

Director's Corner

Review: "The Decline and Fall of the Catholic Church in America"

by Fr. John Harvey, OSFS

I want to point out an important book which all Courage leaders and members ought to read: *The Decline and Fall of the Catholic Church in America* by David Carlin. The author predicts that if the Church continues to go downhill at the same rate as in the last 40 odd years, she will have about as much influence on public affairs as the Lancaster Amish. As a sociologist and as a practising Catholic through many years, he has amassed the kind of data which will persuade the reader that Carlin is on target in his evaluation of the Church in America. He wrote the book reluctantly, adding four chapters at the end in which he recommends ways in which the Church in America can stop its slide into oblivion.

In Part 2, he describes how secularism succeeded Protestantism as the dominant culture of America. In the mid-sixties, Catholics had become full participants in American mainstream culture at the very time that our culture "was being revolutionized by a generalized rebellion against authority". Catholics became full participants in an increasingly secularized culture which rejected all revealed religions: Catholicism, Protestantism, Judaism, and Mohammedanism. Secularism's moral theory rejected "a long list of traditional, religion based moral rules. Thus it endorsed - or at any rate, soon would endorse, once it realized the implications of its premises - sexual license, cohabitation, easy divorce, abortion, homosexuality, euthanasia, and suicide."

As Catholics breathed in the toxic air of secularism, they accepted the view that one must tolerate religious teachings in direct opposition to Catholic truth. It really did not matter what you believed in so long as you were a good person. It did not matter even if you were anti-religious. "And now an even more drastic change, tolerance extended not just to doctrine, but to conduct." Of course, one would be intolerant of conduct which obviously hurt others, such as murder, rape and robbery, but everything else would have to be permitted. If you did not agree with this attitude, you were guilty of the great sin of intolerance. Carlin cites the example of no-fault divorce. From now on, divorces could be carried out by mutual consent, "simply because the two parties had grown tired of the relationship," or even without such consent. Now people were as free to leave a relationship as they were free to enter one.

The culture of secularism was embraced whole heartedly by some Catholics. They were lost to the Church. Other Catholics sought to work out a reconciliation between secularism and their Catholic religion. These were the "liberal" or "progressive" Catholics. Often priests who rejected *Humanae Vitae* and openly opposed the pope were leaders in this group. A third group did not

accept secularism, or the liberal Catholic point of view. These were the conservative or traditional Catholics, some of whom yearned for the pre-Vatican II Church, but this was not true of other conservative Catholics.

What Carlin regards as the largest group are the bewildered Catholics, a mass of people which included many priests and "not a few" bishops. They remained attached to the Church as an institution without a clear understanding of what the Church stood for. They were not sure of their own beliefs, and consequently did not "engage in open resistance to that culture".

These four factions or groups can still be found today. But it is not clear which group, or combinations of groups will "definitively determine the future of American Catholicism".

Having described secularism, I want now to discuss the Principle of Personal Liberty which flows from it.

The Personal Liberty Principle

The grounds for the Personal Liberty Principle (PLP) are found in cultural relativism and ethical emotivism, both of which have been with us for several centuries. Cultural relativism means that actions are good according to the tastes of the prevailing culture. It is acceptable by those in some parts of America to directly shorten a person's life because one is tired of living, and one is in complete control of one's life. This leads to forms of the living will, in which one declares the conditions under which he will die. Ethical emotivism is a method of determining right from wrong on the basis of personal feelings. Animal rights people feel that it is morally wrong to shoot a deer during hunting season. One will note that both cultural relativism and ethical emotivism undermine the idea that there is an objective moral law. "Both lead to the conclusion that moral rules and values are, in the last analysis, simply a matter of personal preference."

The principle of personal liberty may be described as the person's right to decide that certain actions are good, and others are bad. But how do they make decisions about their conduct? The individual believes that he can do anything that he desires, so long as he does not hurt any other person. As this principle was practised by the secularist it came to be applied to matters of sexuality. Sexual relations are a purely private matter. They are a source of great pleasure. One should not then be bound by religious or moral codes. So long as one does not directly hurt another person, one's conduct is justified. Thus, sex before marriage, cohabitation, the viewing of pornography, and homosexual acts are viewed as private matters hurting no one. Directly shortening one's life is the liberty exercised by the person.

Having described the PLP with its origins in John Stuart Mill's understanding of liberty, Carlin demonstrates its serious flaws, referring to the PLP as a "singularly stupid principle".

Nevertheless, many Americans have uncritically accepted it - such is "an indicator of the state of

our national intellect and character. The dominance of this principle makes it difficult for Catholicism to flourish, or even to survive in America. It is the antithesis of Catholic morality. How can one be tainted by this principle and be really Catholic?"

Carlin adds that the PLP is composed of two inseparable sub-principles: (1) the autonomy principle, "which holds that we may do as we like, so long as we do not harm others" and (2) the tolerance principle which "holds that we must tolerate the conduct of others so long as this conduct does not harm people other than the actor himself."

Proponents of the gay-movement use the PLP in their effort to justify same-sex marriages. These unions are presented to the American people as alternatives to traditional marriage. If someone objects that such unions make no real contributions to the common good, he will be told that two people of the same-sex are not hurting anyone by their conduct. Their sexual acts are strictly a private matter, until one of them gets AIDS. When their union is known by children and teenagers, it impacts upon their perception of morality. They think marriage is not the only way to sexually express love. Such is a distortion of the meaning of marriage, of liberty, and true love.

We turn now to another application of the PLP, namely, married couples who become tired of one another and seek divorce. When they say that they are not hurting anyone else, they refuse to face the truth. Divorce brings deep unrest into the lives of the children, as I know from many years of counseling the victims of divorce. True, it did not hurt me personally, but it did leave scars on the children. Many other examples can be offered of the harm done by those who follow the PLP. Indeed it leads to habitual selfishness which ends up in addictive self-indulgence and loneliness.

The PLP principle is no reliable guide to conduct, but it allows one to rationalize any conduct in which one desires to engage. This is a dangerous moral principle. "But it is a principle that is immensely popular in American culture today." Yet for the last thirty or forty years our Catholic people have been living in this culture, and they will continue to live in this culture indefinitely.

Space does not permit me in this article to discuss the dismantling of the Catholic Ghetto in the sixties, the rebellion against the magisterium of the Catholic Church by dissident theologians in the sixties and seventies on the issue of contraception, and the deeper problem of Catholic self-identity in which Catholics began to believe that their religion was a mere denomination among other Christian churches instead of believing that it is the one true Church of Christ.

I hope I have whetted your curiosity to read Part VIII, entitled "Can the Fall Be Prevented?" (319-363). Carlin holds that it can be prevented under certain conditions, but he is uncertain whether the leaders of the Catholic Church in America and its faithful members are willing to take the steps which he regards as necessary.

In an appendix, Carlin presents statistical evidence of American Catholic decline(389). Here are a few samples of this decline: (1) Between 1965 and 2002 the number of priests in the United States dropped from 59,000 to 46,000, a drop of 22 per cent. (2) In 1965 the number of ordinations of new priests outnumbered the number of priests lost through death and departures by 725. In 1998, it was quite reversed, as death and departures outnumbered ordinations by 810. (3) In 1965 there were 49,000 seminarians; in 2002 the number had dropped to 4700. (4) In 1965 there were 180,000 religious sisters in the United States; by 2002 the number had dropped to 75,500, with half of them past age 70.

Conclusion: Catholics loving their Church must turn to Jesus, the Head of the Mystical Body of Christ, telling Him that they will pray and do works of Penance for their Church. This will lead them to make sacrifices for the spiritual health of their families and parishes. The laity need to encourage our much maligned bishops to openly oppose gay rights legislation and legislation that restricts the God-given freedom of conscience which everyone has. There are many examples of this restriction of freedom; for example, pressuring doctors and interns to learn how to perform abortions; asking a doctor to directly shorten a person's life because the relatives desire it.

I end with a prayer from the letter to the Philippians: "Brothers and Sisters. . . I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work in you will continue to complete it until the day of Christ Jesus."