Four Gifts of the American Church to the Universal Church

Roger Haight, S.J.

Recognizing the unique contribution that the American Catholic church made by its proposal of the doctrine of religious liberty at the Second Vatican Council, a respected theologian identifies three other areas of potential development, rooted in the American experience, that could benefit the Universal Church.

Is it the best of times or the worst of times for the Catholic Church in the United States? I want to propose that, while things could be better, the American church is in pretty good shape in terms of its resources to solve its current problems, and to contribute something to the universal Catholic Church. More specifically, the thesis I want to offer is that, at this stage in history, the American church has four gifts to offer to the universal church. The first has already been written into universal church doctrine, whether or not it has been internalized around the world. That is the doctrine of religious liberty. Three other extended experiences in the American church may develop into doctrines for all: the first concerns the place and role of women in the church. The second has to do with the place and role of the laity in the church. And the third will define the grounds for an open and positive evaluation of other religions.

To elaborate this grand vision of the vocation of the American church briefly and schematically, I will proceed in four stages. First, I will set up the model of

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how the doctrine of religious freedom came to be experienced in the American
church and, chiefly through the agency of John Courtney Murray, became a
Catholic doctrine at the Second Vatican Council. With that experience as an
example, I will ask whether these other typically American experiences might
also be channeled into doctrine for the whole Church.

In all of this, I grant that I project an idealistic vision of a possible future,
perhaps overly so. But, given the experience of Vatican II, we should not under-
estimate the power of God as Spirit within the community. I want to probe be-

dan the flagrant crisis that the American church is currently undergoing, and
urge a deeper historical role with which our church has been charged, and from
which we should not be distracted.

*Religious Freedom*

I begin with the doctrine of religious liberty, which was taught at Vatican II, in
order to show how it made complete sense in the context of the American
Catholic experience. The doctrine of religious liberty of Vatican II says all human
beings enjoy freedom in their religious commitments. Assent to religious doc-
trines or membership in a specific religious group cannot be enforced by an out-
side social agency. Each person has a natural, inner right to self-determination in
his or her religious commitments.

Murray’s role in shepherding this doctrine through the council is well known.
He was, of course, an American, familiar with the Enlightenment principles
upon which the United States was founded, and a scholar of the history of
Church-State relations. Murray had collaborators at the council and not all rea-
soned in the same way. But Murray’s own position had its roots in the American
experience, and in some measure this is reflected in the conciliar decree (Rico,
38–41). Let me describe in general terms how this came about so that I may use it
as a model for what is to follow.

*The American Constitution*

I begin with the American Constitution and its First Amendment. Often this
amendment is referred to as positing a wall of separation between Church and
State. It is no wall, but rather a two-fold guarantee that the government will not
establish and not interfere with religion. It reads as follows: “Congress shall
make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free
exercise thereof. . . .” All know how difficult it can be to interpret the applica-
tion of this simple idea in concrete cases. But all Americans can implicitly de-
light in the benefits from the exercise of religion in freedom, not only without
interference from the government, but with protection by the government.
American Catholic Experience

The American Catholic experience, in the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, is a dramatic success story. I will not tell that story here, but I want to highlight a couple of aspects of it. Catholic immigrants arriving in the nineteenth century both did and did not experience the separation of Church and State. In fact, the United States in many ways appeared to be a thoroughly Protestant nation. For example, elementary schools were often fundamentally Protestant in their ethos. But Catholics were free to build a parallel Catholic society and culture, with schools, aid to the poor, health care, and, in the end, associations for almost every profession. After World War II a fairly established Catholic population, newly educated at government expense, continued to enter the main stream of American public life. The result was an educated, public church made up of a modern and even postmodern laity that is also believing and practicing. American Catholics experience a government that is friendly, supportive of religious freedom, and protective of the right to develop religious-based institutions, which have, in turn, been put to the service of the wider public. The Catholic Church in the United States has thrived in a modern industrial nation structured by enlightened rational principles often associated with natural law.

Confronting the Obstacles

The European experience of Church and State has not been so benign. The very topic arouses memories of different national experiences. Sometimes national governments had to free themselves from the influence of the churches: they may have taken over what had been the functions of churches, or expropriated church property, or persecuted the Church. The process of the secularization of governments in Europe, therefore, undercut many of the privileges enjoyed by the Catholic Church. From the Church’s side, convinced that Catholicism was the one true religion, theology maintained that when a nation was Catholic, other religions had no clear right to exist; when a nation was not Catholic, a nation was bound to tolerate and extend basic rights to the Catholic Church.

Distinctive Contribution of the American Church

What the American church communicated to the universal Church arose out of its positive experience of the so-called separation of Church and State. In the American experience secular society means a religiously pluralistic society. America is not a Protestant nation; the nation is not a religious union but a civic union. The religious liberty of all citizens constitutes one of America’s most basic premises. It results in religious pluralism and a belief that freedom in religion is an unquestionable birthright. Any American can test the depth of this conviction by looking out at various religious conflicts and finding them incomprehensible insofar as they are purely religious. Religious freedom represents a completely positive doctrine, not against Christianity, but one discovered to fit
neatly with Christian revelation of the nature of God as creator. This doctrine will enrich the whole Church and humankind generally as it is gradually internalized. To the extent that this gift has firm roots in the American experience, the American church can be proud.

**Women in the Church**

A second potential gift of the American church to the universal Church concerns the place and role of women in the Church, in society at large, and in the world. I do not have to document the degree of oppression experienced by women throughout the world, nor the fact that women are barred from official leadership positions in the Catholic Church. This is a serious problem for the Church, for women in the Church, and for the mission of the Church to the world. But it continues to be addressed in the church in the United States. What are some of our resources and experiences?

**The American Constitution**

I look back at the founding documents of the nation not as proof-texts, but as bearers of basic values to which Americans consistently appeal. It is good to recall the limitations, fears, prejudices that constricted the founding vision. For example, in the beginning, the American experiment was elitist: voting rights were limited to a tenth of the male population with land or money. Citizenship was thus stratified and graduated. The social fabric of the south was racist, and so was the almost universal estimate of black people in the white north. More generally, by our standards, the whole nation was sexist. But counterbalancing these limitations of the age were a number of fundamental principles from the Enlightenment that were reinforced religiously with Christian doctrines, such as creation. The Declaration of Independence affirmed: “We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights.” Despite its actual, historically limited meaning, the term “men” syntactically meant all people. Like a subversive worm in a computer’s main drive, this religiously anthropological sentiment worked its way into general consciousness, and is still doing so, for it has not run its course of completely destroying the racist and sexist dimensions of the American program.

**American Experience**

This is not the place to review the historical growth of the women’s movement or movements that blossomed into a more general movement and critical theory in the last half of the twentieth century. Gradually, after the demonstrations for voting rights and rights in employment, through the experience of World War II, and in the explosion of the feminist movement, the idea that all human beings
are created equal took on its intrinsically true meaning. Despite the progress, however, women still experience socially structured oppression in the five areas underlined by Serene Jones: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, the prevalence of masculine cultural norms, and violence (79–93).

**Confronting the Obstacles**

Where is the Catholic Church in America relative to the question of the role of women? Consider the church sociologically as an organization: the task of the official leadership of the church belongs to the clergy. But women are excluded from orders, the ranks of the clergy, and official leadership roles because of their sex. Therefore the Church is officially and according to its current doctrine a sexist institution. In fact, women make up the majority of ministers in the American church, and this has been the case since the growth of women’s apostolic religious congregations in the nineteenth century. But the five areas of social oppression of women continue to be reflected in the Church. The failure of the American bishops to put this experience into words a decade ago shows how deeply the roots of this sexism reach into the structures of the Church.

**Distinctive Charge to the American Church**

American women in the church have responded positively and constructively to this impasse in a massive movement of Catholic feminist theology. Many such theologians are well known: Mary Daly, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, Anne Carr, Elizabeth Johnson, Sandra Schneiders, Susan Ross, and Mary Catherine Hilkert (I could expand the list); womanist theologians Shawn Copeland, Diana Hayes, and Jamie Phelps; mujerista theologians such as Ada Maria Diaz and Maria-Pilar Aquino. These theologians have developed various feminist interpretations of God, Jesus Christ, the Church, sacraments, ethics, and spirituality that are distinctively American. But the point of this feminist theology is universally relevant. It will continue to ride the tide of a universal oppression of women. The case for women is, therefore, being made on the ground in a women’s movement, and these theologians are formulating its implications. They follow St. Paul at his deepest: “There is no such thing as . . . male and female; for you are all one person in Christ.” (Gal 3:28) I believe that it is only a matter of time until these theologies widely take hold in the American church, and that the American church has the special role to midwife these values into the consciousness and then the doctrine of the universal church.

**Laity in the Church**

One of the most remarkable developments in the Roman Catholic Church since Vatican II has been the development of lay ministry. That develop-
ment has been astonishing in the United States. In making my case here let me begin by recalling some foundations of American and recent American Catholic experience.

**The American Constitution and Vatican II**

The founding impulse of the United States is democratic. By that I mean that the source of legitimate authority of a government of this people comes from the people. The Declaration of Independence says that to secure the citizens’ inalienable rights, “Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just Powers from the Consent of the Governed, [and] whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these Ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government . . .” And, thus, the Preamble of The Constitution of the United States says: “We, the people of the United States, . . . do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.”

With these predispositions, American Catholics were open to the strong language of Vatican II on the laity found in The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*, 30–38; hereafter *LG*) and The Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People (*Apostolicam Actuositatem*; hereafter, *AA*). With a theology of baptism in the background of the former (*LG*, 31), the Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People says, “by its very nature the Christian vocation is also a vocation to the apostolate. No part of the structure of a living body is merely passive but each has a share in the functions as well as in the life of the body . . . the member who fails to make his or her proper contribution to the development of the Church must be said to be useful neither to the church nor to himself or herself” (*AA*, 2). “The apostolate of the laity is a sharing in the salvific mission of the church. Through Baptism and Confirmation all are appointed to this apostolate by the Lord himself” (*LG*, 33; *AA*, 3). It is clear that these ministries come under the supervision of the clergy (*LG*, 37; *AA*, 24). But it is also clear that the competence of lay ministry extends “both in the Church and in the world, in both the spiritual and the temporal orders” (*AA*, 5). This is forceful conciliar language concerning the active ministerial role of the laity.
American Catholic Experience

It is common to divide the historical experience of the Catholic church in the United States into three quite distinct periods: the pre-colonial period up through the American Revolution and the founding of the nation, the period of the immigrant church of the nineteenth century up to the mid-twentieth, and the post-WW II church, energized as it was by Vatican Council II. World War II was a watershed; after it, American Catholics became more educated, affluent, moved to the suburbs, imbued suburban values, became more like Protestants in terms of individual decision making, so that Catholic parishes became voluntary organizations. Catholics today are the most educated Christians in the United States. Consider, too, these factors related to the internal life of the church that occurred over the past forty years: the disappearance of nuns, the decline of priests, laity filling the breech, the growth of a more differentiated ministry, complexification of parish life, the new highly motivated, educated, and skilled laity functioning at all levels in many parishes (cf. Murnion and DeLambo 1999).

What I am pointing to with all this empirical data are “the signs of the times.” One can make some generalized judgment on the basis of these two sets of data: on one side are the statistics of the decline of sisters and priests; on the other are the statistics of lay people in ministry, of over 300 training centers for laity in ministry. It is true that, if the criteria for ordination to priesthood were changed, some of the pressures on sacramental ministry would be addressed: circuit-rider priests, parish closings, and parishes without the Eucharist. But it would not address the other distinct problem of the new equation in the relationship between clergy and laity that has already arrived in the American church.

Confronting the Obstacles

At the present time, one can find in many parishes a superb balance and collaboration between clergy and laity. But it is not firmly institutionalized: it depends on the parish, the pastor, and the staff. Any given parish with a healthy and productive formula can change over night with the appointment of a new pastor. In other words, deep institutional patterns of clericalism remain resistant to the collaboration of laity. I will simply mention two manifestations of this.

Ecclesiae de Mysterio was a decree of the Vatican issued four years ago that outlined all the pastoral activities or ministries that were reserved for priests and that could not be assumed by the laity. The decree seemed to regard lay people participating in ministry competitively, relative to priests. In a situation where strictly priestly functions seemed to be diminishing, it sought to carve out anew the activities and ministries that are reserved for priests. The result was a thoroughly negative document that listed all the things that the laity could not do.

Another manifestation of the confrontation between clericalism and the rise of the laity in the American church consists in the lack of communication between
laity and higher clergy in the diocese. Whereas the American church intermittently manifests good communication on the parish level, this does not extend to the diocesan level. This lack of communication has been dramatically displayed over the past year in the present sexual abuse crisis.

**Distinctive Charge to the American Church**

There is a revolution going on in the Catholic church in the United States. Although we are too much in the eye to grasp its dimensions, we should be able to read the signs. I characterize the revolution as “the rise of the laity.” Unlike other quiet revolutions in other countries, this is not one of disaffection and abandonment, but of a new kind of engagement and participation that is distinctively American. The proper corporate reaction to this revolution is captured in the maxim that I associate with Theodore Hesburgh and Andrew Greeley in the context of Catholic education but applicable here: “trust the laity.”

The positive significance of this development in the American church since Vatican II can be read in some measure as a weakening of the clerical system in the church as we have known it. The “open system” of the most progressive parishes, whether in suburbia, rural areas, or among the poor in cities, is something new and valuable. The laity are participating at all levels in the actual running of the parish. In them one finds diversification in ministerial expertise, together with lateral communication and collaboration. The challenge now is to implement this sharing of responsibility and openness on the diocesan level. If the American Catholic church can design administrative structures that preserve priesthood and lay collaboration in a non-competitive way on the diocesan level, we may help revise the canonical structuring of clerical and lay responsibility into new patterns of authority for the universal church.

**Religious Openness to Other Faiths**

The issue here is the last to arise in consciousness. In a way, it concerns the practical fall-out from the doctrine of religious freedom, which is a political doctrine. But political freedom in religious matters raises a theological question. In fact, theological questions are constantly being raised by the new interaction of Christians with people of non-Christian faiths. These questions pertain to our understanding of ourselves as Christians relative to other religions. This issue has been discussed heatedly among Christian theologians over the past thirty years and it is far from over. But I am less concerned here with the theological discussion than with the common experience of educated American Catholics. Some serious things are going forward that are particular to the church in the United States. Our attitudes relative to other religions are being changed for us by concrete events.
The American Constitution

Let me go back briefly to the American Constitution and the first Amendment that deals with the non-establishment of any religion in the United States. Catholics benefited from the implication that this is not a Protestant nation. But with the last period of new immigration policies begun during the 1960s, new arrivals in the United States have included many people who practice other religions of the world. In the past, the civic union that was the United States could tacitly presuppose some Christian substructure and conventions, and Jews were forced to go along with it. Little by little those Christian underpinnings and supports of what many still take to be a Christian nation are being removed.

American Experience

The American Catholic Church was allowed to grow because of non-establishment. We had our experience of anti-Catholicism from outside, and we had our own private doctrines of no salvation outside the Roman Catholic Church. But we grew and flourished because of the deeper and legislated value of religious pluralism. In the current American experience, what happened for Catholics in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is happening for members of other religions. Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and constituents of other religions are bringing their religions with them in an organized form. Historically, that is, concretely and actually, the United States is passing from being a largely Christian nation, in terms of numbers and rhetoric, to one that is more and more explicitly multi-religious. This expresses itself in language, visibly in architecture, dress, and patterns of behavior, in demands for new religious exceptions to rules. It is reaching into all phases of public life and, through intermarriage, into private family life as well. The United States is being called upon to become a political and social union embodying a religious pluralism that extends well beyond Jewish-Christian pluralism. Is this happening evenly and smoothly? One can read all sorts of negative anecdotes. Organized resistance exists on local levels, some of it clearly racist and bigoted, along with other subtler forms of fundamentalism. But one also finds some solidly positive signs, and the future looks good because American history and the American mythos support a positive valuation of religious pluralism as such (cf. Eck 2002).

Confronting the Obstacles

The obstacles within the church that need to be overcome include a doctrine formulated in such a way that it does not ring true to American Catholic experience. For example, the way the Vatican document, Dominus Iesus, was received provides insight into the new situation of our evolving consciousness on this matter. That document was most interesting as a weather vane of American Catholic reaction to it. Broad, strong resistance on the part of embarrassed Catholics shows that an evolution of consciousness has taken place among
American Catholics themselves, apart from what theologians may or may not be saying.

The problem consists in the absolutist form of classical doctrine, not its message. On the one hand American Catholics believe that there is salvation outside of Roman Catholicism and even outside of Christianity. On the other hand, Catholics strongly believe that Jesus Christ is the real mediator of salvation from God. This last doctrine has to be affirmed and taught with clarity, but in a new pluralist context and a non-competitive spirit. Religious freedom, it is being realized, is also a religious doctrine. Its explanation must accommodate in principle the theological grounds for religious freedom and not simply the political principle that people have a right to be wrong.

**Distinctive Charge to the American Church**

Like the movement from the American experience to religious freedom mediated by Murray, the growing American Catholic experience of openness to other religions needs a movement from actual developments to the level of reflection and self-understanding. The reaction to *Dominus Iesus* shows that Catholics need a new theology and then a new doctrine that preserves the Christian commitment to God in Jesus Christ and, at the same time, guarantees the intrinsic validity of other religions in principle. Respect of peoples who have long histories of religious experience and practice demands in part that we acknowledge the autonomous truth and value that constitute their religions. This process is, I believe, going on in the mutual reinforcement of the work of theologians and the *sensus fidelium* of American Catholics. The point at which this experience will pass into doctrine is still far off, but one can see it on the horizon.

**Conclusion**

We cannot let the present crisis in one area of the church, namely, in its clerical leadership, distract attention from the enormous gains that have accrued to the Catholic church in America through a natural process of historical inculturation. There have been positive gains in almost every area of Catholic life apart from priestly ministry and the numbers of people in religious life: parish life, schools at primary, secondary, and college levels, lay ministry, the development of American theology, a wide variety of social ministries in the areas of health, the elderly, battered women, the imprisoned, the poor, new immigrants, ethnic groups, and world out-reach through missionaries and Catholic social agencies. American Catholics know the value of religious freedom, affirm the equality of women, experience energy and responsibility for the church's mission, and recognize the value of other religions. These are lessons for the universal Church, and I hope that gradually they will find a theological rationale that is so
convincing that these truths will pass into universal doctrine as four gifts from the American to the universal church.

References


