R. Scott Appleby

Diversity as a Source of Catholic Common Ground

“A pox on both your houses!” On the houses, that is, of U.S. Catholic “liberals” and “conservatives” engaged in a seemingly endless dispute over the meaning of the Second Vatican Council, the legacy of Rev. John Courtney Murray, S.J., the teaching of Pope John Paul II, the proper role of women in the Church, and other neuralgic issues dividing American Catholics into ideological camps of “left” and “right.” In 1995 Allan Figueroa Deck, S.J., describing the view from what he called “the Hispanic Margin,” delivered this colorful benediction upon his Euro-American colleagues who, like him, were contributing essays to Being Right: Conservative Catholics in America, the first of a projected three volumes purportedly mapping the ecclesial-political landscape of the United States (Deck).

Like many Latino/a intellectuals, Deck bristled at the exclusive application of the term “American” to the Catholics of North America—indeed, primarily to those European stock, “post-ethnic” Catholics concentrated in the northeastern and midwestern sections of the United States. Nor is he alone in claiming that the worldview of Latino Catholics is significantly different than the one held by most Euro-American or “Anglo” Catholics. While European Catholicism was shaped definitively by the Council of Trent, theologian Orlando Espín has argued, the type of Christianity brought to Latin America by the Spanish, by contrast, “was medieval and pre-Tridentine, and it was planted in the Americas approximately two generations before Trent’s opening session” (Espin: 117).

If Latino Catholics represent the future of Roman Catholicism in the United States, as most commentators with an eye on demographic projections believe they do, it will be a Catholicism transformed and re-invigorated by this striking “Hispanic difference.” That, at least, is the claim advanced by the heralds of “re-traditionalization,” the project of Latino theologians and pastoral leaders who purport to offer Euro-Americans an alternative way of being “modern” and Catholic in the Americas. The model they offer is derived not from the hierarchical top down, but from the ground up—that is, from the religious experiences and practices of ordinary Mexicans and Mexican-Americans, Cubans, Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, etc. (Barrera as quoted in Deck: 89).

In detailing the Hispanic difference, Latino scholars point to the unique historical trajectory of Catholicism as it unfolded in Latin America, where
lack of a native clergy ensured that popular religion would develop relatively free of clerical control, and where distinctions between liturgical and devotional traditions, on the one hand, and the dogmatic content of the faith, on the other, were seldom observed or even recognized.

The result was Hispanic fidelity to a traditional, pre-modern understanding of symbol and symbol system that preserved the mythology and thus the ultimate truth at the heart of Christianity. The Mexican people, according to the theologian Roberto Goizueta, are the prototypical bearers of this traditional Christian consciousness and worldview. The sacred is present, Mexicans believe, only if and when it makes itself visible, audible and tangible. Such epiphanies occur not only in the “official” sacraments, but in religious practices such as the Via Crucis, the devotions to Our Lady of Guadalupe, and los Días de los Muertos, the ritual that invokes the deceased family members, friends and co-religionists whose spiritual presence continues to bestow grace upon the worshipping community. These saints and departed ones “are the assurance,” Goizueta writes, “that God is indeed here—not up in heaven or in some ethereal realm, but here in our very midst; they are the assurance that God is indeed real” (Goizueta: 18).

Unmistakable in the Latino-American claim to constancy of witness is the pointed implication, often stated unequivocally, that somewhere along the way Euro-American Catholics lost sight of something essential to the Catholic Christian faith. According to this view, the “new” Hispanic insight is in effect the theological retrieval of “an organic, intrinsically symbolic worldview” which understands creation to be the site of encounter with the sacred, the flesh to be the instrument of salvation, and “the cultivation of bodily experience” to be “a locus of redemption” (Bynum, 251–52 as quoted in Goizueta, 9). Euro-American Catholics, as heirs to the rationalist and nominalist distortions introduced into medieval Thomism by neo-scholastics of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—distortions codified in the decrees of Trent that emphasized God’s transcendence and immutability to the virtual exclusion of God’s immanence and relational presence—separated the symbol and the symbolized. As a result, they tend to see the world as pointing away from itself to God, as Goizueta puts it, rather than as offering a direct encounter with God.

Mexican Catholics, as they migrate north and east from Mexico and the southwestern United States, thus bring with them an incarnational and sacramental Christianity unashamed of its medieval or “pre-modern” vibrancy, its material and physical immediacy, its literal-minded celebration of the passion of Christ and the suffering endured by all people. God is real, here and now, present in the ritual and in the lives poured into the ritual. The agony of childbirth, homelessness, unemployment, disease and death; the joy of fertility and family; the ecstasy of self-sacrifice and loving devotion—each of these experiences,
and many others, are more than passageways to the sacred; they are powerful encounters with God. The faith itself is an encounter with God in the world, felt rather than conceptualized, that defines the person in relation to community in such a way that we can no longer speak of individuals, only members of a holy family.

Anglos, take note. A pox on both your houses, you who split theological and ecclesiological hairs like the Pharisees of old, even as the divine drama of life, suffering, death, resurrection and new life is being played out in the streets, in the barrios, in the hearts of thousands of believers every day.

A NEW CONTEXT FOR CATHOLIC UNITY

When Joseph Cardinal Bernardin announced the Catholic Common Ground Initiative [CCGI] in 1996, only months before his death, certain Catholic pundits, as well as some members of the hierarchy, expressed concern. Why is such a project necessary, they asked, when everyone knows that the doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church constitute the “common ground” upon which all faithful Catholics stand? One does not enter into “dialogue” about the shared faith, as if certain authoritative teachings (e.g., the ban on the ordination of women) were open (i.e., reformable) matters of discussion and debate. Some early detractors even voiced the suspicion that “dialogue” was a code word for liberal insurgency against the magisterium.

These reactions, distressing to the Cardinal and to members of the CCGI steering committee, were conveyed mostly through sound bites and dashed-off editorials rather than reasoned treatises. But they nonetheless raised an issue that stands at the heart of contemporary Catholic identity. After forty years of theological and pastoral adaptations to the Church’s heightened awareness of its internal diversity, how are we to think of the underlying unity of the “one holy, catholic and apostolic Church”? Beyond the recitation of abstract theological formulas or mystical and mystifying assertions of an ontological or metaphysical oneness that can be fully appreciated only sub specie aeternitatis, how are we to speak concretely, even empirically—that is, in a way that even social scientists, journalists, and historians can understand—of “one” Roman Catholic Church? (Not to mention one Church encompassing all the diverse peoples of God, including those who do not belong to the Roman communion.)

The answer is not obvious. Consider the depth of the transformations that occurred in Catholic self-understanding with the introduction of a genuine plurality of perspectives and methods into Catholic theology as Thomism was supplemented and (in many Catholic colleges and universities) supplanted by narrative, feminist, liberationist and other inductive theologies grounded in experience.
These multiculturalism-friendly theologies emerged simultaneously with the advent of mass transportation by airplane across time zones and continents, the first groanings of globalization. At the necessary moment theologians of the indisputable fact of diversity emerged *ex corde ecclesiae* touting a new evangelism of inculturation and liberation endorsed in its broad outlines by no less than Pope Paul VI (in his 1975 apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii nuntiandi* (“On Evangelization in the Modern World”). James Joyce’s famous description of Catholics—“here comes everybody”—took on a new resonance, theological as well as ethnic.

In the United States alone, just as the Euro-Americans were beginning to enjoy their assimilated, “post-ethnic” status, new waves of Asian, African and Latino immigrants ensured that *more than ever before* (hard words for an historian) the hallmark of U.S. Catholicism is internal diversity—in ethnic heritage, social class, family structure, educational level, spiritual formation and theological orientation. Never before have the pastoral challenges posed by the Church’s ethnic, social and cultural diversity been compounded by the proliferation of so many differing (and often competing) theologies, worldviews, and models of what the Church is and ought to become. And no previous generation of American Catholics, it could be argued, inherited so little of the content and sensibility of the faith from their parents, as have today’s Catholic youth. At no point during the previous 150 years of Catholic life in America has a need for the widespread catechesis and re-evangelization of broad segments of the Catholic community coincided with so dire a shortage in the number of priests, religious and seminarians (Appleby: 3).

“The dogmas and doctrines proclaimed by the magisterium constitute Catholic common ground.” In light of our current situation, one must respond: Yes, of course, and what, exactly, does that mean in our plural, polyglot, multicultural, secular milieu? How are we to think and speak about the unity as well as the catholicity of the Church in relation to ethnic, racial, theological and cultural diversity? How are we to promote commitment to the unity and catholicity of the Church that is “neither monolithic and Eurocentric nor fragmented by polycentric and ethnic and racial factionalism?” (Hinze: 172). How, in short, do we transform mere plurality into vibrant pluralism? How can we rightly perceive diversity of form and expression as the symbol and guarantee of internal unity?

**THE HISPANIC “DIFFERENCE” AND CATHOLIC COMMON GROUND**

Probing the claim of an “Hispanic difference” is a useful starting point for addressing these questions. The experience of life, suffering,
death, resurrection and new life is ritually enacted by Latino/a Catholics on the streets of Chicago’s Pilsen neighborhood during the Via Crucis, in the barrios of East Los Angeles on the Day of the Dead, along the route of the Guadalupe processions in San Antonio. It is also enacted, however, by young “post-ethnic” Catholics who are returning to the perpetual adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, the wearing of the scapular, the praying of the Rosary and other time-honored devotional practices of their Euro-American grandparents and great-grandparents. Hailing from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, these so-called “Generation X” and “Generation Why” Catholics are a telling minority within their cohort. They tell of a Catholic worldview, by no means forgotten or fallen into disuse, that is available for retrieval and adaptation. The persistence of this worldview, documented in a variety of recent sociological studies, calls into question the “decline thesis” given currency by the (more thoroughly documented) secularizing tendencies of the Baby Boom generation (Beaudoin; Davidson, et. al.; D’Antonio, et. al.). The Boomers, that is, may well prove to be anomalous in the degree and depth of their displacement of the supernatural worldview associated with Tridentine as well as medieval Catholicism.

In this respect the contemporary encounter between the Latino-American and Euro-American Catholic imaginations, worldviews, and competing sets of historical claims and theological perspectives carries the promise of mutual renewal. It is, unfortunately, an inchoate and halting encounter, restricted mostly to scholars, religious officials and a minority of U. S. Catholic parishes. Yet the majority of Euro-American or post-ethnic Catholics alive today would find the religious worldview of Latino/a Catholics, if not the particulars of the rich Hispanic heritage, reassuringly familiar in its broad outlines. The psychological orientation to the transience of earthly existence, the moral conviction that suffering is potentially redemptive, the meditation upon death as a constant presence and integral part of life, the sharp and ritualized awareness of the pervasive offer of grace, the everyday reality of communion with the saints—one need not return to the 40s and 50s to find “American Catholics” whose religious imagination is replete with such elements.

Nonetheless it is true that the middle class “white” American Catholics who came of age after the 60s seldom experienced Catholicism as a comprehensive way of life and corresponding way of looking at the world; they were not “held by the faith,” to use Clifford Geertz’s term for believers living unreflexively within the milieu of orthodoxy. Rather, those who sought to be enfolded into Catholicism, to be absorbed by its unqualified supernaturalism, found it necessary to insist on literalism, to assert corporeality and self-sacrifice against the grain of the therapeutic culture, to “hold on to the faith” with such defensive
fierceness that “the Catholic thing,” which had been taken for granted and experienced as natural and organic before the fragmentation of the orthodox community, now became a brittle object, a tool or weapon with which to beat off the encroaching secular world.

Other post-ethnic Catholics of the 80s and 90s, perhaps the large majority, took a piecemeal approach, selecting and retrieving “disembodied bits” and “symbolic tokens” (Giddens) of what even their religiously casual Boomer fathers and mothers understood to be one, unified Great Tradition. To the least fortunate of these so-called Generation X Catholics, who began to reach voting age in 1980 and who were hit hardest by the deleterious impact of divorce, drugs, and decadence, “the Catholic thing” was nothing more or less than another source, alongside other media of propaganda, of vivid images, practices, symbols and insights. Catholicism, moreover, carried the baggage of a long and ambiguous history that was not to be trusted in toto, and it continued to assume the existence of an objective moral order governing the universe. “The security of what people previously considered simple ‘reality’ has—for many Xers—molted like a snake’s skin,” explains Tom Beaudoin, a member of the cohort of post-ethnic U. S. Catholics born between 1962 and 1982, and therefore assigned by demographers to “Generation X.” Like many of his thirty-something peers, Beaudoin distrusts “meta-narratives” and other putatively unifying or encompassing explanations of reality; surfing the web or the cable television channels, he prefers to pick and choose, mix and match bits of information, symbols and practices in order to construct his own version of “virtual Catholicism.” In the cultural space “of fresh and frightening indeterminacy” created by the technology of a society that places a high premium on self-construction, “religious pop culture images roam freely and Gen Xers abandon themselves to grace.” But it is a grace, Beaudoin admits, “that comes at a cost—the abandonment of the comfort of past generations, of a once-and-for-all final reality” (Beaudoin: 40).

The rootless wanderers of Beaudoin’s Generation X occupy one end of the contemporary post-ethnic spectrum, while the “holding tightly to the faith” neo-orthodox groups such as Opus Dei and the neo-Catechumenate inhabit the other extreme. In the broad middle, held by approximately 35 percent of young Catholic adults in the United States according to the latest study of this cohort, one finds believers in traditional doctrines such as the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. These young Catholics embrace the sacramental worldview of the Church, respect and revere the pope and the Virgin Mary, and live a devotional life similar in some respects to that of most practicing Latino-Americans (Dinges, et. al., 1999; Dinges, 1998).

The two U.S. Catholic communities, “Latino” and “Anglo,” each has something vital to teach and to learn from the other. Forewarned
by what they see as the Euro-American Catholic absorption into a culture of radical individualism, scholars and pastoral leaders present the Latino commitment to family—for Hispanics, the primary site of the encounter with and celebration of the sacred—as the antidote for the moral toxins of materialism and consumerism that have eroded the once close communal and familial bonds of European immigrants. The sacralization of family, and the family as site of the sacred, resonates with Euro-American Catholics, of course, a steadfast minority of whom have preserved the home altar, family rosary and other domestic devotions. Others, including Mexican-American mothers and daughters, are reminded of their petitions to St. Jude, patron of hopeless causes, who was the last source of hope for women facing the breakdown of their families as a result of the economic and social traumas of the Depression, alcoholism, male delinquency, the loss of a son to war, the destabilizing entry of women into the work force, and other crises of the middle decades of the twentieth century (Orsi).

The historical experience of living in a racially plural democratic society is another source and stimulus of mutually enriching encounter and dialogue. In a move that could lead to fruitful crosscultural dialogue, Euro-American Catholics have recently given sustained attention to the racism infecting U.S. society, refusing to overlook their own disastrous contributions to that plague. Historian John T. McGreevy, for example, has chronicled the history of Catholic race relations in the urban north over the course of the twentieth century. His study of Parish Boundaries, which concludes that the American parish and parochial institutions “strengthened individuals while occasionally becoming rallying points for bigotry,” has inspired reflection by U.S. pastoral leaders concerned that the patterns of religiously sanctioned segregation and discrimination detailed in the book persist in this new century (McGreevy). Latinos are no strangers to racial discrimination, of course, and Latino popular Catholicism offers itself as, in part, a complex psychological, ritual and spiritual response to oppression of various kinds.

THE PATH TO A DEEPER UNITY

The particularities of each community’s cultural experience of “family” and “history” are important in themselves. But their mutual exploration makes possible the achievement of a deeper apprehension and appreciation of the underlying unity—the common ground—of the Catholic faith. This penetration to the heart of Catholicism is achieved for each community or culture only in and through dialogue with the other, preferably conducted in the context of a face-to-face encounter marked by expressions of mutual respect, the sharing of faith, common prayer and liturgy.
The proliferation of examples of this dynamic of mutual self-disclosure across religious cultures leading to a deeper experience of unity is beyond the range of this essay, but a few indications in that direction are in order. It is possible to read Pope John Paul II’s “dispute” with liberation theologians in the 1980s, for example, as an encounter between “Latino” and “Euro” American understandings of “Church” that led to a clarified mutual understanding of the “operative theologies” and perspectives of the respective parties—in this case, the Vatican and the Latin American liberation theologians. More importantly, this dispute, which evolved into a dialogue, disclosed different dimensions of the Catholic experience—of “Church”—that one or the other party cherished and, in the course of the encounter, was compelled to identify as non-negotiable, as “essential” to its experience and apprehension of the faith. What did the Pope refuse to concede in his encounter with this representation of the Latin American experience? What did the Latin American liberationists refuse to concede in their encounter with this particular representation of the teaching of the magisterium?

Active concern for the poor and marginalized has characterized Christianity from its ancient origins; liberation theology is innovative in the privileged role it gives to the experience, perspective, and agency of the oppressed themselves. Pope John Paul II’s lifelong animus against communism, however, and his rejection of the Marxist call for class struggle shaped his evaluation of liberation theology. During a nine-day trip to Central America in March 1983, John Paul made clear his disapproval of a specific theory of the Church that was being promoted under the auspices of liberation theology. According to this ecclesiology “the preferential option for the poor” means that Catholics must become politically partisan and “decide for some people and against others,” as Gustavo Gutierrez put it. In sermons and other public comments, particularly those addressed to the supporters of the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua, John Paul II explicitly rejected this idea of a partisan and “popular” class-based church as exclusive and narrow (unsuitably catholic), divisive and potentially insubordinate to the hierarchy (unsuitably Roman Catholic).

Complicating matters further, the hierarchy in Latin America was itself divided over certain aspects of liberation theology and its social and ecclesial manifestations. Many bishops, as well as the Pope, acknowledged the historic failures of the Church in Latin America to protect the material, social and political interests of the poor; indeed, many acknowledged that the Church, in ministering to the elite land-owning class, had positioned itself on the wrong side of the struggle. The gospel clearly demanded a courageous discipleship in service to the poor, and the bishops at Medellín, invoking Vatican II, had left no doubt that “a preferential option for the poor” entailed a spiritual,
sacramental and religious presence that would inspire concrete social and political change.

The official Vatican response to liberation theology reflected this ambivalence, certainly, and one could criticize the process by which “active consultation and dialogue” was achieved or attempted—in the first instance by reading (scouring?) the works of Gustavo Gutierrez and other prominent liberationists. Yet the Vatican response revealed a genuine movement from one set of perceptions and evaluations to another. In August 1984 the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith [CDF], headed by Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, issued an Instruction on Certain Aspects of the Theology of Liberation. While acknowledging that the liberation of the poor is at the heart of the Church’s mission on earth, the document focused on the elements of “genuine liberation” and found much of liberation theology wanting at this fundamental level of analysis. Most of the several varieties of liberation theology erred, the document continued, in reducing sin to social categories: the eradication of political and economic injustice could never proceed apart from the conversion of the human heart—fundamentally a religious, not political, task. Obscuring the spiritual truth at the root of social injustice, moreover, led the liberationists to other errors: the endorsement of class struggle, the justification of revolutionary violence and the attempt to foster a “People’s Church” alienated to some degree from the hierarchical Church of Rome.

The response from the proponents of liberation theology was sustained and substantive, conducted through personal communications with the Pope and Cardinal Ratzinger as well as in the public forum. Certain points were clearly registered and the CDF issued a second Instruction within eighteen months. This second document, the Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation, embraced the nonviolent struggle for human freedom, accomplished in “solidarity” with the poor and oppressed. It decried the systematic abuse of human rights by totalitarian states, and affirmed the liberationist goal of replacing dictatorships and oligarchies with open, democratic-style systems of government. This “tacit endorsement of democracy as a way to help liberate the poor from oppression and injustice,” George Weigel notes, was “an important moment in the development of John Paul’s social doctrine.” The Franciscan priest and prominent Brazilian liberationist Leonardo Boff claimed that the second Instruction, because it had internalized the dialogue between the two “parties,” represented a vindication of sorts for him and his liberationist colleagues (Weigel: 458).

CONCLUSION

The Catholic Church is both wise and forgetful of the wisdom it has gained over two millennia of struggling with the meaning of unity in
diversity. *Gaudium et spes* proclaimed: “The Church has been sent to all ages and places and nations and, therefore, is not tied exclusively and indissolubly to any race or nation, to any customary practices, ancient or modern” (n. 58.2). The African-American bishops proclaimed: “To be Catholic is to be universal. To be universal is not to be uniform. It does mean the gifts of individuals and of particular groups become the common heritage shared by all” (Black Bishops of U.S.: 275).

Behind such statements of Catholic principle, so familiar as to be commonplace in the postconciliar era, stands the experience and insights of countless missionaries from the sixteenth century to the present day; the German romantic concept of *Volksgeist* which, despite its pernicious applications, cultivated appreciation of, even reverence for, the particularity of social and linguistic cultures; Pius XII’s *Evan-gelii praicones* (1951), which urged a new “respect for native civilizations, for the individuality of the different peoples and for all the elements of truth that Christianity may find in them” (as quoted in Hinze: 176); a generation of ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue; and countless other landmarks in Catholic self-understanding.

To the testimony of the past the Catholic Common Ground Initiative offers its own insights, surely not original but decidedly relevant to the encounter of cultures taking place around the world at an astonishing pace. The encounter between Catholic cultural communities, if guided and discerned properly, serves to deepen and purify each community’s grasp of, and commitment to, both its own cultural heritage and the universal Church. This realization and achievement of “common ground,” further, occurs by means of the discovery and naming of convictions and concerns which the dialogue partner will not sacrifice for the sake of amity or reconciliation.

May the encounter in depth extend beyond the circle of “professional Catholics”! And, to the Latino-Americans and Euro-Americans seeking and fostering dialogic communion: A blessing on both your houses!

**REFERENCES**


Dinges, William, Dean Hoge, Mary Johnson, Juan Gonzales, Jr. “Young Adult Catholics.” America 180 (March 27, 1999) 9–13.


R. Scott Appleby is director of the Cushwa Center for the Study of American Catholicism at the University of Notre Dame.