

# The Real Problems of the American Church

Much of the noise concerning American Catholicism has been made by a special few about troubles of a special kind. That does not mean that there are no problems; there are—but they are not the ones usually talked about

If we are to believe certain commentators, things are getting progressively worse in the American Church. We are told that more and more Catholics are going through "crises of faith." We are warned that there is a revolt against the "conspiracy of silence." We are informed that the laity are growing restless about clerical domination, and that anticlericalism is on the increase. We are informed that unless the Church changes its present stand on birth control, large numbers of people will leave it. We are exhorted to practice "honesty" in ecclesiastical life before it is too late. We are advised that Catholic schools are in "trouble" because of the rapidly growing lay criticism. Clearly, if the commentators are to be believed, we have much to worry about.

It seems to me that these kinds of worries have two things in common. First of all, there is precious little evidence to back any of them up. Secondly, there is not much that can be done about them. They constitute the sort of theoretical and high-level concern that delights the heart of the professional viewers-with-alarm; but, for all their unquestioned merits as conversational material, they do not indicate any direction that practical policy may take.

I must confess I find myself thinking that these "problems" are not the real ones in American Catholicism. Crises of faith, the quest for honesty, the revolt against silence, complaints about parochial schools, the rise of anticlericalism—these are problems of the very, very few and do not at this time and prob-

ably never will affect the American Church to any considerable extent. Indeed, as far as the crisis-of-faith phenomenon goes, I suspect it is probably much less a problem among Catholic intellectuals now than it was twenty years ago.

But lest Mr. John Leo should accuse me of a sunny and trouble-free view of Catholicism, let me affirm that the American Church has immense problems—not the kind that threaten the existence of the Church, but the kind that can greatly impede its work and may cause it to miss many of the golden opportunities of the present age.

These difficulties are much more specific and much more concrete than those presented by the high-level worrier. They are also the sort of thing it is possible to do something about. I trust I have said enough in other writings about the healthy and dynamic state of the American Church to insure that my impressionistic comments about serious problems will not be viewed as either pessimism or despair. Even though simple-minded men like Mr. Leo may not believe it possible, one can be quite optimistic about the health and vitality of the American Church and at the same time feel that the Church has tremendous and almost staggering problems to face.

In any summary catalogue of the challenges faced by the American Church, one must necessarily be concise: the nuances and qualifications this article properly requires would fill a book rather than just a few pages.

The first set of problems are problems of structure. Despite fashionable complaints, the Church is not top-heavy. It is bottom-heavy. My non-Catholic colleagues in social science are constantly astonished by the Church's attempt to direct its many activities with an incredibly small number of administrative and planning personnel. Administrators are terribly overworked; they must make all kinds of decisions that should be delegated to lower-level administrators, and have little time for research and planning about long-range policy. It is even more astonishing that the tremendous organizational revolution launched within the Church by the Second Vatican Council has not as yet led to a notable increase in either the size or the competencies of ecclesiastical staffs. It is a near miracle that the Church, as a human organization, functions and even grows with the present limited staff available to it; but there seems no real reason why this state of affairs should continue.

Again, non-Catholic scholars are astonished that the first tentative beginning of the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate represents the only national research and policy-planning body the Church has. If on the local level there is anything similar, its existence is a carefully kept secret. One very prominent ecclesiastic said several years ago that the Catholic Church need not plan for the future but can leave that to the Holy Spirit. There are at least some of us who might think that this attitude was very close to what the

moral theology books used to call *tentatio Dei*.

It is, of course, possible for staffs to become unwieldy and bureaucratic. But this need not happen, and the present problem in the American Church is not that we have too many people on our staffs, but that we have not nearly enough to handle the complex administrative and planning problems that such a vast and diversified institution must face.

The second aspect of the structural problem is related to the first. Because the administrative staffs are generally numerically inadequate, administrative decisions must necessarily be made at the top levels. Thus, a bishop and his assistants must supervise an entire diocese—a virtually impossible task in a diocese that has several hundred parishes. Despite all the Church's talk about the principle of subsidiary function, there exist no intermediate bodies between the diocesan curia and the local parish—bodies that could be entrusted with the making of many lesser decisions that need not be referred to the highest authority. Paradoxically, the decentralization of decision-making power actually gives the central institution more power than it had before, because it can then ignore minor problems and concentrate its resources on the truly major questions that face the diocese as a whole. The principle of subsidiary function is not merely an ethically valid principle; it is also one that works in practice, because it increases the administrative efficiency of an institution.

A third structural problem is connected with the second. For many reasons, including lack of viable intermediary bodies, the processes of communication, consultation and information gathering proceed at a very slow rate within the Church. For example, it is difficult for a bishop to know what his priests and people are thinking, and it is often equally difficult for the people and the priests to understand what the problems of the bishop and his staff are. At this point in the development of the Church's canonical structure, there are no institutionalized channels by which bishop, clergy and people can talk among themselves and share their ideas and problems. While there is a good deal of talk about the establishment of

consultative institutions and the development of public opinion within the Church, this talk has in only very few instances been turned into concrete action. The result is that decisions must be made and policies implemented by people who are forced to operate largely in the dark. What is surprising is not that there have been misunderstandings, but that there have not been many more misunderstandings.

It is to be hoped that no one will say the new emphasis on consultation and communication diminishes the authority of the decision-maker. Quite the contrary, a decision-maker who has better means of gathering information from his subordinates will be a stronger and more efficient one.

**T**he second set of problems the Church faces are problems of personnel. Perhaps the most acute of these, at least for the clergy, is to be found in the seniority system, which in many places does not permit a man to assume a position of responsibility until he is relatively far along in years and then keeps him in this position until he is removed by death, even though long before his death his competency may have approached zero. Because of the seniority system and the absence of a retirement policy, some men of undeniable virtue and good will are no longer competent at their jobs, frustrate the work of their subordinates and do serious harm to the institution for which they are responsible.

In the meantime, younger men are kept in a position of dependency, where they are unable to make decisions and cannot achieve any sense of personal security or growth toward maturity. Under such circumstances, their decision-making talents atrophy, and when at last they succeed to power and responsibility, they in turn feel threatened and insecure, and are quite frequently incompetent. Furthermore, at one time the problems of a church and of ecclesiastical administration may have been simple enough for one all-wise and all-knowing Father to make all the necessary decisions. But this time has long since passed. The concentration of all the power and authority in an institution in the hands of one person succeeds only in isolating that person from

his subordinates and from the rank and file members of the institution. His position becomes awkward, lonely and virtually untenable. The lonely pastor or the lonely superior, cut off from his assistants and his people, thrust into a job for which he was not trained, and feeling threatened by the fact that his decision-making powers have been stunted, is a sad and indeed pitiable figure. While we may well be impatient with the mistakes he makes and dissatisfied with his hesitancy and lack of vision, we cannot help sympathizing with the impossible position he has been placed in.

There are no simple answers to this question of authority and responsibility in the Church. But answers at least can be found, and it ought to be clear that mere longevity is not a sufficient qualification for assuming a decision-making role.

Closely related to the use of authority over ecclesiastical personnel is the problem of training such personnel. There is no need in this article to do more than mention the seminary question, which is currently being discussed on all sides. At least one point, however, ought to be emphasized: in large metropolitan regions, the Church is increasingly engaged in a good deal of "cross cultural" work in communities of poverty and cultural deprivation. It is a grotesque mistake to assume that a middle-class young man or woman who has received no special training for this kind of missionary work can be placed in such a situation and be expected to react in a healthy and intelligent way. No missionary order in the world would make the mistake of sending its personnel to the mission fields without training, and the large archdioceses must face the fact that they are going to be in the missionary business for a long time to come and must train some of their personnel intensively for this business.

The third set of problems have to do with the "crises of growth" in the Church. Growth situations have immense revolutionary potential. As the historian Crane Brinton has pointed out, revolutions do not occur in times of stagnation; they occur in periods of growth when something or someone causes the growth to slow down or stop. Revolutions, in short, are a failure of safety-valve mechanisms in time of

dramatic change. While thus far the American Church has successfully avoided any serious revolutionary crises, one would be naive to think that the danger is not present and will not continue to be present for some time to come. The problem is not so much that the younger clergy and laity and religious will push too far, too fast, but rather that at least some people in positions of responsibility and authority will feel threatened and become panicky as the pace of change accelerates their efforts to "slow things down" or "put the lid back on"; and this could create a far more serious and far more dangerous situation than the one that actually exists.

Part of this problem results from the "cultural lag" that exists among certain leaders within the Church. At least some people in positions of responsibility and authority do not really understand the forces that have been unleashed by the Ecumenical Council and are not in sympathy with them. When faced with subordinates who understand the meaning of the Council and are terribly excited by the *aggiornamento*, those members of the older generation (who are either ill-informed or unsympathetic) find themselves in a position where they can avoid dissension and conflict only with considerable skill. The leader who is shrewd enough politically to trust his followers and to give them as much free rein as he can is much less likely to have difficulty than the suspicious leader who feels afraid and insecure in the face of change he does not understand. A difficulty also exists when a leader has intellectual conviction in support of the *aggiornamento* but lacks the vision or the know-how to implement his conviction. He is sympathetic with change but, because he doesn't know how to activate the sympathy, he insists on going slow.

The restlessness among the members of the young generation whom I have referred to as the New Breed may aggravate this crisis of growth. Not only are they constantly agitating for change, but they are often doing so in a language and a style that a superior may not understand and that can make him feel more threatened than he already felt. It is my impression that this problem of the New Breed versus the Old

Guard may well be more serious in seminaries and in religious communities (particularly of women) than in either dioceses or parishes. As a matter of fact, certain religious orders seem to be on the verge of splitting wide open over the question of modernization. Unless those in positions of responsibility in these situations are extremely sophisticated and mature in dealing with the restlessness within their communities, we may have a fair number of very messy conflicts on our hands. While I find myself troubled by the inflexibility of the demands of some members of the New Breed, I would nevertheless be inclined to say that when the messes eventually develop, they must to some extent be attributed to insensitive, unperceptive and insecure leaders. From the social science point of view, I am compelled to say that social movements (and make no mistake about it, the *aggiornamento* is a real wing-ding of a social movement) cannot be stopped once they have begun. They may be channeled, they may be directed, they may be guided, but attempts to stop them or even to slow them behind their natural pace are usually a sure-fire guarantee of trouble. Movements must move, and the shrewd and sophisticated leader faced with a social movement among his followers quickly takes the advice of the ancient Irish political adage: "If you can't beat them, join them."

**T**he "growth crisis" is also aggravated by the inevitable arrival of a "lunatic fringe." In every transitional situation, there appear a few unbalanced and immature individuals who do not understand what is going on and adopt extremist poses to demonstrate how "progressive" they are. No particular harm is done by these people so long as they are the only ones who think they are leaders. Those with responsibility, however, occasionally find it difficult to distinguish between the real prophet and the madman. The lunatic fringe is still small within the American Church and probably will be prevented from doing serious harm, but it can still create a good deal of mischief.

The Church also has its problems of "lay personnel." For a wide variety of social and historical reasons, the elite members of the laity, especially those

who can make some valid claim to be intellectuals, find themselves strongly tempted to alienation from the main body of the Church structure. Their interests, aspirations and goals are so different from those of the ordinary laity (and clergy) that they find much of what goes on in Catholic life quite unacceptable. Such a reaction is understandable and inevitable; the restlessness of the intelligentsia is a strong prod to the Church's institutional conscience and an important source of creative suggestions. But the friction involved in the present uncomfortable relationship between intelligentsia and structure is not without its dangers. Those in positions of responsibility must seek to develop new modes of participation in the life of the Church where the growing lay elite can make its proper contribution. Not to do so might lead to an inexcusable waste of talent and energy.

On the other hand, there is at least some question as to the extent to which alienation is a valid reaction to a difficult situation and the extent to which it is a self-conscious pose that may be preserved long after it has any relationship to reality. Alienation from the ecclesiastical structure and antagonism toward it may often be a means of releasing aggressions (toward father figures) or luxuriating in self-pity. The lay intellectual is often tempted to feel snobbish when he looks at the great unwashed mass of American Catholics who are not fortunate enough to be as intellectual as he (and then, of course, is further tempted to blame Catholic schools). He is tempted to wonder whether it is not dangerous for him to become too closely associated with the Church structure; for example, John Cogley, normally an extraordinarily balanced and perceptive writer, recently raised a clarion call of warning to his fellow "lay thinkers" about the dangers of being too friendly with bishops. I suppose that there are some dangers involved in "lay thinkers" being friendly with bishops, but it appears to me that it might be more dangerous for the bishops than for the "lay thinkers."

But far more serious than the alienation of the elite is the apathy of the masses, including the "educated" masses. A good deal of the indifference of Catholics to the work of the Church

(beyond Sunday Mass, Catholic education, and certain moral restraints) can be attributed to the fact that until very recently lay people could have thought with every justification that the Church was a clerical affair, and that no lay help was wanted or needed. Nevertheless, a tremendous amount of work must be done if the laity are to be persuaded that the Church is theirs and that they must assume responsibility for its work and its goals. In the National Opinion Research Center's study of attitudes toward Catholic schooling, for example, despite the increased lay representation on parochial school boards, we could find no evidence that there was much popular demand for such representation. Only one per cent of the Catholic adult population and only seven per cent of the readers of the *Commonweal* believe that an important improvement in Catholic education would be greater parental participation and administration of the schools. While there are a fair number of "educated" laity who are quite willing to criticize the Church (and especially its education), those who are willing to assume responsibility are still pathetically few. One suspects that, for a long time to come, the major task of the lay apostolate will be to convince the laity that there is one.

**A**t the root of many of the other problems is the lack of theoretical perspectives to enable us to understand the American Catholic phenomenon. One would gather from the almost complete lack of interest in the subject that there is no such thing as a valid history of American Catholicism—at least nothing beyond oversimplified references to "lay trusteeism" and obscure allusions to "Americanism." While we have a wealth of first-rate Scripture scholars and an increasing number of competent dogmatic theologians, there is yet to evolve an "American school" of theology that would provide the theoretical underpinnings for practical work.

Pastoral theology is nonexistent; presumably the old goal of preserving the faith and loyalty of the immigrant is no longer operative, but many of the pastoral techniques still in use are apparently directed toward such goals. We

have not even begun to develop a "spirituality of affluence" that would show what the virtue of poverty would look like in a society of permanent prosperity and abundance. Despite all the ferment in the catechetical and liturgical fields, progress toward evolving comprehensive theories in these areas has been very slow, largely because, as one prominent liturgist put it, there is little profound scholarship from which to build theories.

The marriage-education movements, whose approach was so long based on opposition to both family planning and the working wife, and emphasis on the differences between the sexes, now find themselves desperately searching for a new direction. Their tentative probings into crucial problems of the meaning of sexuality and the role of woman in the modern world have not as yet been particularly successful. In the meantime, Pre-Cana Conferences are rapidly falling from favor among the younger generation.

In the absence of competent scholarship and sound theoretical development, that which passes for theory in the American Church is often served up by popular journalists who have stepped into the vacuum. No one would deny the immense contribution these men have made, but it is to be hoped that the era will soon come to an end when they are the only ones contributing theory for the American Church.

Not the least important theoretical debate is that raging about use of freedom and authority. It often seems that at least some of the advocates of freedom feel that freedom means an absence of rules and regulations, while some of the defenders of authority apparently argue that rules and regulations are necessary to create virtue. Perhaps both sides fail to understand the nature of law and the nature of virtue. The purpose of law is to create and maintain external order to promote the common good, to prevent one man or a group of men from interfering with the right to freedom of another man or group of men. But law cannot create virtue; it can only produce a climate where virtue is possible. Virtue results from the repetition of free human acts and cannot be compelled by law or constrained by force. Spirituality cannot be developed by the drill method formerly

used in teaching the multiplication tables.

Pressures, either crude or sophisticated, to obtain conformity do not produce either virtue or freedom. Thus, for example, the practice so prevalent in many parishes of forcing children to go to Mass every day or to confession every Thursday before First Friday are intolerable abuses of human freedom and a poor substitute for development of conviction and virtue. But such practices enable pastors to feel they are developing "good habits" in children. It is astonishing that generations of experience with the disappearance of these good habits have not persuaded anyone of the utter folly of virtue by compulsion.

**S**imilarly, the practice in certain inner-city mission parishes of compelling parents to come to inquiry classes and to go to Sunday Mass if they wish their children to enter Catholic schools seems quite inexcusable, no matter how effective it is as a means of making converts. Many of those who are most restless in demanding freedom in the Church are apparently not willing to concede this freedom to others, once they themselves have positions of responsibility.

Freedom implies respect for the dignity, the uniqueness, the privacy of each human being. It is the right of every human personality to grow at its own pace and in its own direction, according to the guidance of the Holy Spirit (so long as this growth does not interfere with the rights of someone else). Until full recognition of this right is widespread in the Church, we shall continue to face the problem of the charismatic innovator who, once his movement becomes established, draws up a rigorous party line that the rank and file must follow or risk expulsion. It is always easy to talk, however, about how other people abuse our freedom and to ignore the abuses of freedom that we ourselves are guilty of.

Certain other problems should be mentioned in passing. It would seem, first of all, that we might be able to learn much from our Jewish brothers about fund-raising and financial problems. There is reason to think that the increasing affluence of the Catholic

population is not reflected in the financial condition of the Church; the reason for this might not be so much that people are less generous, but that the Church's fund-raising has not kept pace with the change in the population.

The problem of religious and priestly vocations is apparently growing more serious. For many reasons (not unconnected with matters already discussed in this article), the religious and priestly life does not attract as many of the best young people in the country as it did a generation ago.

The inner city apostolate in the large dioceses is in considerable trouble as the younger generation begins to question seriously the assumptions of the Young Turks of a generation ago about the role of the Church in the inner city. Although volunteer programs such as Extension, PAVLA and CALM are a step in the right direction, we still have not found the kind of youth movement that seriously challenges the enthusiasm and dedication of the most talented young people from the high schools and colleges.

Finally, there is the secret problem about which nobody speaks, the problem of the ethnic groups. One Protestant summed this problem up beautifully when he said: "Long after the ecumenical movement has solved the difficulties separating Protestants and Catholics, it will still be struggling with the tensions that separate Irish Catholics and Polish Catholics."

The litany of problems in this article is a long one. If none of them is insoluble, neither does any of them admit of an easy solution. While one can be very optimistic about the future of the American Church, there would hardly be any justification for beginning a new cult of St. Pollyanna. The problems we face are serious—in some instances terribly serious. They are serious not because they threaten American Catholicism with major destruction, but because they present a kind of impediment that could seriously weaken the Church's impact during perhaps the most exciting period in its whole history.

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