

SOCIAL CHANGE IN THE AMERICAN CATHOLIC CHURCH

Joseph A. Varacalli, Hudson County Community College

THE BICENTENNIAL MOVEMENT

The American Catholic Bicentennial movement is clearly the most ambitious movement in the history of the liberal social activist wing of the American Catholic Church. The Bicentennial movement represents a marked recognition on the part of the American Church hierarchy of the reality, and to a lesser degree, of the legitimacy of what Edward Shils (1975) has termed the "dispersion of charisma". Such a conceptualization is useful in describing the "collegial" tendencies of not only the American Catholic Church but that of world Catholicism, as evidenced by the Second Vatican Council and some of its concrete applications, such as, the creation of the Synod of Bishops, the internationalization of the College of Cardinals, the greater autonomy given to regional and national episcopal conferences, and the creation of priests' senates and pastoral councils, of which the last includes lay representation. These "collegial" tendencies, perhaps retarded by the election of the traditionalist, Pope John Paul II, remain, nonetheless, the modal movement in the contemporary worldwide Catholic Church.

Of more specific relevance for the American scene, the Bicentennial movement has had the effect of making a systematic concern for the implementation of social justice a central and institutionalized concern of the American Catholic Church. This is to be contrasted with a pre-Vatican II period in which the activities of the liberal social activist wing were far more ad-hoc in nature and relied heavily for legitimation on a selective interpretation of the two great social encyclicals, *Rerum Novarum* and *Quadragesimo Anno* (Leo XII 1981; Pius XI 1931).

The success of the movement is not unqualified. The more radical proposals for the theological, structural, and status/authority changes in the Church were rejected by the hierarchy, which insists that the democratizing trend be controlled by the hierarchy and not allowed to destroy its function in the Church. The movement straddles the issue of being coopted by the ecclesia or coopting the hierarchy.

The social justice movement seeks precisely what the Synod of Bishops's 1971 state-

ment, *Justice in the World*, pronounces: that a concern for social justice is a "constitutive" element of the Catholic calling. In this the Church is attempting to keep pace with the contemporary social situation. In order to accomplish this, the Church is addressing, certain social developments consistent with the overall process of rationalization as discussed by Max Weber.

There are three facets to the world-transforming process of rationalization for Weber. They are 1) a systematization and abstraction at the cultural level, 2) bureaucratization and centralization at the level of formal and social organization, and 3) individuation at the level of thought and activity (Weber, 1947, 1963; Aron, 1970). Weber has talked of the first "in terms of the degree to which a religion has divested itself of magic and in terms of the degree to which it has systematically unified the relations between God and the world and therewith its own ethical relationship to the world" (Weber, 1951). Such a rationalization at the level of culture is exemplified through his discussion of the rise of the ethical, "world" religions from their more "primitive" origins. The second level is the development of bureaucracy and that of the nation-state and the change in "authority-patterns" endemic to modern life. The latter is discussed through his analysis of the changing forms of "social action", from "traditional" to "value-rational" and "goal-rational".

Any effective social movement requires a reasonably high degree of compatibility between these various levels of analysis. Weber's notion of "elective affinity"—that certain ideas and material interests "seek each other out in history" and constitute the very presupposition for any effective social movement—is relevant to an understanding of the success of the Bicentennial movement.

The celebration was sponsored by the national episcopal conference and official national level bureaucracy of the American Catholic Church, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops/United States Catholic Conference. The movement was fought for and protected by the liberal social activist wing of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops/

United States Catholic Conference. It was monitored throughout its earlier stages by the Bicentennial Justice Committee, a group of nationally renowned Catholic clergy, religious, and laity.

THREE STAGES

The first "grass roots" stage included, 1) the collection of over 830,00 individual responses from approximately half the nation's dioceses that solicited which issues on the part of Catholic parishioners were perceived to be vital to the Church; 2) numerous parish and diocesan meetings; 3) seven "justice hearings" in which over 500 Catholic clerical and lay leaders presented testimony; and 4) the construction of eight sub-themes associated with the overriding theme of "Liberty and Justice for All". The sub-themes chosen were 1) Church, 2) ethnicity and race, 3) neighborhood, 4) family, 5) personhood, 6) work, 7) nationkind, and 8) humankind.

The second stage consisted of the national Catholic assembly held in Detroit of 1976, the Call to Action Conference. The Conference debated, voted, amended, and eventually passed an enormously large list of recommendations along each of the sub-themes--a total of 182--which were to be considered by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops at their subsequent May meetings from 1977 through 1981. The Conference was attended by 1,340 delegates from 150 out of 170 dioceses of the country. It was composed of approximately 47% laity and 53% clergy including 110 of the nation's 300 Bishops. There was present, in addition, 94 national Catholic organizations with voting privileges. Over 1,000 non-voting observers were also in attendance. Over two-thirds of the voting delegates were employed by the Catholic Church and over 90% claimed heavy involvement in various Church organizations.

The third period of the overall "Liberty and Justice for All" program (1977-81) was designated by the Bicentennial committee as a time of "follow-up" that is, to study, discuss, and implement appropriate--from the viewpoint of the Bishops--Call to Action recommendations. At their May 1977 meeting, the Bishops re-

sponded initially to the Call to Action proposals by 1) issuing a pastoral statement addressing some of the more controversial Detroit recommendations and 2) assigning each recommendation to a Bishop's Committee within the N.C.C.B./U.S.C.C. It was then the task of each respective committee to evaluate each of the assigned resolutions a directive to either 1) study; 2) act immediately; 3) support existing activities or 4) to "respond in light of the Universal Law of the Church". The pastoral reply also created a Bishop's Ad Hoc Committee on The Call of Action Plan within the N.C.C.B./U.S.C.C. under the chairmanship of a liberal prelate, Archbishop John Roach. The chairmanship of this committee has now been assumed by another strong Bicentennial advocate, Bishop Joseph Francis. The task of the committee is to serve as a strong monitoring committee, complete with funds and staff which was authorized to receive progress reports on the implementation of acceptable.

TO DO THE WORK OF JUSTICE

The 1978 May meeting of the Bishops produced the "Call to Action Plan", later developed into *To Do The Work of Justice*. The plan proposed a six prong attack on the theme of "liberty and justice for all" through its sections on human rights; economic justice; the Church as people, parish, and community; education for justice; family life; and world hunger. Unsatisfied merely to mandate, the plan called for a review of national accomplishments and pitfalls in 1983, (thus adding to the Bicentennial program an additional two years). The year 1978 also saw the creation of a permanent secretariat within the national level bureaucracy, that of the Secretariat for the Laity which would be of special assistance to the Call to Action Bishop's Committee.

In March of the following year, 1979, the Bishop's Committee on the Call to Action Plan, in conjunction with both the Secretariat for the Laity and the staff of the U.S.C.C. held a "mini-Call to Action" follow-up in Washington, D.C. At this three day conference over 300 Bicentennial diocesan "coordinators" reported to each other the progress, in the implementation at the local level of the Call to Action proposals.

FIRST YEAR IMPACT

It is impossible, given the very general one page questionnaire issued to the coordinators, to determine just how effective and vital are the commissions and programs and other structures being instituted at any one diocese. Less than half the nation's dioceses were represented at the March meetings. One could not simply assume that all dioceses not represented at the March meeting were not active in any way in the implementation of proposals emanating from Detroit. The results only monitor the diocesan activity started in less than a year from the issuing of *To Do The Work of Justice*.

A year later, the Bishop's Committee on the Call to Action Plan, completed a more complete and comprehensive survey of the implementation of proposals along the six areas, education for justice; family life; the Church, people, parishes, and communities; economic justice; human rights; and world hunger. When analysis began in July of 1980, 106 dioceses, representing 62.3% of the total dioceses in the nation, had returned questionnaires. Some of the results, from the position of the advocates of the Bicentennial were positive (Francis 1980). The report noted the following:

1. Work is being done to improve textbooks and courses in social justice in Catholic schools, seminaries, and catechetical programs

2. Nearly two-thirds of the nation's dioceses demonstrated that they have a specific agency for justice education and justice advocacy

3. Almost all dioceses now have family life offices

4. Half of the dioceses report work done on behalf of human rights

5. Most dioceses have undertaken anti-hunger campaigns

The survey pointed out some negative results:

1. Most Bishops feel strongly that white middle-class Catholics and their parishes do not see social justice as a priority for themselves

2. Only one-third of the nations Bishops have appointed individuals, committees, or other advisory bodies in their dioceses to guide implementation of the plan of action

3. Justice education and economic justice, major focal points of *To Do The Work of Justice*, received the least attention

4. Only 12% of the dioceses had designated

an office or person to coordinate implementation measures identified with the question of "racism"

5. More than half of the dioceses could not report that they had implemented affirmative action guidelines

6. More than half of the dioceses could not report that they had implemented action on hiring of the handicapped

7. Only one-fourth of the dioceses reported no significant increase in funding or personnel in social advocacy agencies during the last year.

The Call to Action can be accurately described as both "cause" and "effect" of the establishment of the American Catholic liberal perspective. While there is some evidence of structural change in the Church as a result of the Call to Action, it is too early to assess its impact on both the national level of Church organization, and at the grass-roots, parish level. While noting the presently ineffective nature of the advisory councils to institute many of the democratic and social justice reforms called forth by Vatican II, Schoenherr and Simpson state that the councils remain potentially viable in the long run. As they put it, "given the centuries long tradition of strict monocratic authority manifested by the Bishops and the ambivalence of the Council Fathers manifested in the decree suggesting their establishment, advisory councils are, not surprisingly, fighting, an up-hill battle (1978)".

MAJOR CHANGES

While not, as yet, overly effective as a "cause" of social change within the American Catholic Church, the Call to Action process is nonetheless itself a reflection, of profound changes taking place both inside of and outside of the Church that point to the firm establishment of the liberal heritage within her constitution. The first change deals with the theological legitimation given to the Call to Action by Vatican II theology in general and by such statements as Pope Paul's *On the Development of People* (1967) and *A Call to Action* (1971) as well as by the Synod of Bishop's statement *Justice in the World* (1971). Such theological statements provide far more authority to the Catholic left than did such pre-Vatican II social encyclicals as *Rerum Novarum* (1891) and *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931). Sec-

ond, one must note the profound change in the American people's cultural attitude toward the desirability and reality of the modern "welfare state". If anything, the liberal Catholic wing at the turn of the century operated against a social matrix that took an unmitigated capitalism as normative. Ryan's eleven proposals, namely labor participation in management are now facts of life. These include social security, public housing, and the minimum wage. The present day taken-for-granted acceptance of the idea and practice of the welfare state has also made more plausible, in the minds of at least a significant number of Catholics, the idea that the Church must be involved in the political process, in some way, on behalf of society's disenfranchised. As Andrew Greeley (1977) has argued, American Catholics have, for decades now been liberal in their attitudes toward a host of social issues. There is no "gathering storm" between the advocates of a social Catholicism and the average American Catholic. That there is some real tension between the moderately liberal attitudes of the average American Catholic and those advocating the Marxist-Christian synthesis termed the "theology of liberation" does *not* negate the truth. The theology of liberation fall far short of exhausting the historically rich and varied tradition of social Catholicism.

THE NEW KNOWLEDGE CLASS

The recently reorganized National Conference of Catholic Bishops/United States Catholic Conference and the newly created Catholic social justice centers like the Catholic Committee on Urban Ministry (C.C.U.M.), the Center of Concern, Network, and the Quixote Center, among others, have provided for the generation and dissemination of information, ideas, and visions about the Church's role in society. This national-level "formal organizational" revolution finds its mirror reflection at the local level with the creation of priests' senates, pastoral councils and other advisory council mandated by Vatican II. The correlation between sympathy and understanding for liberal issues and higher education is one well documented. There is a van guard segment of a middle-class American Catholic population--which can be termed the "New Catholic Knowledge Class". This class is variant of the liberal social activist wing of the Church. It is the New Catho-

lic Knowledge Class that runs the large-scale social programs, at the national, regional, and local levels, of a Church becoming ever more bureaucratic and involved in the social and political order. The skill of this new class of Catholics lies in its ability to create and manipulate symbols, in its ability to translate these into concrete questions of social policy, and its ability to implement, man, and institutionalize religio-social programs, like the Call to Action. There is a social-psychological revolution taking place among American Catholics. It is a "communalism" (Greeley 1976), that smacks of individualism and an attenuation of the authority of the Bishops. Such a perceived dispersion of charisma on the part of at least a significant number of educated Catholics is conducive to an active laity not always waiting for the clergy to lead in a temporal sphere perceived to be imbued with religious significance. And while it was the clergy, and not the laity, that gave overall shape to the Bicentennial process, there is no denying that the laity were more involved in a significant way in an important American Catholic project than ever before in its history.

The American Catholic Bicentennial movement signals the arrival of an emerging "New Catholic Knowledge Class" that fosters--a more centralized and bureaucratic Church that "seeks out" and is sought by certain compatible cultural constellations and individuals characterized by certain social-psychological orientations to the world. The cultural constellations are those of Vatican II theology and the American Civil Religion and, to lesser extent, a theology of liberation characterized by their exponents as Biblical, universal, world-affirming, ecumenical, democratic, abstract, and comprehensive, and concerned with the enactment of justice in the world in the name of the one God. The "appropriate" social-psychological orientations on the part of such Catholic individuals are twofold. The first is that of the "organizational man" mentality of bureaucrats adept in the planning and implementing of rational system-wide programs of reform. The other is a highly developed sense of individuality that incorporates into its overall worldview many components not specifically Catholic, such as humanism, Marxism, existentialism, or Freudianism. It is the rather expansive and differentiated orientation that

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