

TRUTH, FREEDOM, TRADITION, FRONTIERS:  
PRESENTATIONS ON AMERICAN CATHOLIC HISTORY: PART IX  
OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES. RENEWAL AND DISSENT  
THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN AMERICA DURING THE ERA OF VATICAN II

I. The 1960s and 1970s and early 1980s saw an era of dramatic change in the Church both in the United States and throughout the world. There was at the same time interest, enthusiasm and reform, and also laxity, dissent and decadence.

II. The Vatican II Council called for both an adherence to traditional teachings and sacraments, and also new ways of practice and explaining the faith. The Church in America, as throughout the world, struggled to implement the reforms that it called for.

A. Throughout the Church, the Vatican II Council (1962 – 1965) made numerous changes to Catholic practices and governing structures, although the documents repeat continuously that the changes were reforms building upon what had gone before, not a revocation of tradition.

B. The documents on religious liberty (Dignitatis Humanae) and on ecumenism and interreligious dialogue (Unitatis Redintegratio and Nostra Aetate) were considered victories for the Church in America, which had been promoting these issues. Dignitatis Humanae is sometimes called the “American document” of the Council due to the fact that American bishops and theologians, such as Cardinal Francis Spellman of New York and Fr. John Courtney Murray had very large roles in drafting it.

C. After the Council, the Church in America, as with most of the world, implemented changes based upon the Council documents, but often struggled in how to do so.

1. Churches generally made the liturgical changes that were called for such as more homilies, simplicity in the liturgy and public participation. However, many unauthorized changes, such as altering the words of the Mass and using secular music, also came in. It should be noted that such changes as the priest facing the people and receiving Communion on the hands were not actually called for by the Council, but were allowed later.
2. There was some progress in the establishment of such things as youth groups, Bible studies and pastoral councils. However, some important Catholic practices such as Confession and praying the rosary or Stations of the Cross oddly declined despite the fact that there was nothing in the Council justifying that neglect. For example, according to one survey monthly confession declined from 38 % in 1963 to 17% just eight years later. In addition, many Churches took the Council’s call for focusing on simplicity and common prayer too far by getting rid of all or most of the sacred images in churches, and took the authorization for greater vernacular in the liturgies and a greater variety in music too far by getting rid of Latin and organ music altogether.

III. Catholic education also came into a crisis after the Council.

- A. In its decree on Christian education Gravissimum Educationis, the Council had called for an increase in emphasis on education and training in the faith, virtues and prayer, although certainly incorporating modern insights and knowledge.
- B. Despite this emphasis on Catholic education, the number of students in Catholic schools began declining during this time. In America, from 1965 to 1988, the number of Catholic elementary and primary schools declined from 13,396 to 9050 and enrollment declined from 5.1 million to 2.6 million. The enrollment at Catholic colleges and universities did increase from 385,000 to 564,000 during that time, although the number of such institutions declined from 304 to 233. But the Catholic identity of these institutions, as well as campus ministries, was often compromised to fit in more with the idea of being an American university.
- C. In the United States, this decline of Catholic identity was exemplified by the Land O' Lakes statement of 1967.
  1. In July 1967, 24 representatives from 10 Catholic universities, including Notre Dame, Georgetown and Boston College met in Land O' Lakes, Wisconsin and issued a statement that has come to be known as the Land O' Lakes statement. It basically called for allowing professors at Catholic universities to teach and publish what they think best without regard to consistency with Catholic teaching or practice.
  2. Although the statement was made by a small number of representatives, such organizations as the National Catholic Educational Association quickly took it up and it became a guiding principle at many Catholic universities.
  3. There were many others who objected this compromising tendency, including Msgr. John Kelly at St. John College and Cardinal John Krol of Philadelphia. In addition, some universities such as Christendom College in Virginia expressly rejected the statement. Likewise, at Franciscan University in Steubenville, Ohio, Fr. Michael Scanlon took over in 1974 and gradually restored the Catholic identity that had suffered in the previous decade.
- D. The Popes opposed this tendency to downplay the faith but it took some time for their calls to take effect.
  1. For example, in a speech in August, 1975, Pope Paul VI. said, "In recent years some Catholic universities have become convinced that they can better respond to the various problems of man and his world by playing down their own Catholic character. But what has been the effect of this trend? The principles and values of the Christian religion have been watered down and weakened; they have been replaced by a humanism which has turned out to be really a secularization. Morals within the university community have degenerated to the point where many young people no longer perceive the beauty and attractiveness of the Christian virtues." The Holy Father went on to call for a reversal of this trend. Catholic universities, he said, "must see to it that in the pursuit of their disciplines, in the

books they publish and in all other academic undertakings, they always foster the full integrity of Catholic doctrine, obedience to the Church's teaching authority and fidelity to the hierarchy and the Apostolic See."

2. In 1990, St. John Paul II issued his instruction Ex Corde Ecclesiae, which called for Catholic Universities to emphasize their Catholic identity, and for all theology professors to affirm allegiance to Church teachings.

IV. Dissent was already in the air in the mid-1960s. But it broke out in full force, both in the United States and throughout the Western world, when Pope Paul VI published Humanae Vitae in 1968, which upheld the Church's traditional views on artificial contraception and affirming that they apply to chemical methods in addition to barrier methods.

A. Pope St. John XXIII had appointed a commission to study the issue of whether the Church's historic teaching against artificial contraception applied to chemical methods. St. Pope Paul VI continued authorization for the commission, which had only an advisory role. Some members of the commission leaked to the press that the majority wanted to approve of chemical methods, and possibly any method, of artificial contraception in at least some cases. However, partially with the consultations from Archbishop Karol Wotyla of Krakow, Pope Paul VI forbade any artificial contraception, for the reasoning against barrier methods applied just as much to other methods.

B. There was immediate dissent on the part of many, and perhaps most, theologians in America. One prominent dissenter was Fr. Charles Curran of Catholic University, who increasingly opposed Church teaching on this and then on almost every area of sexual ethics. Although the University president, Msgr. James Hickey (later Archbishop of Washington) wanted to remove him, he was unsuccessful at the time. In 1986, after a lengthy correspondence, the Vatican forbade him from teaching theology.

C. In the Archdiocese of Washington, 40 priests immediately issued a letter dissenting from the teaching. Cardinal William Boyle at first suspended them. However, when they appealed to the Vatican, the Congregation on Clergy said that they could return to ministry if they made a private retraction. Even though the Vatican said that they must uphold Church teaching, the removal of the suspension was taken by many as permission for dissent.

V. With increased immigration, particularly from Latin America, the Catholic population increased in proportion to the general American public. However, the number of priests religious sisters declined dramatically.

A. According to the official Catholic Register, the number of Catholics in America increased to about 53 million by 1988, which was about 22% of the population, similar to the figure in 1965. (Other surveys have put the number as high as 67 million, which would be about 27% of the population; the difference may be due to people who were raised Catholic, no longer practice the faith, but still in some way identify with it.) There were at the same time both large losses from the Catholic ranks and increases from immigration, particularly from Latin America.

- B. On the one hand, many Catholics were leaving the faith. According to a recent Pew survey, 31.7 % of adult Americans were raised Catholic, but 12.9% of adult Americans are former Catholics, indicating that four in ten Catholics leave the faith. By contrast, 2% of Americans joined the Church as adults. It should be noted that Protestant groups and even the unaffiliated experience similar portions leaving, but they usually make up for most of the losses by gaining converts.
- C. The loss of Catholics from the Church has been countered by immigration, particularly from Latin America. The number of Hispanic Catholics in the United States increased from about 4.9 million in 1960 to about 13.3 million in 1987, or from about 10 percent of the Catholic population to about 20 percent. According to a recent survey, 34 % of American Catholics are now Hispanic. In addition, among American Catholics, 27 % are immigrants and another 15% are children of at least one immigrant. With the general public, 15% of the population is Hispanic, 15% are immigrants, and another 10% are children of at least one immigrant.
- D. The number of priests in America also declined from its height of about 59,000 in 1965-1970 to 54,000 in 1988 and about 38,000 today. One reason was that about 10,000 priests left orders in the 1960s through the 1980s. In addition, seminaries were often torn by dissent and doctrinal disputes. With the Vatican II Council authorizing married permanent deacons in the Latin rite, the number of married Latin permanent deacons in the United States has gone from none in 1965 to about 15,000 today.
- E. The decline in religious sisters was even more dramatic. In 1965, there were about 180,000 religious sisters. By 1988, there were 107,000 and there are about 50,000 now.
1. There was a crisis in religious life in America and throughout the West as many orders got rid of such things as community prayers, the habit, and adherence to a regular rule and also experienced a great deal of dissent for Church doctrine and authority.
  2. In 1992, approximately 120 communities from more traditional orders, including some new ones such as the Sisters of Life, the Franciscan Sisters of the Eucharist, and the Dominican Sisters of Mary, the Mother of the Eucharist, broke off from the Leadership Conference of Women Religious to form the Council of Major Superiors of Women religious. They have about 6000 sisters now, with about 1000 of them in formation.

VI. Amidst the struggles, there were signs of new hope as initiatives that would bring about a fresh start in the faith were beginning.

- A. Mother Angelica, a mother superior of the Poor Clares in Birmingham, who would found EWTN in 1980, was already becoming well known as a speaker and writer of small pamphlets, as well as the hostess of a local religious show in Birmingham.

- B. Small independent Catholic schools were beginning to form, including Seton School and Christendom College in the new Arlington Diocese in 1975 and 1977 respectively.
- C. The need to unite in the face of decadence and a decline of faith led the Christian denominations to cooperate more together. And the Catholic Church was central to these ecumenical efforts. After the Supreme Court mandated legalized abortions in 1973, the Catholic Church became central in the pro-life efforts, such as the Right to Life March first organized by Catholic convert Nellie Grey.
- D. The need to explain theology in the modern world and in the fact of much dissent did lead to great theological works by Americans, both clergy and lay. For example, Jesuit Father, later Cardinal, Avery Dulles was central in explaining the role of the Church in the world. Dietrich and Alice von Hildebrand developed theology of ethics in a more personalist light, as did Father John Hardon.

VII. Four Americans who demonstrated the progress of the Catholic Church in America in this era were Roberto Clemente, Father Vincent Capadanno, Servant of God Thea Bowman and Father Stanley Rother.

- A. Roberto Clemente (1934 – 1972) lived his faith both personally and through charitable works, dying in efforts to help others.
  - 1. Roberto Clemente Walker was the youngest of seven children born to a devoutly Catholic farming family in Puerto Rico. He worked in farming in high school, but also showed great talent in baseball.
  - 2. He began playing baseball for a professional league in Puerto Rico at the age of 18. Eventually, the Brooklyn Dodgers recognized his talents and brought him to one of their minor league teams. Due in large part to prejudice against Puerto Ricans, people at first did not appreciate his talents. But he persevered in dedication, and the Pittsburgh Pirates drafted him for their team in 1955.
  - 3. His play for the Pirates was brilliant. From 1961 onward, he consistently bat over .300 and was in the All Star Game every year except 1968. But he also faced much prejudice, for the racial barrier had just been broken by Jackie Robinson in 1948. There were also some unintentional insults such as calling him “Bob” or “Bobby,” a very non-Puerto Rican nickname. He also struggled to learn English, his native language being Spanish.
  - 4. Outside of baseball, he was very Catholic and patriotic. He married in 1964 and had three children. He and his wife Vera Sabala raised their children devoutly Catholic. He was also a reserve in the Marine Reserve from 1958 – 1964 and served in the off season.
  - 5. By 1970, he had developed Puerto Rican confidence to the point of the Pirate’s holding Roberto Clemente night, at which 300,000 Puerto Ricans came to Pittsburgh to celebrate his accomplishments.

6. During his time playing baseball, Roberto Clemente was increasingly involved in charitable work in Latin America. When an earthquake devastated Managua, Nicaragua in 1972, he arranged for emergency flights bringing aid. However, he learned that corrupt officials were stealing most of the assistance. And so, he personally accompanied the fourth flight to make sure that the assistance arrived to the people. At the time, the airplanes were not well kept, and these flights were difficult. The plane crashed on December 31, 1972, killing all on board.
  7. After his death, the MBA renamed the Commissioner's Award for charitable work as the Roberto Clemente Award. In 2013, Richard Rossi made a film about him named Baseball's Last Hero: 21 Roberto Clemente stories. There have been proposals for his canonization, with the apparent support of the Archbishop of Los Angeles Jose Gomez.
- B. Servant of God Father Vincent Capodanno (1929 – 1968) was a military chaplain who died heroically serving the armed forces in Vietnam.
1. Vincent Capadanno was the 10<sup>th</sup> child of an Italian immigrant family in New York City. The family struggled through the Great Depression, and then through the death of the father in 1939. But their faith and work ethic was very strong, and guided them through these dark times. For example, starting in high school, Vincent regularly attended daily Mass. And, when World War II broke out, three of his brothers served in the armed forces.
  2. After attending Fordham University for a year, Vincent entered the Maryknoll Order, which was founded in 1911 to promote American missions both in foreign nations and in less served areas of this country. After 9 years in the order, he was ordained a priest in 1958.
  3. As a missionary he was first assigned to parishes and schools in Taiwan and Hong Kong. He worked very hard at learning the language and culture of the natives, and was by all accounts a patient listener and wise spiritual guide.
  4. As the Vietnam War was beginning for the United States, Fr. Capodanno asked to serve as a chaplain to the United States Marines. With the order's permission, became a military chaplain in late 1965 and was assigned to units fighting in Vietnam. When his tour ended in 1967, he requested and received an extension of this service.
  5. On September 4, 1967, the battalion to whom Fr. Capodanno had been assigned came in conflict with a much larger Viet Cong force. When two of the platoons were being overrun by Viet Cong forces, Fr. Capodanno went to them to minister to the dying. Despite several injuries he kept on ministering to those in the battle and rushed to help a corpsman who was pinned down by

enemy fire. The Viet Cong turned their fire to him and he received numerous shots, resulting in his death. .

6. The following year, he was awarded the Medal of Honor. In 1968, the chapel at the Chaplain's Military School in Newport, Rhode Island was named for him, the first of numerous military chapels that would likewise be dedicated to him. In 1973, the navy commissioned the U.S.S. Capadanno, which received a papal blessing in 1981.
7. In 2002, the Archdiocese of the Military opened his cause for canonization. In 2006, the Archdiocese completed its research into his life and presented it to the Congregation for Saints, allowing him to be officially called Servant of God.

C. Blessed Fr. Stanley Rother (1935 – 1981) likewise died for the Catholic faith, coming from America to serve the people of Guatemala.

1. Stanley Rother was born in 1935 to a small town farming family in Oklahoma. His family was devoutly Catholic and one of his sisters would become a nun. Stanley discerned a calling to the priesthood and entered Assumption Seminary in San Antonio after graduating high school.
2. In seminary, Stanley was very hardworking and faithful. But he struggled with academics. And so the seminary staff advised him to withdraw from studies.
3. However, his bishop Victor Reed still had confidence in Stanley and sent him to study at Mount Saint Mary Seminary in Emmitsburg, Maryland. He got through studies there and was ordained a priest of the Diocese of Oklahoma City – Tulsa in 1963. For five years, he served as an associate pastor in different parishes.
4. Then, in 1968, the diocese asked for volunteers for a mission in the rural highlands of Guatemala. Stanley, five other priests, three religious sisters and three laity agreed to the mission. The mission was able to establish a parish ministry and even a radio station. But over the course of time, the others returned home. Fr. Rother however, stayed and maintained the mission with his prayer, dedicated work and courteous style.
5. As the 1970s turned to the 1980s, there was a civil war over Guatemala's future pitting the government forces against Marxist revolutionaries. The war came to his region, and parishioners were being murdered. In early 1981, his name was on a death list of death squads that supported the Guatemalan government. As a result, the diocese called him back to Oklahoma, where he visited his family for three months.

6. But Fr. Rother told the bishop that he should return to Guatemala, for the people in his parish had no other priest to serve him. And the bishop reluctantly agreed to the request.
7. Back in Guatemala, Fr. Rother received further warnings that he was in danger, but he stayed nonetheless. In July of 1981, armed militia broke into his rectory and murdered him, one of ten priests murdered in Guatemala that year.
8. The Diocese of Solola-Chimaltenango in Guatemala opened the cause for Fr. Rother's canonization in 2007. The cause was taken up by the Congregation of Saints in 2009. And, in 2017, Pope Francis beatified Fr. Rother, declaring him to be a martyr for the faith.

D. Servant of God Thea Bowman (1937 – 1990) was a leader in the effort to promote the incorporation of different cultures into the liturgy and culture generally of the Catholic Church.

1. Bertha Bowman was born to a relatively prosperous African American family in small town Mississippi. Her grandparents had been slaves, but the family had done well, with her father being a doctor and her mother a teacher. Both of them emphasized getting a good education. Her parents were Methodist but sympathetic to the Catholic faith. When she was very young, Bertha attended a Catholic Mass and was immediately drawn to the Catholic faith and liturgy. With her parents' permission, she joined the Church at the age of 9. At the age of 12, she began attending a Catholic school run by the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration, which was 38 miles from home. At the age of 15, she joined their convent in La Crosse, Wisconsin and was given the religious name "Thea" which is the feminine of Theos, the Greek word for God.
2. After graduating from the Franciscan run Viterbo University, she earned masters and doctoral degrees in English from Catholic University of America in 1969 and 1972 respectively. She then returned to teach at Viterbo University and then Catholic University.
3. Although her field was English literature, she was very involved in liturgical reforms, especially with reference to music, and in evangelizing through literature. Sister Thea also wrote numerous poems and songs, which became the basis for at least two recordings: "Sister Thea: Songs of My People" and "Round the Glory Manger: Christmas Spirituals." Her music was central in the composition of the pioneering 1987 work Lead Me, Guide Me: The African American Catholic Hymnal. That hymnal contained an essay from her entitled "The Gift of African American Sacred Song," in which she described in which she described the spirit filled and realistic nature of African American spirituals.
4. In 1978, she wished to move to Canton, Mississippi to care for her elderly mother. And so the Congregation gave permission for her to become the director of the



Office of Intercultural Affairs for the Diocese of Jackson. In that capacity she promoted an understanding between the cultures of America and help found the Institute for Black Studies at Xavier University in New Orleans. She also went on speaking and singing tours both in the United States and other nations, such as Canada, Nigeria and Kenya. In those tours, she described how the Catholic Church can be one and yet diverse among cultures.

5. In 1984, she was diagnosed with cancer, but she continued her liturgical work with enthusiasm, despite soon being in a wheelchair and on chemotherapy treatments. During these years, she gave about 100 talks a year promoting, more culturally based music and worship. In 1989, although severely disabled, she gave a very influential talk at the United States Bishops Conference, in which she described the history and spirituality of the African American Catholic Community. In that talk, she successfully argued for a greater inclusion of African based music and worship style in the Church.
6. In 2018, the Diocese of Jackson opened her cause for canonization. And in November of 2018, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops unanimously approved of the process.