

TRUTH, FREEDOM, TRADITION, FRONTIERS:
PRESENTATIONS ON AMERICAN CATHOLIC HISTORY
PART VII: PROSPERITY, DEPRESSION, TRUE AND FALSE PEACE
THE CHURCH IN AMERICA BETWEEN THE WORLD WARS

I. The 1920s were simultaneously a time of prosperity for America, and also a time of retraction into decadence and a nativist sentiment. As a result, the Church both expanded building and also had to deal with decays in America.

A. On the one hand, the prosperity of the 1920s enabled the Catholic Church in America to continue building churches, schools, missions and the like.

1. There was an attempt to engage American culture. Thus, for example, many churches looked similar to Protestant churches, at least on the outside. And Catholic schools tended to use the same methods as public schools.

2. Likewise, there was more cooperation in charitable efforts between the different Christian denominations.

B. But both before and even more after World War I, there was a nativist backlash to the connection between the United States and the world. This backlash led to prejudice against immigrants in general and Catholics in particular.

1. The phrase “one hundred percent American” was often used to justify prejudice against foreigners and influences, such as the Catholic Church (and Judaism and Orthodoxy) that people labelled as foreign.

2. In 1920, the United States established the first numerical limits on immigration, and the laws favored countries whose nationalities were already here. The effect was to limit sharply immigration from southern and eastern Europe, as well as Asia and Latin America. Except for the limits on Asian immigration, the effect was to blunt the increase in the Catholic Church in America.

3. There was a natural increase in the American population during the 1920s but that trend was blunted by the Great Depression and then World War II. From 1920 to 1945, the Catholic population in America increased from about 18 million to about 24 million. Because America’s population increased slightly faster than the Catholic population, there was a small decrease in the portion of Americans who are Catholic, from 18% to 17%.

4. Other legislation tried to reduce or eliminate Catholic and other private education. Thus, for example, Oregon forbade all private education and required all children to attend public schools. In its 1925 decision Sisters of the Holy Name v. Pierce, the Supreme Court held that such legislation was unconstitutional.

5. The Ku Klux Klan, which had gone away after 1877, came back in 1915; and its membership increased dramatically during the 1920s to the point of having 4

to 5 million members in the mid-1920s. They added prejudice against immigrants and non-Anglo-Saxons, as well anti-Catholicism to their racist agenda. Despite many requests to do so (particularly by the Catholic statesman Al Smith), neither major political party condemned them at the 1924 conventions.

C. The United States Catholics responded to this nativism with an increased fervor, as well as increased involvement in public life.

1. The number of clergy increased by 82% between 1920 and 1945, while the number of religious sisters increased by 83%. As a result, the Church in the United States no longer depended on foreign priests and religious sisters coming here; and in fact the Church in America was now sending some missionaries overseas.

2. Often the ethnic communities increased religious devotion and loyalty to their parishes in order to emphasize their identity. But there was also a call to demonstrate that they were American.

3. There were also efforts at increasing the American presence in theology and in liturgy. For example, in 1926, St. Louis University began publishing The New Schoolman. The Dominican order launched the publications Modern Scholasticism (now the American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly) and the Thomist in 1926 and 1937 respectively. The Jesuit order began the scholarly journal Theological Studies in 1940, with the famous theologian Fr. John Courtney Murray becoming its editor until his death in 1967.

4. There was also a promotion of liturgical reforms, such as more participation at the Mass and increased beauty in church music and architecture. These reforms were centered on such places as St. Paul Seminary, St. Louis University, and St. John Abbey in Collegeville. There was also a greater emphasis on good preaching and a liturgy people could understand.

a. For example, the Jesuit Fr. Gerald Ellard and another professor Fr. Virgil Michal launched the liturgical magazine Orate, Fratres (now called Worship) in 1926 to help both priests and the laity understand the liturgy better.

b. Along similar lines, Fr. Ellard published the book Christian Life and Worship, in 1933 to promote a greater liturgical life and understanding of the faith among the laity.

5. Other magazines such as the Jesuit publication America (founded 1909) and the lay run publication Commonweal (founded 1924), were designed to bring to the general public a greater comprehension of the fullness of the Catholic faith, including theology, church news, social commentary and Catholic culture.

D. In 1919, the United States bishops formed the National Catholic Welfare Council as a successor to the National Catholic War Council to coordinate the efforts of the Church together.

1. The idea was to promote Catholic interests, and also to advocate a path in the economic and social spheres that avoided the errors of both socialism and social Darwinism. The theologian Fr. John Ryan (author of The Living Wage in 1906) and the Paulist priest John Burke (editor of Catholic World magazine) had a great deal of influence in promoting practical legislation to promote Catholic social teaching.

2. At first, Pope Benedict XV and many people in the Vatican opposed the idea of a national Catholic conference on the grounds that it would be the basis for a sort of national church. However, after discussions with Bishop Joseph Schrembs of Cleveland, the American representative in Rome, the recently elected Pope Pius XI agreed to the Council with the proviso that its name be changed to Conference, rather than Council. The National Catholic Welfare Conference would gradually transform into what is now called the National Conference of Catholic Bishops. In its decree on Bishops, the Vatican II Council expressly endorsed this idea of national bishops' conferences.

II. The Great Depression challenged all of American society during the 1930s and was both a struggle and an opportunity for the Church in America.

A. When the country plunged into the Great Depression, the public began to appreciate more the Catholic bishops' calls for economic reforms, but not socialism, a stance outlined for example in the 1919 Bishops' Program of Social Reconstruction. The bishops and theologians continued to incorporate Pope Leo XIII's 1891 encyclical Rerum Novarum, and gained further guidance from Pope Pius XI's 1931 encyclical Quadragesimo Anno into their commentary on society, economics and politics.

1. For the most part Catholic participation in public life was welcomed.

However, radio personality Fr. Charles Coughlin, who began as a social reformer, became an embarrassment to the Church when he turned to anti-Semitism and revolutionary sentiments in placing blame for the Great Depression upon Jews and industrialists generally.

2. Some American theologians drew a connection between liturgical reform that would allow more lay participation and social reform that would allow broader participation in the economy. There was also a notion of society coming together to worship, and thus setting the stage for other cooperation.

B. Catholic parishes, religious orders and lay efforts were also instrumental in uniting the people in charitable efforts, which enhanced the prestige of the Church. For example, the Saint Vincent de Paul Society expanded rapidly. And in the 1930s Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin launched the Catholic Worker movement, which encouraged people to live among those less fortunate in common homes. Along similar lines, the exiled Russian noblewoman Catherine de Hueck Doherty launched Friendship Houses in Canada, New York and Chicago, which involved Catholic and other volunteers living together in common life and trying to improve the conditions of the people around them.

C. The Depression also led to a debate among black Catholics about how much to integrate the specific notion of racial justice and the overall idea of social justice. Thus, for example, in 1925, the African American scientist and teacher Thomas Turner founded the Federation of Colored Catholic in the United States. Some Jesuit priests, such as John LaFarge, the editor of the Jesuit magazine America, and the social activist Fr. William Markoe were allied with him in founding the federation. And in fact Fr. LaFarge founded the Cardinal Gibbons Institute for African American boys the next year. But, as the 1930s progressed, Thomas Turner wanted the organization to focus more specifically on cooperation between the races, leading to a division between the founder and him and Fr. LaFarge.

D. The “worker priest” movement also came to the United States. This movement encouraged priests to take more jobs among the people to minister to them more effectively. Some young priests such as Fr. Peter Dietz, a priest of Milwaukee and active union supporter, and Fr. Francis Hass, rector of Saint Francis seminary in Milwaukee and later bishop of Grand Rapids, promoted this movement, which was popular for a time.

E. The economic chastisement also led to an increased religious fervor. That increased religiosity enabled the United States bishops and the Legion of Decency to push Hollywood to adopt standards of decorum run by the Hays Office and effective until the 1970s.

F. The issue of contraception and divorce arose heavily in the 1920s, and priests were beginning to deal with this issue among the laity. And in 1930, the Anglican Church’s Lambeth Conference said that artificial contraception could be legitimate in some circumstances. In response, the Church strongly reiterated her teachings about marriage and family, as especially expressed in Pope Pius XI’s 1931 encyclical letter *Casti Connubi*. In the United States, some writings that gave instructions to priests indicate that they were already dealing with dissent on this front. Illegal abortions were likewise increasing, but Christians were united in their support for the right to life of the unborn..

III. Four people who exemplified the creativity and efforts of the Catholic Church in America that era were the statesman Al Smith, the social activist Dorothy Day, Cardinal George Mundelein and Servant of God Father Edward Flanagan.

A. Al Smith (1873 – 1944) became the quintessential Catholic statesman, rising to become governor of New York and the Democratic party’s 1928 Presidential nominee.

1. Born in Brooklyn in 1873 to a working class family, Al Smith had little formal education but a keen intellect and a strong work ethic. Those traits were greatly needed when his father died in 1886 and he had to begin working at a fish market to support the family. He was a devout Catholic, and served as an altar boy until work obligations made that difficult.

2. Al Smith joined the New York civil service as a clerk at the age of 22 and rose up quickly. By his mid-20s he was in the state Assembly and was known for reading through legislation carefully and being able to comment on it with in depth insights. By the age of 40, he was speaker of the New York state

Assembly. In the Assembly, he worked on bipartisan efforts to protect workers and revise the state constitution.

3. In 1900, he married Ann Dunn, and they eventually had five children, raised in what was by all accounts a happy family. He and Ann Died only five months apart in 1944.

3. He was elected Sherriff of New York County and then Governor of New York in 1918, an office he kept, except for 2 years, until 1928. In that role, he supported women's suffrage and opposed Prohibition. He also called for higher salaries for teachers, more care for the mentally infirm, child protection laws, labor laws that improved factory conditions and extended protections for women. Al Smith also sponsored the first state park system and civil service reforms. In his campaigns he became known as "the happy warrior." He was ever an optimist, known for such sayings as, "All the ills of democracy can be cured by more democracy" and "The American people never carry an umbrella. They prepare to walk in eternal sunshine."

4. Al Smith ran for the Democratic Presidential nomination in 1924. However, neither he nor the other major candidate could get the needed two-thirds support for the nomination; and so a little known compromise candidate was the Democratic nominee for the presidency. Al Smith called for both parties to condemn the KKK in that year, but neither did.

5. Al Smith gained the Democratic nomination for the Presidency in 1928.

a. At the convention, Franklin Roosevelt gave his nominating speech in which he described Al Smith as "the happy warrior of the political battlefield." The term "happy warrior" then caught on as a common description of Al Smith.

b. In response to claims that he could not be a faithful Catholic and a patriotism American, Al Smith wrote a long letter published by the Atlantic Monthly, in which he argued that the values that he as a Catholic brought to the public sphere are common values of Americans, and that the Church upholds liberty and human rights.

6. Although he did not prevail in 1928, Al Smith became known as the model of a hard-working, honest, and cheerful politician. In the 1930s, Al Smith strongly promoted charitable actions and humane government programs. But he was skeptical of overly large government or abstract programs. He once said, "You take care of you and your family first. Then you go to your neighborhood, and then you spread it on out within the community."

7. The year after his death, the Alfred Smith Memorial Foundation began arranging the Al Smith dinners, which is to this day a prominent fundraiser for the support of Catholic charities dedicated to needy children.

B. Dorothy Day was a convert to the Catholic Church who established the Catholic Worker movement and promoted an authentic pro-life and pro-charity approach to society.

1. Dorothy was born in 1897 to a middle class family with her father being a journalist. Consistent with the family's tradition, she was raised as an Episcopalian and was active in the faith early on. However, when she moved to New York after college, she turned away from the faith and became involved in socialist activism.
2. In New York, she had several affairs, one of which resulted in a pregnancy. Her boyfriend persuaded her to have an abortion, but then abandoned her.
3. She had several Catholic friends, and decided to give the Catholic faith a chance. However, even as she was attending some Catholic liturgies, she had another affair, which resulted in another pregnancy; but this time she resisted the pressure to have an abortion.
4. She turned again to the Church, received instruction from the Sisters of Charity, and then was baptized with her daughter in 1927.
5. As a Catholic she became a journalist for *Commonweal*, a Catholic social magazine. In that context, she met the Catholic activist Paul Maurin, and together they founded the magazine *Catholic Worker*. The journal was an immediate success increasing to a circulation of 150,000 within a couple of years. The magazine tried to raise awareness of social needs, but avoided the rhetoric of class warfare.
6. She also founded Catholic Worker houses, in which Catholics would live with the people for whom they were providing housing. This project was an important source of assistance during the Great Depression.
7. Her pacifism diminished her popularity, and that of the *Catholic Worker* magazine, during World War II. However, after the war, she resumed social commentary. She maintained an active prayer life, with daily Mass and the rosary, and defied the usual conservative/liberal divide with her advocacy both traditional family morals and economic justice for the poor until her death in 1980.
8. The Claritan Missionaries opened her cause for canonization in 1983. The Archdiocese of New York took it up, and it was approved by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops in 2012. The cause has been sent to the Congregation of Saints in Rome. In his talk at the U.S. Congress on September 24, 2015 Pope Francis listed Dorothy Day as one of four Americans representing the best of this nation and the Christian faith. He

said, “Her social activism, her passion for justice and for the cause of the oppressed, were inspired by the Gospel, her faith, and the example of the saints.”

C. Father Edward Flanagan (1886 – 1948) was a diocesan priest and the founder of Boys Town.

1. Edward Flanagan was born and raised in County Roscommon in the west of Ireland. He was the 8th of eleven children in a devout Catholic family. Being born prematurely, he had health problems early; but he excelled in studies.
2. At the age of 18, he immigrated to the United States with his sister Nellie and stayed with relatives in New York. Soon he entered seminary for the Archdiocese of New York, first at Mount Saint Mary Seminary and then in Rome and Innsbruck, Austria. Despite many health issues, he was ordained a priest in 1912 for the Diocese of Omaha.
3. After a tornado devastated the Omaha in 1913, he worked tirelessly for the relief of those affected. That effort eventually led to the opening of a shelter for homeless men. In running that shelter, he realized that people who could not find work generally suffered from problems that were largely due to the fact that they grew up without parents, or at least without loving parents.
4. And so, in 1917, he arranged with the courts to mentor boys who were in the juvenile justice system. The effort quickly grew from seven to over 100 boys. And so he arranged for the purchase of Overlook Farm, which eventually was renamed Boys Town. The idea was to give a positive environment and a sense of self-responsibility as the boys took on many of the leadership roles, including a boy-mayor. Father Flanagan combined clear discipline, a positive spirit and voluntary spirituality to help orphans, and those taken from their parents, to have a good chance in life. He wanted to combine prayer with upbringing, but how a boy prayed was up to him.
5. Father Flanagan eventually visited 31 states and 12 countries to give counsel on how to open similar arrangements. He could be very critical of current programs, but was always ready with a solution. For the most part his comments were welcomed. But his critique of the Irish system in 1946 drew a great deal of opposition there.
6. In his lifetime Boys Town cared for 6000 youth. There are now centers, some serving both boys and girls, in 10 states that assist 1.5 million youth annually.

7. Two movies about Father Flanagan and Boys town, entitled Boys Town (1938) and Men of Boys Town (1941) won a great deal of prestige for the effort and for the Catholic Church generally in this country.
8. In 2012, the Archdiocese of Omaha opened the cause for canonization for Father Flanagan. The Archdiocese concluded that he has lived a life of heroic virtue and has sent the cause to Rome.

D. Cardinal George Mundelein, the Archbishop of Chicago from 1915 to 1939, epitomized the powerful, and creative episcopacy of the time.

1. George Mundelein was born in Manhattan in 1872 to a devout Catholic family, one of nine children. His father was of German descent and a mother of Irish descent, reflecting the mixing of immigrant traditions in this land. The family was very modest means, but gave good examples of faith and dedication.
2. George excelled in high school and entered seminary for the Diocese of Brooklyn afterward. He studied at the Saint Vincent Seminary in Latrobe, Pennsylvania (run by the Benedictines) and then at the Pontifical Urbanum University in Rome, which then as now specialized in the missions. For, at the time, the United States was still considered mission country, a status that the Vatican changed in 1908. Once again, he graduated with the highest honors.
3. George Mundelein was ordained for the Diocese of Brooklyn in 1895 and soon became the bishop's secretary and then chancellor of the diocese. In 1909, Pope Pius XI appointed him as the auxiliary bishop of Brooklyn at the young age of 37. In 1915, Pope Benedict XV appointed Bishop Mundelein as the Archbishop of Chicago at the age of 43, remarkably young for such a high position. And in 1924, Pope Pius XI appointed him as a cardinal; an estimated 1 million Catholics lined the streets as he returned from the consistory during which Pope Pius XI give him that office.
4. There was a scare at the beginning of his episcopacy as an anarchist chef poisoned the soup at a dinner he and 500 guests attended; fortunately, between the soup being watered down and a remedy at hand, no one died.
5. He was at the same time a liberal in care for the poor upholding the rights of workers and a conservative in social values. Thus, for example, the

Archdiocese of Chicago opened numerous charitable organizations during his tenure, and greatly promoted the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, which is designed to give assistance to the poor in a way that makes them independent. And he supported unions, Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal and similar programs. However, he was also instrumental in promoting the Legion of Decency and standards for movies. And, in a famous 1935 speech, he blamed ill-advised marriages, easy divorces and decadence generally as the main cause of human suffering, more so than war or famine.

6. He also promoted the idea of more regional parishes, rather than ethnic parishes. And he established Saint Mary of the Lake Seminary, which is now named Mundelein Seminary, and is the largest seminary in the United States.
7. Cardinal Mundelein was a strong opponent of anti-Semitism, taking on for example Father Charles Coughlin, a priest of Detroit, who was increasingly going in that direction. Cardinal Mundelein's opposition was one of the factors that ended Father Coughlin's radio career in 1939. Cardinal Mundelein also gave a famous speech in 1937, in which he expressed astonishment that the German nation, known for its deep thinking, could fall for a mediocre "paper hanger," namely Hitler.
8. In his life, and even after his death, Cardinal Mundelein has been considered a model of an effective and active bishop.