

The Conflicted Legacy of American Catholicism



Timothy Flanders

The French Revolution and its daughter movements defined the social question of the 19th century, which, as I have noted [elsewhere](#), the Magisterium from Pius VI to Pius XII answered with authority and clarity. But, as Pope Benedict observed in his famous “hermeneutic of continuity” address in 2005, it was the legacy of the American republic ultimately that enabled the sea change of Catholic social and political policy at Vatican II:

In the 19th century under Pius IX, the clash between the Church’s faith and a radical liberalism and the natural sciences ... had elicited from the Church a bitter and radical

condemnation of this spirit of the modern age. Thus, it seemed that there was no longer any milieu open to a positive and fruitful understanding, and the rejection by those who felt they were the representatives of the modern era was also drastic.

In the meantime, however, the modern age had also experienced developments. People came to realize that the American Revolution was offering a model of a modern State that differed from the theoretical model with radical tendencies that had emerged during the second phase of the French Revolution. ...

So it was that both parties were gradually beginning to open up to each other. In the period between the two World Wars and especially after the Second World War, Catholic statesmen demonstrated that a modern secular State could exist that

was not neutral regarding values but alive, drawing from the great ethical sources opened by Christianity. [1]

So it was that the American republic — with its subdued secularism in comparison to the guillotine of the French lies of “liberty, equality, and fraternity” — convinced, in no small part, the partisans of the New Springtime that Jacques Maritain’s vision could become a reality. Therefore it is of the utmost importance for Catholics who seek to investigate the effects of the Vatican II springtime to evaluate the legacy of the American republic as it regards the social and political doctrine of the Church, especially in the foundational error of the separation of Church and State, which we will return to below.

The Conflict between Conformity and Non-Conformity

As Charles Coulombe observed recently:

One of the unfortunate realities ... of American Immigrant Catholicism [is that] we settled for being accepted rather than evangelizing. Sort of a tacit deal: “We won’t make

too much of a noise about our Catholic faith if we're accepted and allowed our place at the table.”

Except for places with a pre-1776 dominant Catholicism — like the formerly New Spain American southwest and the formerly New France New Orleans — by and large, the Catholicism of America was of immigrants. This meant that at best, they created ethnic ghettos and national parishes speaking their mother tongue with little influence on American Protestant society. At worst, they were immigrants seeking acceptance *at any cost* — including the Catholic faith and identity. The impetus to convert all of America and the whole republic into a Catholic republic that submits to Christ the King was greatly hindered by this conflict.

We can generalize to say that the legacy of American Catholicism was conflicted between conformity to the Protestant American society and non-conformity to it, taking refuge in ethnic enclaves. The Irish immigrants led by prelates such as John Ireland and James Gibbons dominated the conformity party. The German immigrants dominated the non-conformity party. A third force in this legacy was those Catholics who accepted wholeheartedly the fundamental doctrines expounded by the *Pian Magisterium* (1799–1958) and sought to convert America to Christ the King.

Chief among these was the German-language American Catholic newspaper *Der Wanderer*, founded by Joseph Matt in 1867. This paper sought to counter the conformity party and helped to coin the term “Americanism” to level against these Catholics, including many in the hierarchy. They represented those Germans who sought not to *hide* in their ethnic ghettos, but to use their ethnic Catholic identity as a means to spread the faith in a hostile world.

On the other hand, the shibboleth of the conforming party was the separation of Church and State. This error had been condemned by multiple popes and subjected to papal mockery as being “absolutely ridiculous” [2]. Nevertheless, the conforming party sought acceptance from the Protestant American society, and the price of that acceptance was to believe in the condemned error “that the Church should be separated from the state, and the state from the Church” [3]. This was seen as being “patriotic,” while the non-conforming party were viewed by most Americans as political threats to the so-called “[Native Americans](#).”

But even in the face of this wider hostility, Gleason notes, the non-conforming party was willing to be hated by American society because it believed that “[t]he liberals were too complacent, too satisfied with the status quo; they glossed over the defects and shortcomings of American life and were insufficiently critical of the blemishes on the American scene. The liberal Catholics ... were so bedazzled by the supposed

excellencies of the American way that they believed ‘we have no Social Question’” [4].

This American “social question” (like its aforementioned European counterpart) covered conflicts regarding politics and economic struggles (the strong conflict between the rise of American communism and the traditionally Catholic labor unions, which the Germans supported), but also the more fundamental price tag we mentioned, which was highlighted by [popular German priest](#) Rev. Anton Heiter (d. 1911) of Buffalo, N.Y.:

In listing the symptoms of social sickness in America, Heiter included not only the menace of socialism, the “gigantic strikes” of the recent past, and the existence of trusts and monopolies, but also several other points not usually considered part of the social question by Progressive reformers. The separation of Church and State, the reduction of religion to the sphere of private conscience and its exclusion from the realm of public

affairs — these Heiter considered the most telling indications that we did indeed have a social question in the United States. [5]

The social question was part of the larger dispute over the other condemned error that “the Roman Pontiff can, and ought to, reconcile himself, and come to terms with progress, liberalism and modern civilization” [6]. The foundational element of modern government was the separation of Church and State, wherein, it was asserted, there could be a common, positive society built on a disparity of cult with heretics and Jews.

Nota bene: this was not the *pragmatic toleration* of religious differences for the sake of peace and the common good, which had a long tradition in Catholic states. This was, rather, the suppression of what even *Dignitatus Humanae* calls “the moral duty of men and societies toward the true religion and toward the one Church of Christ” (1). If such is the moral duty of the society, there can never be a true separation of Church and State. Nevertheless, the conformist party pressed for this in its thirst for acceptance.

“Americanism” Condemned

When “Americanism” was condemned by Leo XIII in 1899, *Der Wanderer* and the others in the non-conformist party saw themselves as vindicated, for this

document from the Holy Father himself summed up the ideological foundations they sought to overcome in the American Church (including the hierarchy):

The underlying principle of these new opinions [of Americanism] is that, in order to more easily attract those who differ from her, the Church should shape her teachings more in accord with the spirit of the age and relax some of her ancient severity and make some concessions to new opinions. [7]

Remarkably, as *Der Wanderer* observed with relish, the document was so close to what their newspaper had already been printing for nearly a decade that it was almost as if the pontiff's words had been ghostwritten by German Americans! But it does not appear that the German anti-conformist movement was able to suppress the conformist influence against the aforementioned prelates and their successors. Even in 1922, Arthur Preuss (d. 1934), in another German lay publication, could lament:

“Americanism,” solemnly condemned by Leo XIII is not yet dead in this country[.] ...

[These ideas] are wide-spread and constitute a grave danger to Catholicity in a country where so many are inclined to put “patriotism” above religion. [8]

The Brief Triumph of the Non-Conformists

Nevertheless, the 1920s served as a turning point in the efforts of the non-conformists. This era of Prohibition was also one of social revolution, wherein the enemies of Christ sought to overturn the basic fabric of Christian morals. This revolution eventually reached an apex in the later part of the decade, when Hollywood began producing sexually explicit films that shocked the conscience of Americans both Protestant and Catholic.

After the Protestants failed to contain this menace, the Catholic Church showed a remarkable cultural cohesion in organizing a boycott of Hollywood. This was able to force the Production Code beginning in 1934, as Black details, suppressing pornography and all glorification of evil from Hollywood. This was the era of the League of Decency, approved of and applauded by [several popes](#), which spread to other countries as well [9].

Without a doubt, this social power wielded by Catholics showed them to be — even in an officially secular, largely Protestant country like America — truly a force to be reckoned with. Here they sought not only non-conformity, but a sort of evangelism that checked the

excesses of commercial “freedom” (read: license), subjecting it to the moral law of His Majesty.

But in a multi-ethnic society, the ethnic communities of Catholics were bound to their own Catholic faith through the enclaves they had built from the motherland, speaking the mother tongue. As Jones argues, the enemies of Christ targeted these communities in order to disarm the Catholics’ social power. Even more, at the dawn of the Second Vatican Council, the “ethnic ghettos” were ridiculed by the American conformists, as well as the *Nouvelle théologie* party led in part by Ratzinger (Barron ridicules them as “culturally defensive”).

The Conformists Win Back America and the Church

Ultimately the power and influence of the Masonic-secularist, Jewish, and Protestant socio-economic forces in America could never tolerate the non-conformist Catholics. They finally found their perfect pawn in the figure of fourth-generation Irish immigrant John F. Kennedy. He was the Catholic who publicly paid the price for acceptance: the denial of Christ the King:

I believe in an America where the separation of church and state is absolute — where no Catholic prelate

would tell the President (should he be a Catholic) how to act ... where no church or church school is granted any public funds or political preference — and where no man is denied public office merely because his religion differs from the President who might appoint him or the people who might elect him.

I believe in an America that is officially neither Catholic, Protestant nor Jewish — where no public official either requests or accepts instructions on public policy from the Pope ... where no religious body seeks to impose its will directly or indirectly upon the general populace or the public acts of its officials — and where religious liberty is so indivisible that an act against one church is treated as an act against all.

[10]

This betrayal of Christ the King is the essence of the “Catholic” enablers of child murder who say, “I am personally opposed to abortion, but...” As Michael Davis [said recently](#), “asserting the neutrality of any space is to deny the sovereignty of Christ the King over His own creation.”

It is true that the American Catholics had made great gains for the King through the League of Decency, but the forces of Vatican II springtime refused to listen to the warnings of the German-American legacy and its [theological allies at the Council](#), nor even to the [dire warnings](#) of Our Lady of Fatima herself.

Instead, as even Ratzinger would lament, “something of the Kennedy era pervaded the Council, something of the naïve optimism of the great society” [11]. Thus, the greatest achievements of American Catholicism were swiftly dismantled by the machinations of Christ’s enemies, who broke the Production Code, spurred on the sexual revolution, and finally imposed child murder on all the United States of America. The joyous New Springtime — having thrown the lot of the Church in with America as a “model of a modern State” — has been missing in action ever since. Indeed, if the partisans of springtime sought to distance themselves from the French Revolution by looking to the American, they must meticulously refute every ideology that unites and justifies them both. But this was the project of the Pian Magisterium, abandoned at Vatican II.

- [1] Christmas Address to the Roman Curia, 2005
- [2] Leo XIII, *Libertas* (1888), 21, 18
- [3] Bl. Pius IX, *Syllabus of Errors* (1864), no. 55
- [4] Gleason in *The Conservative Reformers: German American Catholics and the Social Order* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1968) quoted in “Skepticism of Americanism: A Tradition at The Wanderer” by Paul Likoudis, *The Wanderer*
- [5] Ibid.
- [6] *Syllabus*, no. 80
- [7] Leo XIII, *Testem Benevolentiae Nostrae* (1899)
- [8] Arthur Preuss, *The Fortnightly Review*, Vol. XXIX, No. 17 (Sep. 1, 1922), 324
- [9] This was also the era of classics such as *Citizen Kane*, still considered one of the greatest movies of all time.
- [10] John F. Kennedy, “Speech to the Southern Baptist Leadership,” *New York Times* (Sep. 13, 1960)
- [11] Joseph Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology* (Ignatius: 1987), 367

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Timothy Flanders

Timothy S. Flanders is the author of *Introduction to the Holy Bible for Traditional Catholics*. In 2019 he founded The Meaning of Catholic, a lay apostolate. He holds a degree in classical languages from Grand Valley State University and has done graduate work with the Catholic University of Ukraine. He lives in the Midwest with his wife and four children.

meaningofcatholic.com