

Rebuilding a broken foundation: Lessons from American Catholic history for the current crisis

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Rebuilding a Broken Foundation: Lessons from American Catholic History for the Current Crisis

Synopsis

The author finds hope for repairing the current fracture in the American church by recalling the extraordinary collaboration of laity and clergy that built the infrastructure of the American church.

About the Author

James M. O'Toole is Associate Professor of History at Boston College. Professor O'Toole specializes in the study of American Catholic history. A former archivist of the Archdiocese of Boston, Professor O'Toole is the author of two books, *Militant and Triumphant: William Henry O'Connell and the Catholic Church in Boston, 1895-1944* (Notre Dame, 1992) and *Passing for White: Race, Religion, and the Healy Family, 1820-1920* (University of Massachusetts, 2002), as well as many articles and professional papers.

Moving from crisis to renewal in the present circumstance will not be an easy task. The repeated shocks of the sexual abuse scandal have undermined the confidence many Catholics feel toward others. Laity distrust bishops, who stand accused of caring more about personal and institutional image than about the actual victims. Some bishops distrust the people in the pews, banning meetings of concerned lay people (often the most active and committed parishioners) for fear that agendas other than response to the immediate crisis will be advanced. Priests feel trapped in the middle, too easily blamed by both bishops and laity, too readily identified with the tiny minority of their fellow priests who were criminals or, simply, monsters. Trust once lost on such a scale cannot be restored simply or quickly.

A backward glance may sharpen our vision of the future, however, and American Catholics should look to the past for insight. Every historical event is, to some degree, unprecedented; and there are, thankfully, no exact parallels to the present crisis. Yet, over the several centuries in which the Catholic church has been an organized presence in the United States, there have been other times of trial, times when the very survival of the faith was at stake, times when hostility toward the church was powerful. Working through those crises was possible only because all segments of the church worked together.

The best example of this kind of mutually respectful cooperation among bishops, clergy, religious, and lay people is perhaps so obvious that we fail to see it: the vast institutional infrastructure of churches, and church-related schools, hospitals, and social welfare agencies that dot American civil society. An overwhelmingly poor and working-class Catholic population built and sustained this network in every part of the nation during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, often amid surges of anti-Catholic nativism. A product of the proverbial widow's mite, the church in America is enduring evidence of millions of small commitments. Boston College's signature building, Gasson Hall, bears testimony on this score. When Father Thomas Gasson was erecting the new college building that now bears his name, the backbone of fundraising was a successful effort to secure one dollar (just a dollar, no more) from each of the school's supporters. The true marvel of accomplishments like that one, replicated elsewhere, lay not in the buildings themselves, but rather in the confidence Catholics placed in one another and in God.

While these efforts were underway, the Catholic community did not lack for internal tensions and even overt antagonisms. Parishioners, priests, sisters, and bishops often disagreed with one another sharply on many important issues: how to reconcile the hierarchical structure of the church with the spirit of American democracy; how to preserve particular ethnic and cultural traditions while at the same time embodying the universality of the church; how to balance the authority of the clergy with the roles and responsibilities of all the baptized.* But beneath these tensions, a commitment to the advancement of common purposes -- to the greater glory of God, one might say with Saint Ignatius -- allowed American Catholics to maintain their focus on what was truly important. We need that same spirit.

Merely pleading "can't we all just get along" is not particularly helpful, however: cheap platitudes will not restore shattered trust. Working together to move beyond the crisis will require two things. The first is a commitment to open, good faith discussion. It will not be easy for lay people (still less for victims and their families) to accept that church leaders were acting as they thought best, even if we now recognize how tragically wrong they were or how scandalously misguided their priorities. Similarly, it may not be easy for bishops, carrying heavy cultural baggage, to accept that the people of God who are the church do indeed have a legitimate and ongoing claim on how that church is organized. The second is a commitment to building up the church of the future in countless small ways, just as our faithful forebears did. Standing in 1850 or 1915, they could not foresee precisely what the church of 2002 would be like, but they knew that

it would still have a message worth hearing. So must we commit to a church still in the process of formation, a process in which all of us must participate.

For further reading

*The three best one volume surveys of American Catholic history are

James Hennesey, *American Catholics* (Oxford, 1981)

Jay Dolan, *The American Catholic Experience* (Doubleday, 1985)

Charles Morris, *American Catholic* (Vintage, 1998)