

Chapter 6

The Catholic Awakening

In the early 1960s, another grand confluence of historic events was also conspiring to transform the U.S. Catholic Church into an influential voice of conscience in the mainstream of American social and political life. These events were the Second Vatican Council, the election of President John F. Kennedy, and the African-American civil rights movement.

Catholics who grew up before Vatican II were most struck by the council's liturgical reforms. The altar was turned around, so that the priest faced the people. The Mass was said in the local language—not Latin—so that everyone could participate more fully. These internal changes in the Church were also symbolic of the changes that occurred in the Church's stance toward the world. The documents of Vatican II urged Catholics to turn the eyes of faith out toward the secular world—to see where God was at work there and to see where God's people were called to serve.

In the United States, this message of openness to the larger world struck especially fertile ground. For almost two hundred years, American Catholics had been turned inward. The primary focus of the Church was on self-defense and on the education and assimilation of millions of Catholic immigrants in a strange land. In the 1950s, most recent European Catholic immigrant families were starting a third generation in this country. Children and grandchildren had grown up speaking English and participating

in American culture. Catholics had participated in World War II, and white Catholics were reaping the benefits of the postwar economy that vastly expanded the American middle class. Vatican II came at precisely the time when American Catholicism was ready to poke its head out of the bunker and venture beyond its ecclesial walls.

This sense of arrival in the mainstream of American life was embodied by the election of John Kennedy as the country's first Catholic president. After assuring Protestant voters that neither the pope nor Cardinal Cushing would direct his policies, the young, wealthy, charismatic Irishman moved into the White House with his beautiful wife and adorable children. It was a new beginning for the whole country, but it was a shifting of epochs for U.S. Catholics.

The hottest domestic issue facing the young president (and his even younger brother, Attorney General Robert Kennedy) was the nonviolent freedom movement of Southern blacks and the violent resistance it was receiving from Southern whites. President Kennedy waffled a bit at first, but before long, he brought his administration down solidly on the side of desegregation and full legal equality for Southern blacks.

Vatican II also spoke clearly on the question of racism. The document on *The Church in the Modern World* stated, “. . . any kind of . . . discrimination in basic personal rights on the grounds of sex, race, color, social conditions, language or religion, must be curbed and eradicated as incompatible with God's design.” The same document carried this call to action: “A duty most appropriate in our times, especially for Christians, is to work untiringly to . . . ensure the recognition and implementation everywhere of everyone's right to human and civil culture in harmony with personal dignity, without distinction of race, sex, nation, religion, or social circumstances.”

Suddenly, after a very long silence, the voices of American Catholic leaders could be heard speaking out for racial equality

and an end to racial discrimination. Equally important in the TV age, Roman collars and nun's habits were visible on the front lines of civil rights marches and sit-ins. Father James Groppi of Milwaukee became a civil rights celebrity for a time. Father Theodore Hesburgh, president of Notre Dame, served on the Civil Rights Commission investigating brutality and repression in the South. Father William Morrissey, a white Josephite priest, became the vice president of the Mississippi NAACP. Catholic schools throughout the South desegregated, years before the public schools.

And it wasn't just Catholic clergy who were taking a public stand. A white Southern Catholic layman, John Howard Griffin, became famous for his book, *Black Like Me*, an account of his travels through the South disguised as a Negro (partly by skin dyes that seriously damaged his health). White Catholic laywoman Viola Liuzzo of Detroit became a martyr of the movement. She was shot and killed by Alabama Klansmen while participating in the Selma to Montgomery march for voting rights.

For the most part, Catholics were not in the vanguard of the freedom campaigns. The black Protestants of the South supplied the spiritual core of the movement and most of its foot soldiers. The U.S. labor unions and mainline Protestant Churches made the greatest commitment of funds. But still, the Catholic presence was there, and notably so. During slavery, America's bishops had seen that social evil as a purely partisan political question. During most of the Jim Crow years, the Catholic Church in the South had treated segregation as a local custom that had to be tolerated. What had changed to cause a Church, which for two centuries had been timid to downright apathetic on race, at last to take its place in the struggle to right America's great wrong?

Part of the answer can be found in the confidence that came with Catholic's new respectability in American society. Another part can be found in the theological mandate for social action

contained in the documents of Vatican II. The religious tone of the civil rights movement itself certainly helped dissolve the objection that acting for racial justice was “meddling in politics.” At least as important, however, was the experience of nearly a century of Catholic ministry with African-Americans, in the South and elsewhere. This gave a significant number of white Catholic clergy a firsthand experience of the oppression faced by black people and allowed them to see for themselves that racism against blacks was entirely different in kind and degree from the prejudices white ethnic Catholics might have faced in the past.

In the South and in the inner cities of the North, Catholic clergy who served African-American parishes and communities took the lead in bringing Catholics into the movement, and they pulled their bishops and some of their white Catholic brothers and sisters along after them.

The American Church Finds Its Voice

More than most American institutions, the U.S. Catholic Church was permanently transformed by the upheaval of the 1960s. The Church’s social and political stance was revolutionized. The Church’s leadership was now able to see that political and economic questions were also moral and religious ones. For decades, Catholic political action meant trying to get government money for parochial schools. That continued, but now open housing, welfare policy, and the rights of migrant workers were also “Catholic” social issues.

In 1969, the U.S. bishops’ conference established the Campaign for Human Development to attack the root causes of poverty, mostly through helping the poor organize to pursue their own interests. In the 1970s, the bishops began a series of pastoral letters on public questions. These were aimed at sketching, for the Catholic faithful and for policy-makers, the outlines of

new, genuinely Catholic social and political morality in the U.S. The bishops began at the beginning, with the problem of race.

The distance the Church still had left to travel on racial issues was evident in the title of that first document—*Brothers and Sisters to Us*. That unfortunate choice implied that both the speakers (the bishops) and the audience (American Catholics)—the “us” of the title—were exclusively white and needing to reach out to those nonwhite “others.” It wasn’t even accurate with regard to the speakers, since by 1979 (when the letter was issued) there were African-American bishops.

The title was especially unfortunate because the actual text gave a thorough analysis of racism that integrated Catholic Christian theology and ethics with the insights of history, psychology, and economics. In excerpts that follow, the document drew especially on three of the long-standing core principles of Catholic social teaching.

(1) The dignity of the human person:

Racism is a sin; a sin that divides the human family, blots out the image of God among specific members of that family, and violates the fundamental human dignity of those called to be children of the same Father. Racism is the sin that says some human beings are inherently superior and others essentially inferior because of race. It is the sin that makes racial characteristics the determining factor for the exercise of human rights. It mocks the words of Jesus: “Treat others the way you would have them treat you.” Indeed, racism is more than a disregard for the words of Jesus; it is a denial of the truth of the dignity of each human being revealed by the mystery of the Incarnation.

(2) The ties of solidarity that bind the human family:

Racism is not merely one sin among many; it is a radical evil that divides the human family and denies the new creation of a redeemed world. To struggle against it demands an

equally radical transformation, in our own minds and hearts as well as in the structure of our society.

(3) The preferential option for the poor:

The new forms of racism must be brought face-to-face with the figure of Christ. It is Christ's word that is the judgment on this world; it is Christ's cross that is the measure of our response; and it is Christ's face that is the composite of all persons but in a most significant way of today's poor, today's marginal people, today's minorities.

In *Brothers and Sisters to Us*, the bishops also recognized the deep interconnection of racial divisions and economic injustice:

Racism and economic oppression are distinct but interrelated forces which dehumanize our society. Movement toward authentic justice demands a simultaneous attack on both evils. . . . Many times the new face of racism is the computer print-out, the graph of profits and losses, the pink slip, the nameless statistic. Today's racism flourishes in the triumph of private concern over public responsibility, individual success over social commitment, and personal fulfillment over authentic compassion. The difficulties of these new times demand a new vision and a renewed courage to transform our society and achieve justice for all. We must fight for the dual goals of racial and economic justice with determination and creativity. There must be no turning back along the road of justice, no sighing for bygone times of privilege, no nostalgia for simple solutions from another age. For we are the children of the age to come, when the first shall be last and the last shall be first, when blessed are they who serve Christ the Lord in all His brothers and sisters, especially those who are poor and suffer injustice.

In this document, and in other teachings of the Church, U.S. Catholics of the twenty-first century have been given a clear imperative to examine their individual consciences for complicity

ity with racism (or worse) and to act publicly for racial justice and equality in their parishes and communities, and in their nation. In future chapters we'll explore the practical implications that can be drawn from this clear pastoral direction.

No longer can any Catholic say that racism is a “political” question outside the authority of the Church. If the U.S. bishops aren't enough, it's right there in the official Catechism from the Vatican:

The equality of men rests essentially on their dignity as persons and the rights that flow from it: Every form of social or cultural discrimination in fundamental personal rights on the grounds of sex, race, color, social conditions, language, or religion must be curbed and eradicated as incompatible with God's design (#1935).

Access to employment and to professions must be open to all without unjust discrimination: men and women, healthy and disabled, natives and immigrants. For its part society should, according to circumstances, help citizens find work and employment (#2433).