice for the laity
- The right of clergy to choose their bishop
- A sense that democracy is good for the Church
- A written constitution for the clergy with a clear definition of authority and its limits
- A preference for public debate and dialogue of church issues
- Ecumenism
- A warning that foreign and papal interference will diminish the credibility of Church leaders

John England

In 1823, thirty-four years after Carroll's ordination as Bishop of Baltimore, John England, of Charleston, South Carolina, issues a "Constitution of the Roman Catholic Church of South Carolina."

John England researched the document thoroughly going back to the theology of conciliarism in the 1415 Council of Constance. That Council forced three popes to resign and declared ecumenical councils superior to papal authority.

The Church Constitution of South Carolina notes that the bishop is not the "duty of the Pope" any more than the governor of an American State is the deputy of the President of the United States. As each American State can have its own laws, in general agreement with the constitution of the United States, so each diocese can formulate its own laws and culture, in general agreement with the universal Church. The Constitution adds that "We are not required by our Faith to believe the Pope is infallible."

The Constitution calls for a vestry of laity to supervise the finances of each parish. The vestry settled salary for clergy and pays them directly. It selects all lay ministers and personnel for the parish; no lay person can be removed from office except by decision of the vestry. If the vestry has a problem with its priest, it meets without him and sends its report directly to the bishop for resolution.

On the diocesan level, a board of "General Trustees" is in charge of all diocesan funds. This board consists of five clergy (the bishop, a vicar and three clergy chosen by the clergy) and six laity, chosen by the laity.

The "Constitution" continues and advances characteristics of John Carroll's approach:



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- A substantial voice for the laity and the right to elect trustees
- A written constitution
- A preference for public debate and dialogue

A special feature of this “Constitution” is an annual convention of clergy and laity. This convention takes place every year from 1823 until John England’s death, some twenty years later, in 1842.

The annual meeting of the convention has a house of clergy and a house of laity. The lay house selects its members, elects its president and meeting on its own. No act of the convention is valid unless a majority of clergy, a majority of laity and the consent of the bishop are in harmony. If a majority of both houses disagree with the bishop, delegates can appeal to Rome to have the bishop do what they wish.

In these late nineteenth-century developments we see a stress on collegiality, concern for free speech in the church and a sensitivity to ecumenical and even interreligious dialogue.

For some twenty years, John England, is perhaps, the most powerful voice in the American Catholic hierarchy. A sign of his influence is the two-hour address he is invited to deliver before the United States Congress. He will be a leader in assembling the plenary councils of bishops in Baltimore. These councils are the most successful example of collegiality in the universal Church of the nineteenth century.

There are final vestiges of this thoroughly American and yet Roman, free and yet traditional style in three surprising developments in the last nineteenth century:

- Nationwide meetings of the entire American episcopate, plenary session at Baltimore, convene in 1855, 1866 and 1884; they are consciously collegial in their approach as we have noted; they anticipate the regular national conference of bishops called for in Vatican II.
- The American bishops arrive at Vatican I opposed to a definition of papal infallibility; they believe it will inflame American and Protestant fears of foreign interference, idolatry, and papal control of free speech; indeed, almost half of the American bishops (22) leave the Council as approval of infallibility becomes inevitable.
- The first Parliament of World Religions takes place in Chicago in 1893 at a time when Catholics and Protestants do not dialogue with one another freely; three episcopal leaders of the American Church participate, on an equal footing with major world religious leaders, much to the subsequent anger of Rome; James Cardinal Gibbons of Baltimore (from the North); John Keane of Richmond, Virginia, first rector of Catholic University (from the South); John Ireland of St. Paul Minnesota (from the Midwest).

In these late nineteenth-century developments we see a stress on collegiality, concern for free speech in the church and a sensitivity to ecumenical and even interreligious dialogue. We find the roots of this in John Carroll’s and John England’s ecclesiology.

So, what went wrong?



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There are two possible explanations. The first is suggested by Alexis de Tocqueville, the more astute observer of American culture in history. In 1831, in the later years of the American Phase, he notes that American Catholics are “the most democratic class in the United States...very sincere” but also “very submissive”.

This submissiveness will end the American influence on the Catholic Church when Rome turns harshly against it. Submissiveness and Roman censure terminate the American Phase and bring us to the Roman Phase of the American Catholic Church.

The Roman Phase 1850-1960

The Roman reaction against American enculturation is swift and harsh.

John Carroll is informed that he will not be consulted on the choice of future American bishops and that there will be no further clergy elections of their bishop. Some twenty years after John Carroll’s brave experiment on election of bishops, four new dioceses are created and bishops appointed in Bardstown, Boston, New York, and Philadelphia, without consultation with Carroll or with clergy. The trustee system is ended and the ownership of all parish property is transferred to the bishop.

Pope Leo XIII directs two negative encyclical letters against the American Church.

The first of these, *Longinqua Oceani* (1895) rejects the American separation of Church and State and makes it clear that this is a “very erroneous” arrangement even for the United States. The encyclical notes with horror that “State and Church...in America” are “dissevered and divorced.” Rome will at best tolerate this experiment in America but only until Catholics are a majority. At that point, American Catholics must press for a union of Church and State and for the marginalization of all Protestant Churches.

The encyclical calls for a “submissive spirit” from the clergy and for “obedience from the laity.”

The second letter, *Testem Benevolentiae* (1899) took direct aim at American Catholic Culture. It found American Catholics:

- Too eager to accommodate doctrine to modernity (change)
- Too willing to think and say whatever they wish and indeed to express these thoughts too readily in print (free speech)
- Too individualistic and too willing to rely on the direct influence of the Spirit in their spiritual lives rather than following the “well-known path” laid out by the church (conscience)
- Too enamored of active and practical virtues, to the neglect of passive and contemplative values (pragmatism)
- Too dismissive of vows and formal religious life (initiative)

The encyclical condemns these characteristics as “Americanism,” a general tendency to suppose that the “Church in America” can be “different from” the rest of the world.

Cardinal James Gibbons objects to the encyclical in a sharp letter to the Pope on March 17, 1899.

If one looks carefully at the encyclical letter *Testem Benevolentiae*, the five criticisms of Leo XIII go to the heart of American culture. He dislikes, as we have noted: change, free speech, conscience, pragmatism and initiative.

The submissiveness DeTocqueville observed and the Roman critiques of America advanced even further because of the massive influx of immigrants. The immigrants were less adept with the American system. They did not, for the most part, have English as a native language; as Catholics, they cared less about an active voice in governing their Church than in surviving. A



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ready group of bishops moved in a sternly conservative direction, with Roman support.

The Roman Phase stresses submissiveness, the papal critique of America and service to the immigrant community. In fairness, it must be noted that many conservative and even repressive bishops organized assistance for Catholic immigrants that was often healing and life-saving. A great deal of social justice work was expended on behalf of vulnerable and frightened immigrants. But, these bishops, in turn, and many priests, insisted on absolute power and total obedience. They are aware brilliant organizers but also men of narrow theological vision. They tended to be belligerent, more impressive in conflict than in their capacity to reconcile.

John Hughes, Archbishop of New York, is typical. He dismantles the trustee system in St. Patrick's Cathedral, boasting, "I made war on the whole system." He added that "Catholics did their duty when they obeyed their bishop." Even more ominously, he warns: "I will suffer no man in my diocese that I cannot control."

Rome kept up the pressure. In *Vehementer Nos*, Pius XII writes "...the one duty of the multitude is to allow themselves to be led and, like a docile flock, to follow their pastors..."

This Roman Phase was strongly hierarchical. It instilled a sacramental reverence for Church authority, a sense that Christ was present in every official decision. The laity were to receive authority the way they would receive sacraments. Obedience because a central defining virtue, a mark of holiness, an indispensable condition for approval and promotion. Dissent was treasonous, diagnosed as a pathology. Initiative withered. This Church gave safety to its compliant members but it filled them with a sense of paranoia and suspicion of everything that was not Catholic. It seemed a very long time ago indeed when democracy and open discussion were prominent in Catholic circles.

Nonetheless, immigrant Catholics found a harbor of safety in the ghetto they built with their language, culture and Catholicism. Within these enclaves, three objectives were of paramount importance.



The first of these was education and the construction of a massive and expensive private school system. There was a general fear of American culture and public life, a distrust of American universities, the New York Times, non-Catholic writers, and Protestant crusades such as the abolition of slavery, the women's suffrage movement, prohibition of alcohol, birth control, socialism. Too many Protestants, Catholic seemed immoral, favoring slavery and alcohol and gambling, resisting a women's right to vote and social reforms, using language against Margaret Sanger and birth control that was an incendiary as the language now used against legal abortion.

In fairness, it is important to observe that the Protestant majority did not always make things easy for Catholics. It could be discriminatory, even savage. In 1834, a Catholic convent was burned to the ground in Charles, Massachusetts; in 1850, the Kowa Nothing Party was founded with a virulent anti-Catholic agenda.

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Protestants were terrified of the papacy, now claiming infallibility for itself, and of the escalating number of obedient Catholic immigrants flooding the country. American bishops were trained in Rome and regularly traveled there for consultations with the Pope. Catholics fed these fears with huge parades like St. Patrick's Day and Home Name extravaganzas. There were Eucharistic Congresses which brought Vatican and foreign Church dignitaries in flamboyant dress and with aristocratic titles.

The Catholic school system never became as large as the hierarchy wanted. There never was a school for every parish. The American bishops meeting in the Baltimore Councils threatened Catholic parents with the denial of sacraments if they did not send their children to Catholic schools. Nonetheless, most Catholic children went to public schools. Even so, the Catholic school system became the largest private educational enterprise in the history of the world. It trained five million elementary students at its height. This system was complemented with thousands of high schools and hundreds of colleges and universities.

The Catholic school system did a great deal of good, certainly, but it was under the strict control of the pastor and this frightened non-Catholics. It pulled thousands of Catholic teachers out of the public school system where they would have had to contend with greater diversity. It paid its lay teachers one-third the salary of their public school counterparts and it gave multitudes of women religious virtually no pay at all. The system both inspired and exploited women; it gave lay teacher a noble calling but it allowed them no rights.

I stated a moment ago that there were three paramount objectives of this Roman Phase. The **first** of these was education; the **second** was the development of a piety that was sentimental, at times superstitious, and always submissive. Once again, here also, not everything about this was bad.

The life of Catholic immigrants was harsh, even cruel. People of enormous courage came to these shores, leaving their families and countries of origin, often forever; struggling with language and culture, with menial jobs an unfair class and religious discrimination.

Sentimental piety brought comfort to many; quasi-superstitious practices, a relic or a scapular, gave a measure of control or protection; submissiveness seemed fitting (give us church and a school, a network of friends, a sense God cares for us and we will obey in any way you wish.)

This piety, nonetheless, fed, consciously or not, into the ecclesial politics of the hierarchy. It kept Catholics from organizing national lay congresses; it eliminated the last vestiges of the trustee system; it took away the will and the desire for democracy in the Church; and, it crushed dissent. It gave the hierarchy legions of docile voters who could be marshaled against political adversaries. It provided enormous economic clout to church officials who could boycott and censure films and books they did not favor. It garnered massive sums of money that bishops could use as they saw fit, with no meaningful accountability. The truth became a casualty through all of this. Cardinal John Henry Newman once observed that "piety and power make life difficult for truth."

The **third** paramount objective was recruitment for formal ministry. At its height, in the 1960's, the American Catholic Church had some 300,000 women religious, priests and seminarians. That number is currently some two-thirds less, with a much larger Catholic population and a much older corps of canonical ministers.

During the Roman Phase, the crowning achievement of the Catholic Church in this country was tied up with ministerial vows and ordination. Priests were called "other Christs" and nuns were described as angelic and saintly.

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Marriage was considered an inferior vocation lay life was second-rate way to be a Christian. The juggernaut of a Catholic educational system, a submissive piety, and a denigration of marriage left Catholic laity with a diminished sense of their value and worth and with the conviction that the church belonged to the bishops and pope.

Let me add, however, that the success of institutional Catholicism was stunning; no other national Church in the modern world equaled the power, wealth and organization of the American Catholic Church. It also did an enormous amount of good. Its schools and hospitals, its rituals of healing and its parishes with their sense of belonging, its willingness to demand better working conditions and its insistence that Catholics must be American must not press for the union of Church and State, all this was admirable. All this gave people meaning at times and it strengthened the life of this nation. Such a Church gave us Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton although, we must add, it resisted the former and silenced the latter.

There were costs, however, and as Catholics became educated and autonomous, they were no longer willing to pay them. It was a remarkable system but it favored an aristocratic few and it eventually destroyed the freedom and dignity of people to an extent that assured its demise.

The Catholic Phase (1960 to Present)

The American Catholic Church works best with revolutions. Two key revolutions define where the American Catholic Church is today.

We have seen how the American Revolution itself shaped Catholicism in this country. I suggest it would have given this nation and the world a brilliant model of creative theology for the modern era had it not been crushed.

The second revolution came in our time and we are its heirs and witnesses. This was, of course, Vatican II. It has shaped the American Catholic Church perhaps more profoundly than any other national Church. Indeed, it has both moved us forward and brought us back to our revolutionary roots.

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Vatican II changed Rome itself and moved Rome closer to American Catholicism than anyone might have expected. Rome is now more defined by the American Declaration of Independence than it is by the papal Syllabus of Errors; it is more powerfully influenced by the Declaration on Religious Freedom, a Vatican II document Americans crafted, than it is by its own condemnation of Modernism; its present Code of Canon Law resonated with the language of the Bill of Rights and affirms equality, free speech, due process, freedom of association, freedom of inquiry and the right of privacy (this is very different from Pius X's insistence that the laity must be "led...like a docile flock, to follow their pastor"). Rome realizes that the ideas and the language of American culture create a far more credible vocabulary for modern discourse than its own monarchical system.

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Rome, I suggest, has no choice now except to move in an American direction. A revolution begins by rejecting the language of oppression and then compels the oppressor to change the system. The revolution has begun and it will carry the Catholic Church to reform and renewal.

Vatican II unmasked the liabilities of Vatican I. Vatican I gave the Church to the Pope; Vatican II made clear that the Pope cannot manage the Church.

The papal mishandling of the Church between Vatican I and Vatican II is breath-taking in its scope. The popes have been wrong on issues Vatican II reversed: political democracy and ecumenism, biblical studies and liturgy, religious liberty and world religions, Judaism and the Holocaust, the definition of marriage and the acceptance of married clerics, theological freedom and the overwhelming vote of the papal commission to approve birth control as a moral option in marriage (52-4). The architects of Vatican II were the theologians in the generation before it who were silenced by the popes for proposing the very doctrines which were now declared official teaching.

The last effort to maintain a Vatican I Church is the pontificate of John Paul II. He has made his own theology and piety the norm for approval. Theologians have been intimidated and excommunicated, books suppressed, male celibate priesthood proclaimed as ontologically superior to all the baptized, debate prohibited, women defined without their concurrence or consent and servile bishops appointed in extraordinary numbers to tasks which exceed their intelligence, their competence, and their pastoral skills. The sexual abuse of clergy is criticized in gentler than the condemnation of condoms to prevent AIDS or irresponsible pregnancies. Catholic political leaders are censured for their views on abortion but not for their support of the death penalty and their approval of war. The notion that the Pope is the Church and that the Church is a monarchy has been revived under John Paul II but this time there is a Council, Vatican II, and a world-wide consensus which offer resistance.

In June of 1995, twelve American bishops with the support of forty other bishops who endorsed but did not sign the document) listed fifteen pastorally urgent issues which the episcopal conference is frightened to discuss because of Vatican intimidation:

Presenting the minority position of Vatican II as though it were the majority

- Ecumenical issues
- marital annulments
- appointments of bishops
- the relationship of episcopal conference to Rome
- collegiality in the church
- the role of women and their ordination
- the shortage of priests
- the morale of priests
- the ordination of married men
- sexual ethics
- contraception
- homosexuality
- abortion
- pedophilia

We must not, of course, overlook the good this papacy accomplished with its millennial plea for forgiveness for catastrophes and scandals caused by Catholics over the centuries. The social justice teaching which is a complement to the plea for forgiveness has been impressive. There have been prayers with world religious leaders and support by the Vatican for separating Church and State, even in Italy. John Paul II has prayed in mosques and synagogues, in Protestant Churches commemorating Martin Luther and at Gandhi's tomb. There are the beginnings of a Catholic bill of rights in the 1983 Code of Canon Law and a changed policy on married Latin-Rite Catholic priests if they are former Protestant pastors.

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Nonetheless, these changes have been made monarchically, not collegially. They are admirable decisions but they do not alter the underlying abusive system.

This papacy has destroyed the effectiveness of the International Synod of Bishops, the most impressive collegial structure set up by Vatican II. It has taken direct aim at freedom of speech and inquiry with its mandatum of episcopal approval for Catholic theologians and threatened them thereby with dismissal and loss of livelihood if they are not compliant. The world at large does not see the Catholic Church as a champion of freedom or human rights. It is not friendly to women or eager for Christian unity. It has not been sensitive to the pastoral care people deserve if that care required an inclusive priesthood or an acceptance of faithful homosexuals or remarried Catholics or a trust in the work of the spirit as manifested in the *sensus fidelium*. At its best, it has been benignly patriarchal. In its worst moments it has terrified God's People and tyrannized them in a shameful and deeply hurtful manner. This is not a papacy which people turn to for healing; indeed, it has left in its wake countless wounded Catholics, the collateral damage it inflicted as it imposed on the church an abusive system of authority and control.

Since secularity and modernity have often been denounced by Church leaders, sometimes correctly, but often as a way of shifting blame and attention, it may be useful to reflect on the immediate past and to determine whether the world at large or American in particular are untrustworthy. The twentieth century was not only a century of unimaginable human suffering but a century of revolution and freedom. We must not indict the crimes without citing the miracles. Nor must we be embarrassed if the miracles were frequently the work of American influence and democracy.

Three of these miracles are especially impressive:

1. The creation of the United Nations, an American idea, in 1945; it has lasted now some sixty years and emerged as the conscience of the world, sometimes witnessing against American arrogance; minorities and women found a voice at the United Nations never given them in the Catholic Church;
2. The creation of the European Union, begun with the Marshall Plan in 1946, supported by Americans wholeheartedly and now autonomous of American dominance; the European Union has given diversity, reproductive rights and civil liberties a healing they never received at the Vatican;
3. The creation of democracy in Russia with the breath-taking collapse of Eastern European colonies (1989), the Berlin Wall (1990), and the Soviet Union (1991), all in a two-year period and all without violence.

The fact that Americans cannot bring democracy or these miracles to the Catholic Church at large is the single greatest failure of American Catholicism. The fact that American bishops repeat mindlessly that the Church must not be a democracy is anti-American and anti-Christian. All the other Christian Churches are collegial. Loyalty to Christ, after all, is not essentially connected with monarchy and ecclesial feudalism.

Democracy is not only the key to all ecclesial reform but the essential ingredient in global social justice.

No less a figure than Amartya Sen, the 1998 Nobel Laureate in Economics, insists on two observations of paramount importance.



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In *Democracy as Freedom* (1989), he writes: “No famine has ever taken place in the history of the world in a functioning democracy.”

Sen argues that the opening of a democracy, its accountability and its freedom of the press make it impossible for governments to tolerate famines. Famines are the legacy of a monarchical system.

It is time for democracy to revolutionize the Church and restore it to its original New Testament charge of freedom, collegiality and community.

Indeed, we know that free markets are also crucial. It is impossible to have free markets and not to have a democracy. Once the economic sphere is removed from government control, the government is not strong enough to maintain totalitarianism. A Church that is proud it is not a democracy is a model for totalitarianism systems.

Sen argues, at a later date, that no multi-partied democracy has ever waged war on another democracy.

If Sen is right and if democracy restricts famine and war, then a democratic world will be one in which social justice and peace may be possible on a scale greater than we have heretofore imagined. “This is not a time for the Church to boast that it will never be a democracy.”

American democracy has brought this nation enormous benefit. It may also change the world in a way that fits the Gospel better than any other governance structure we have known. This is an urgent hour for dialogues and democracy; it is not a time for pontifical wisdom and infallibility.

It is time for democracy to revolutionize the Church and restore it to its original New Testament charge of freedom, collegiality and community. We need to decide now which tradition works better for our church and served its life; the imperial, feudal and monarchical systems of John Paul II or the New Testament, modern Post Reformation, Enlightenment, American of government.

Democracy is the only way to bring back from the margins of the Church the massive numbers who choose to be Catholics but are not serfs, who hear Church but will not listen to Caesar.

American Catholics will not allow this papacy to prevail. Some will openly resist; other clandestinely subverts; most will simply not comply.

The level of dysfunctionality in priestly ministry in this country is a sign of the resistance. The shortage comes from non-compliance. The lack of morale comes from hopelessness. Nothing else in American Church history has shaken it to its foundations as destructively as the sexual abuse scandal. This scandal is not limited to the horror of pedophilia; it extends to the abuse of adult women and adult men. In this scandal and its cover-up, we see the end of the celibate male, clerical culture which is directly responsible for it and the beginning of the end of the monarchical system which thrives in an enforced, celibate, clerical culture.

We have traveled a long road from the Roman Phase of movies like “Going My Way,” “The Bells of St. Mary’s” and “Boystown” to the cinema of “Thorn Birds,” “Priest,” “The Power and the Glory” and “Nothing Sacred.”



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We behold in the burgeoning of this new revolution of our shores the ghosts and memories of John Carroll and John England, of Courtney Murray and Dorothy Day. We see the inclusiveness of the first native-born American saint, Elizabeth Seton, who was Catholic and Protestant, wife, mother, widow and celibate. We trace the journey to freedom as the Arch and Dove drop anchor in 1634 and as Charles Carroll signs the Declaration of Independence. We note the Catholic connection with American and its imaginative best in Benjamin Franklin's nomination of John Carroll and in John Kennedy's inauguration as an American president who happens to be Catholic.

We cannot forget the thousands of priests and women religious and laity who followed an African-American Baptist pastor, Martin Luther King, an American Gandhi, all the way up the mountain of freedom. In such a march, we experience the rejection of ecclesiological servitude.

There is no turning back now, no way to stop all this. There will never again be a Roman Phase to the American church. We have come too far, seen too much.

We are Catholic now in a way we have never before known. And we are American again as Alexis de Tocquerville saw us in 1831, the most democratic class in the new nation. We will not let ourselves be led without representation. We ourselves were not always sinless. But the crimes of democracy are always less than those of tyranny. We are free of that now.

We have a mission and a mandate, in independence and baptism, that will not allow slavery again in this nation, this time under the guise of religious tyranny. For we have been called to freedom by something even more awesome than our Declaration of Independence. We have been called to freedom by Christ.

Postscript: By Nick De Los Reyes

We are eternally grateful to Anthony for this outstanding article which withstands the test of time. It presents a history of American Catholicism that I was never taught in Catholic elementary and high school; two years at St. Mary's College in Moraga, CA (Christian Brothers); a year of novitiate; five years at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome (Jesuit); and three years at the University of Santa Clara (Jesuit). I wonder why? Is the raw history a challenge because it suppressed the interests of the Roman dominated Church?

History records that tyranny always evokes resistance and rebellion, both covert and overt. The decline in the numbers of priests and religious and the decline in Church attendance are indicative of resistance to the ever-present but never named tyranny. Church authorities have consistently refused to take seriously the voices and the lived theology of believers who dare to present ideas beyond the traditional party line.

In our day, Pope Francis, who appears to have a foot in both the pre-Vatican II and post-Vatican II cultural and ecclesiastical worlds, makes some effort to move the church forward. But each effort to enact the spirit and teaching of Vatican II is resisted by the entrenched and privileged male hierarchy and their supporters

For more than forty years, the spark of many movements in the church - like CORPUS, Federation of Christian Ministries, Call to Action, and Women's Ordination Conference - are indicative of the Spirit's refusal to be restricted by the institutional Church. FutureChurch, Roman Catholic Womenpriests, the Association of Roman Catholic Womenpriests, and Nuns on the Bus are only a few of the many fruits of this turbulent but creative period.

As Anthony Padovano is famous for saying: "The force of history is on our side." Nelson Mandela reminds us: "It always seems impossible until it's done".