

An Essay on the Political Division of American Catholics

A project completed in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the Honors Program

by

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April 27, 2023

History and Political Science
Ohio Dominican University

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Acknowledgements

I have been privileged with the opportunity to compile a thesis as an undergraduate student, but this journey has not been without its hurdles. I would like to thank the many people who helped me along the way starting first with the faculty of Ohio Dominican University, especially my advisor, Dr. Ronald Carstens. Dr. Carstens graciously poured countless hours into helping me twist my incoherent rambling into this essay. I would also like to thank Dr. Matthew Ponesse and Dr. Leo Madden for their guidance, as well as Dr. Robert Parks, Dr. John Marazita, Prof. Harry McKnight, and Prof. Chris Blubaugh for their support throughout my academic career.

I would also like to thank my friends, both at Ohio Dominican and at home, who aided me in my writing. Special thanks goes to Mrs. Colleen Adams whose fluency in data science helped me to transform almost an entire decade of electoral chicken scratch into intelligible data. Additionally, a thank you to the staff of the Library of Congress who, despite unfavorable circumstances surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, still aided me a great deal in my research.

Last, but certainly not least, I would like to thank my family who have lovingly tolerated me and my theological tirades for the past four years of university. And finally, a thank you to my spiritual family at St. Brendan the Navigator Parish.

Introduction

Many Christian denominations in the United States have discernible voting patterns among their members which can be used to predict their political behavior. According to the *Religious Landscape Study* done by Pew Research center in 2014, denominations such as the Mormons, Nazarenes, Southern Baptists, Assemblies of God, Anglicans, and Methodists have a discernible preference for the Republican Party among their members. Conversely, historically black churches, Unitarians, and the United Church of Christ each have a discernible preference for the Democratic Party among their members.¹

However, when applied to the largest denomination of Christianity, the metric fails to yield significant results. Catholics in America are just as likely to find a political opponent in the pews as they are at the polls. Of the whole, 37% of American Catholics give preference to the Republican Party, 44% to the Democratic Party, and 19% are independent. This distribution is almost identical to the overall population of the United States: 37% Republican and 44% Democratic. Statistically speaking, there is no significant correlation between identification as a Catholic and overall political affiliation.

But to the Catholic laity, none of this seems particularly surprising. One only needs to examine the House Speakerships of Catholics Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) and Paul Ryan (R-WI) to understand that Catholics hold a wide variety of political opinions across the aisle. But what is quite shocking is that many of these politicians claiming to be faithful Catholics actively contradict some of the core teachings of the Church throughout their public careers. In recent

¹ Michael Lipka, "U.S. Religious Groups and their Political Leanings," *Pew Research Center*, February 23, 2016, <http://pewrsr.ch/1p0ZNNT>.

years the issue has been brought into the limelight with spats between the American episcopacy and various politicians.

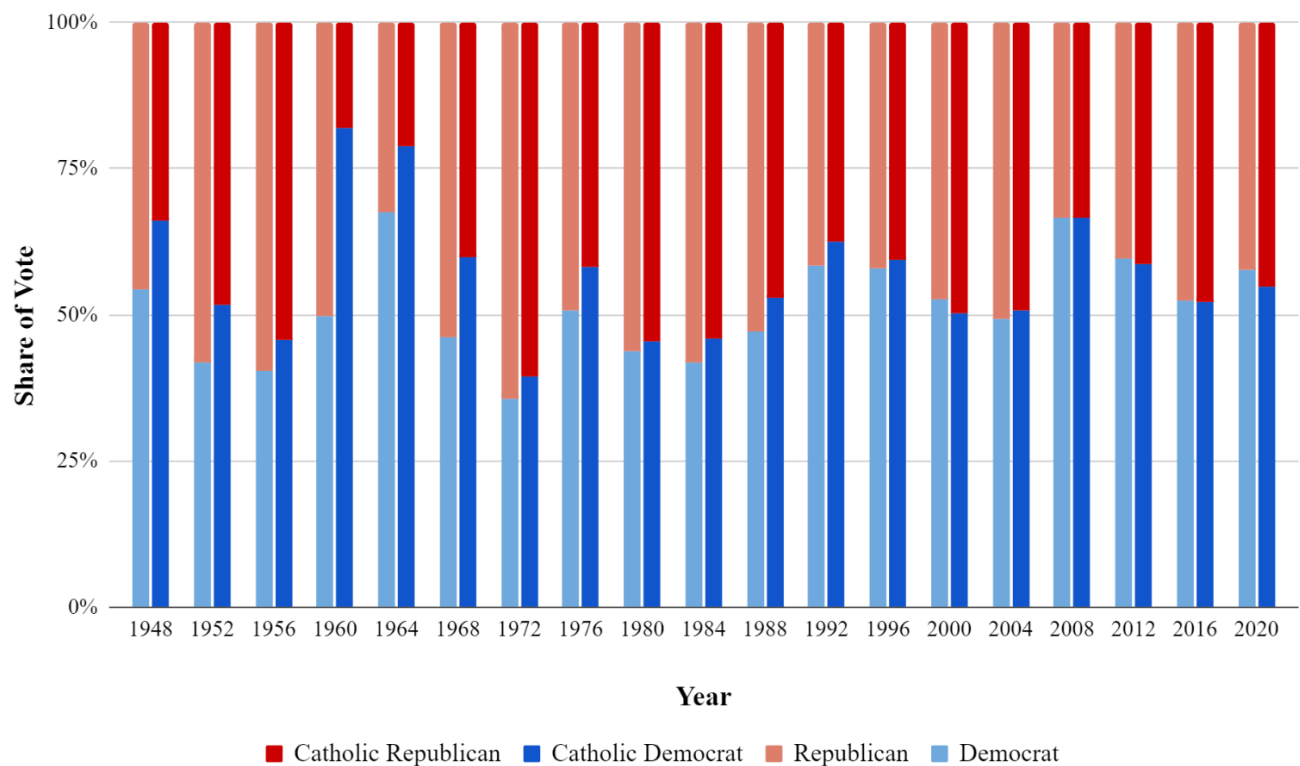
In theory, all of this is quite odd. Unlike most of the aforementioned Christian denominations, the Catholic Church has a body of clearly defined social teaching. One would assume a religion with such defined norms in terms of politics and social policy would constitute a much more coherent voting bloc. Any astute observer of American history knows that Catholics were once a homogeneous stronghold of the Democratic Party and worked to enact Catholic social policies in the public sphere. Yet now, Catholics are both divided in political affiliation and seem to come into conflict with the Church more often than they promote her teachings.

As with many historical events, the split between Catholics who identify as Democrats and those who identify as Republicans is complex. Far from being an egg where one discernable strike breaks the whole, the political division of the American Church seems more like a fabric which has been slowly torn apart. Once a demographic stronghold of the Democratic Party, a myriad of theological and political events tore the fabric of the American Church apart in the twentieth century. This essay will examine three factors that may illuminate this divide. First, a presentation of the political philosophies which influenced the political strain among American Catholics in the first place. Second, a chronology of the political divide; where the fabric of American Catholicism first came under strain, the actors who tugged on it, and the events which displayed her frayed seams. And finally, a consideration of political topics and the teachings of the Church to see if Catholic politicians have jeopardized their communion with the faith in favor of politics.

The Divide

According to the American National Election Survey (ANES), a survey of the American electorate which has been conducted since 1948, Catholics have been voting similarly to the general population since just prior to the turn of the 21st century.² Compared to the rest of the historical data, this behavior is strange. For the first three quarters of the 20th century, Catholics were a predictable and reliable Democratic constituency as can be seen in the figures below. Regarding the presidency, Catholics voted in favor of Democrats over Republicans when compared to the rest of the population until the mid-1990's. The same holds true for Catholic votes for the House of Representatives, while in the Senate the Democratic stronghold broke down in the mid-1990's.

Figure 1: How the U.S votes vs. How American Catholics vote Two Party Share - Presidential Election



² "Nicholas Valentino and Shanto Iyengar, "American National Election Survey," Stanford University and the University of Michigan, <https://electionstudies.org/>.

Figure 2: How the U.S votes vs. How American Catholics vote Two Party Share - House

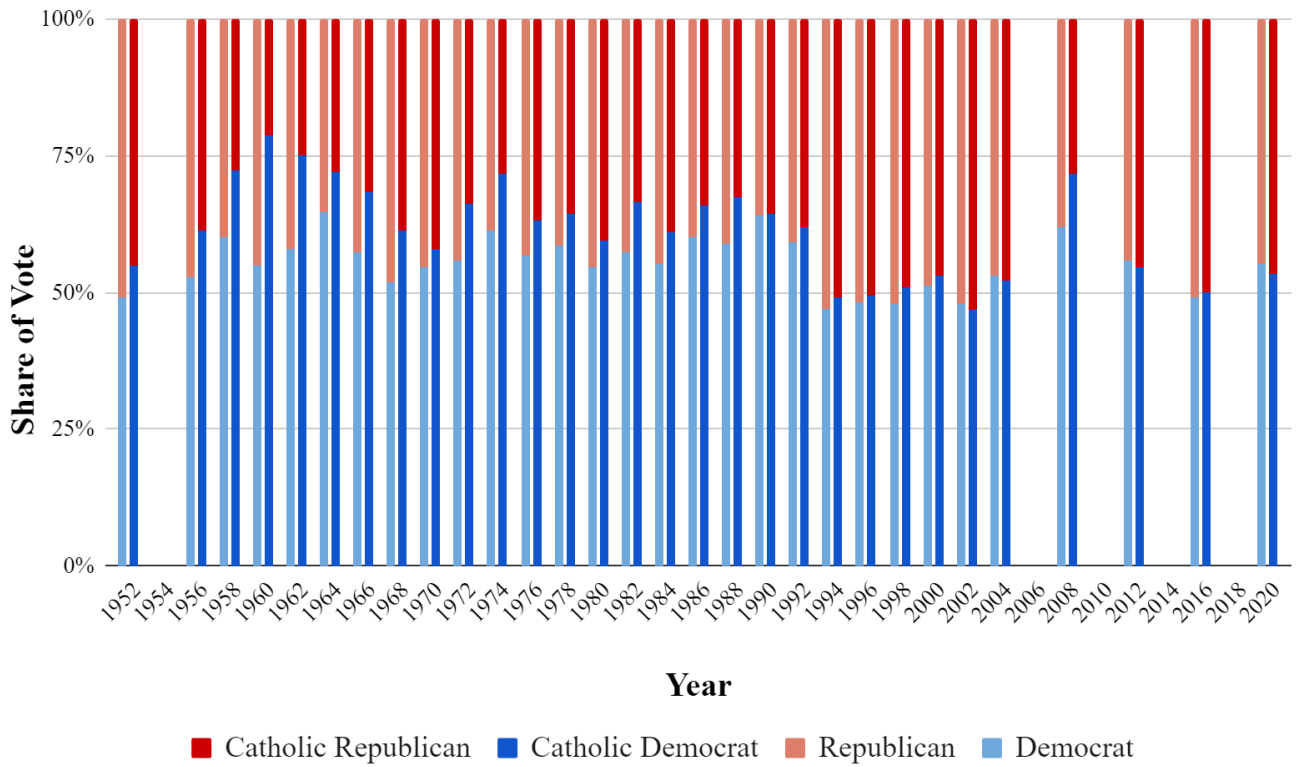
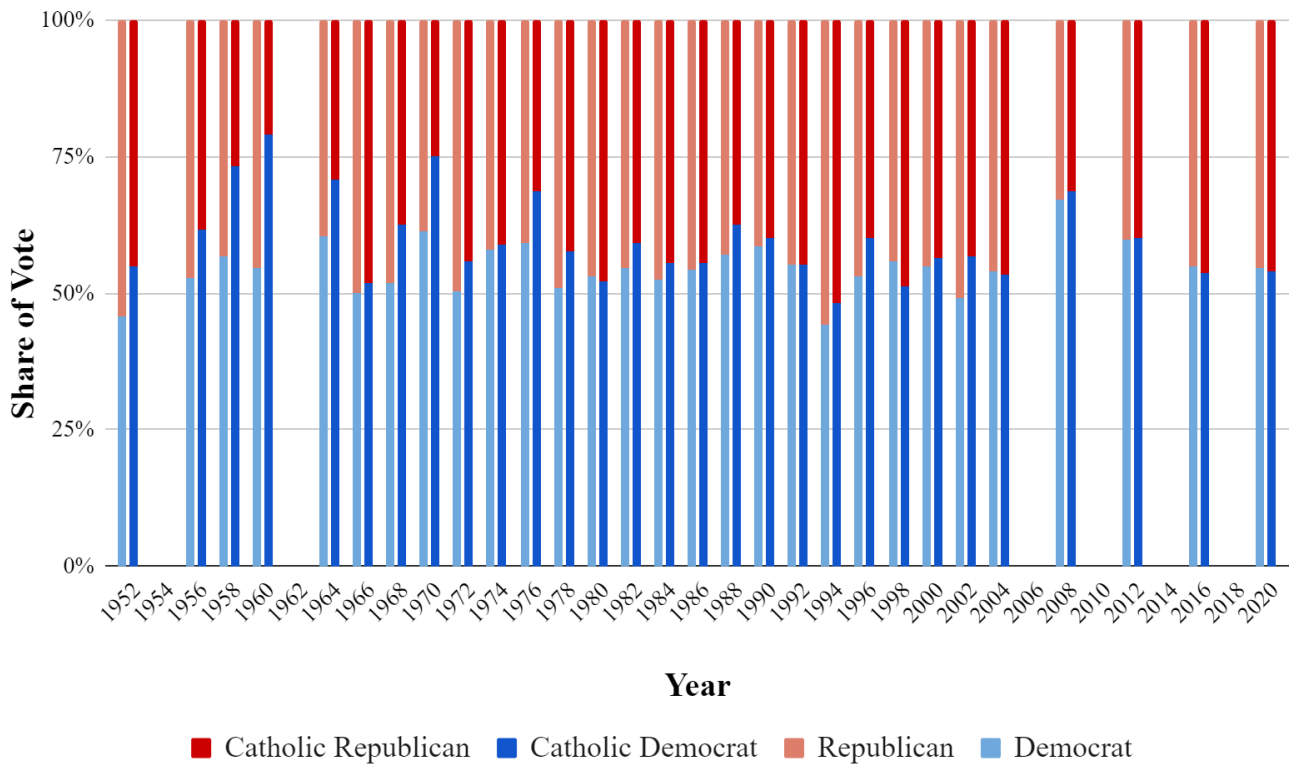


Figure 3: How the U.S votes vs. How American Catholics vote Two Party Share - Senate



This difference in voting behavior, while historically odd, does not necessarily present a problem in and of itself. As will be seen, there are political and social subjects on which Catholics are free to have a wide variety of opinions without the need to dissent actively from the Church. Thus, Catholics falling into conflicting political parties is not a problem in and of itself. However, there does seem to be an apparent pattern of foregoing Catholic doctrine in favor of party platforms. For example, Catholic Democrats have been accused by their opponents and their bishops of supporting abortion policies contrary to the teaching of the Church. Likewise, Catholic Democrats often accuse their Republican counterparts of eschewing Church teaching on the death penalty. The question of who is and who is not outside of the legitimate bounds of the Catholic Church will be considered later in this essay, but the conundrum illustrates the problematic situation American Catholicism finds itself in politically.

Part 1: Philosophical Foundations of the Conflict

Hyper-Individualism and Catholic social teaching

Consideration of the most important events involved in the political division of the American Catholic Church depends on understanding the competing philosophical underpinnings of both American and Catholic concepts of society. For the American political system, the ideas of John Locke (d. 1704) are foundational. Locke's *Second Treatise of Government* written in 1689 establishes the foundational natural rights of life, liberty, and property. Thomas Jefferson (d. 1826) would engrain these three principles into the national ethos with the Declaration of Independence in 1776. The Catholic concepts of society and politics find their origin in the Gospel and were transmitted through the work of philosophers and theologians

over the next 2000 years. At a cursory glance, both of the above philosophical systems are similar. Both Locke and the Catholic Church recognize the universal importance of reason and of God's dominion as the foundations of a moral system.³ However, key differences in their philosophies have played themselves out over time and have led to conclusions which come into stark contrast.

In the *Second Treatise*, Locke argues that man begins in a hypothetical "state of nature." In this state, man has his health (life), the ability to do as he pleases (liberty), and whatever he mixes his labor with nature and claims as his own (property). In this state, man can use his reason to understand the moral law and can discern good and evil. Locke admits the state of nature involves a serious inconvenience: if all men can do as they please, then some men might take the lives, liberty, or property of others. Thus, many are left at risk of either losing their means of survival or possibly their very lives. Because of this, men leave the state of nature and consent to live with one another under the rule of the law of reason in the form of society. Society then forms a government for the sake of protection and order. When men create society and government, they consent to modify their rights to achieve this basic protection. In the philosophy of Locke, the individual precedes society and government. If society or government fail to protect the individual or breach their basic rights, then the individual has a right to withdraw their consent and cease to participate in society and government.

Catholic social theory is different. Using the philosophy of both Aristotle (d. 332 BC) and St. Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274 AD), the Church recognizes humans as social animals.⁴ Therefore,

³ John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, ed. C. B. Macpherson (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, 1980), ch. 2, § 6

⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. C. I. Litzinger (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1964) Lect. 1, para. 4. <https://isidore.co/aquinas/english/Ethics.htm>.

societies are not the biproduct of individual consent, but rather an integral part of human nature. To separate the person from society, or vice versa, is to assault human nature. In short, persons and society are inseparable.⁵ From this continuity, the Catholic concept of the common good arises. *Gaudium et Spes* states, “[the common good] is the sum total of the social conditions which allow people, either as groups or individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily.”⁶ Here a balance is struck: the good of a person cannot infringe or oppose the common good and in return, the common good must promote the good of persons.

While both the philosophies of Locke and the Church have as their cornerstones respect for the fulfillment of the individual, they differ on the source of that respect. For Locke, society and government are the product of individual consent. But for Catholics, society is an integral part of a person’s nature. In the contemporary era this difference has only become more marked with the warping of the philosophy of Locke into a sort of hyper-individualism. Permeating American politics today is the fear of society trampling on liberty. Any action by the government to restrict the actions of an individual is seen as suspect at best and tyrannical at worse. To be clear, Locke does not equate liberty with license, rather he conceives liberty as within the bounds of reason and the law of nature.⁷ But the concept of liberty as license has become all too common in contemporary political discourse. Political discussions on topics such as abortion, euthanasia, vaccinations, and firearms routinely evoke cries of tyranny for fear that this misconstrued concept of an individual’s “license-liberty” will be obstructed. Catholic professor

⁵ In short, the common good is the very condition without which there can be no individual or group fulfillment or good. See Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes*, in *Vatican Council II: Constitutions, Degrees, Declarations*, vol. 1 of *Vatican Council II*, ed. Austin Flannery (Northport: Costello, 2004) § 25.

⁶ *Ibid.*, § 26.

⁷ *Ibid.*

and author Thomas Storck fears this individualism has been so distorted in America to the point where any non-material reality, morals included, have become the sole purview of the individual,

Catholic thought does not see an individualistic social order as the ideal, but understands that society and even the political order must be evangelized and ought to reflect the teachings of the Gospel. But the individualism of American culture will not tolerate the notion that society can rightly propose any kind of transcendental vision of reality. Truth is always my own.⁸

American Jesuit John Courtney Murray (d. 1967) attempted to reconcile the philosophy of the Church and the United States throughout his career. However, even he recognized that the tendency of Lockean liberalism to devolve into a hyper-rationalistic and individualistic system which excludes any notion of a transcendental God or morality was opposed to the notion of Catholicism and Catholic thought.⁹

While the average American, or the average Catholic, is unlikely to entertain this sort of philosophical debate when moving through the political realm, the politics of America have been so permeated by hyper-individualism that he or she will likely encounter the idea in some way, shape or form. As he does so, if the person is a Catholic, there is the risk of straying further and further from the fundamental philosophy underlining his faith. As lay Catholics entered the political arena in full force throughout the 20th century, they became versed in the language of American individualism. This development would both affect and consequently be the effect of the political division within American Catholicism.

⁸ Thomas Storck, "What is the Christian Understanding of the Social Order?" *Ethika Politika*, March 11, 2015, <https://www.ethikapolitika.org/2015/03/11/what-is-the-christian-understanding-of-the-social-order>.

⁹ John Courtney Murray, "How Liberal is Liberalism?" *America* 75, (April 1946): 6-7, <https://library.georgetown.edu/woodstock/murray/1946a>.

Part 2: A Chronology of the Political Division

A Historiography

In regards to the political division among American Catholics in the 20th century, the best full length treatment of the matter can be found in William Prendergast's 1999 book *The Catholic Voter in American Politics: The Passing of the Democratic Monolith*.¹⁰ Prendergast concludes that a myriad of factors culminated in the Democratic Party losing a grip on the Catholic voting bloc as a whole. However, since Prendergast's 1999 work, the situation has changed. As shown by Figures 1-3, not only has the Democratic Party continued to lose Catholic votes, but since the early 2000's, Catholic voters now vote nearly identically with their fellow Americans.

Besides Prendergast, other scholars have touched on the topic, usually in longer works pertaining to American Catholic history as a whole. Additionally, some scholars have chosen to focus merely on one element of the political division as opposed to the overall treatment Prendergast presents. The following chronology will attempt to lay out the important events of American Catholic political history that contributed to the division while also taking into consideration the work of various scholars.

Strangers in Their Own Home

To say the Catholic Church in America has been in a unique situation from the beginning would be an understatement. Far from the shores of Catholic-Christian monarchs in Europe, the Catholic Church in America had been planted in the garden of Lockean liberalism. Unlike the

¹⁰ William B Prendergast, *The Catholic Voter in American Politics: The Passing of the Democratic Monolith* (Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1999).

Catholic Church in South America, the Catholic Church in North America would never achieve the same levels of prominence as her southern counterpart. Reflecting the anti-Catholicism of the Protestant Reformation, Puritans, Anglicans, Methodist and Lutherans all equally despised the dreaded arrival of papists to their shores of liberty. Even after the birth of the nation in 1776 and on into the 19th century, the Catholic Church struggled. The Church in the United States would remain a missionary territory (an ecclesial term for a yet to be fully matured church) until 1908. Catholics were, “a minority group wherever they lived, and the foreign character of both the laity and the clergy set them off from the mainstream of American society.”¹¹

The Church was also far from the organized ecclesial organization it is today. As immigrants began to move away from the urban center of the East Coast and into the Midwest and beyond, the Catholic populations would often be without priests and the sacraments. It was only in the latter half of the nineteenth century when a true diocesan system was established as immigrant priests flooded the Atlantic coast to pastor the flock of the United States.

Like the nation she was situated in, the Church in the United States came of age rapidly. For the first years of her history, the United States was regarded by much older European powers as a backwater nation with little significance other than her proximity to British Canada and Spanish South America. However, as the United States emerged from the Civil War and experienced the Industrial Revolution, America matured. In part this was marked by the destruction of the Spanish Empire by the United States in the Spanish American War in 1898; the international policies of President Theodore Roosevelt beginning in 1901; and the 1917 intervention of the United States into World War I. Unsurprisingly, about the same time London

¹¹ Jay Dolan, *Catholic Revivalism: The American Experience 1830-1900*, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1978) 3.

and Paris began to take Washington D.C. seriously, so too did Rome. The encyclical *Longinqua Oceani*, promulgated by Pope Leo XIII (d. 1903) in 1895, is evidence of this shift.¹² Pope Leo notes the maturity of the Church in America from the days of her infancy and praises the remarkable success of such a unique territory of the Church. Unsurprisingly, the successor to Leo, Pope Pius X (d. 1914), would end the missionary status of the American Church in 1908.¹³ The young Church in the United States now found herself on the same ecclesial level as the older churches of Europe.

Unlike these older churches in Europe, the American Church lacked a distinctive cultural quality. In the Old World, and indeed even in South America, the local Catholic churches had developed their own traditions and customs. Mexico had her devotion to our Lady of Guadalupe, France rode on the shoulders of St. Louis, and Italy touted the tomb of St. Peter. By contrast, the members of the Church in America continued the traditions of their ancestral homelands rather than form a distinctively American identity. The issue of course is the same issue Americans still grapple with today. Americans as a people do not have a grand and long history. A common language unites us, but most of our history, traditions, and customs are far from ancient. The most common element uniting Americans is their love of freedom and individualism. Unfortunately, this individualistic mark of being an American would be warped and, in some important ways, clash with Catholic teaching.

¹² Leo XIII, *Longinqua Oceani*, in *Documents of American Catholic History*, ed. John Tracy Ellis (Milwaukee, The Bruce Publishing Company, 1962), 495-507.

¹³ Dolan, *Catholic Revivalism*, 1.

First Fracture: Americanism

Predictably, the first growing pains of the Church revolved around the very question of American identity. As the bishops of the United States debated the direction of the American Church, heresy arose, or so European observers thought. The Americanism Controversy occurred in tandem with the influx of Catholic immigrants to the United States between 1885 and 1908.¹⁴ As a result, the American bishops started to debate how, or if, these immigrants should be “Americanized,” and what exactly this Americanization would entail. Bishops such as Cardinal James Gibbons of Baltimore (d. 1921) and Archbishop John Ireland of St. Paul (d. 1918) sought to combine American ideals and Catholicism as a way to assimilate the immigrant masses. This camp of “liberal” bishops wanted to send immigrants to a quasi-public school system in order to integrate them into American society. Opposed by Archbishop Michael Corrigan of New York (d. 1902), he and his “conservatives” worried about the integration of American ideals and modernism, which they ultimately saw as opposed to the Catholic faith.¹⁵

The matter would probably have been of little significance to the hierarchy in Rome as the United States was still a mission territory and far from an ecclesial powerhouse in the eyes of the Vatican. However, erroneous interpretations of this controversy soon reached the shores of Europe by way of the French. Anti-clerical republicans in France credited the flourishing of the Catholic Church in the United States to the American separation of church and state.¹⁶ This, along with other flamboyant and reckless words used by frenzied republican admirers, offended

¹⁴ For a more complete treatment on the Americanism controversy see, Thomas McAvoy, *The Great Crisis in American Catholic History 1895-1900* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1957).

¹⁵ Robert Emmett Curran, “Michael Augustine Corrigan and the Shaping of Conservative Catholicism in America, 1878-1895.” (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1974), www.proquest.com/docview/302734472?pq-origsite=gscholar&fromopenview=true.

¹⁶ John Tracy Ellis, *Documents of American Catholic History*, (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1962) 490-491.

the pious ears of conservative ecclesiastics in Europe who demanded that the Vatican rein in the supposedly rogue Americans.¹⁷ In 1899 Pope Leo XIII intervened in his carefully worded letter to the American hierarchy, *Testem Benevolentiae*.¹⁸ In his letter he gently condemned the idea of extreme individualism without referring to any American clerics in particular. For the American hierarchy, this message gave a *de facto* edge to conservative bishops and provided a warning as to how far Americanism and Americanizing could go.

An argument can be made that the Americanism controversy marks the beginning of a political division among American Catholics. After all, the bishops formed into “conservative” and “liberal” factions while they debated over elements of immigration. However, despite this debate, the Americanism controversy was not particularly political. The Americanism controversy was largely an ecclesial squabble, not a lay one.¹⁹ “Conservative” bishops did not align themselves with Republicans nor “liberals” with Democrats. However, the warning Pope Leo XIII issued proved to be apt. The threat of “Americanism” would eventually find a way into the minds of the laity. As American Catholics stewed alongside their non-Catholic compatriots in the Great American Melting Pot, the heresy condemned by Pope Leo would bubble into a hyper-individualism which would come to rock the Church and contribute to the political division of the American Church nearly a century later.

The Catholic Labor Movement and Democratic Hegemony

For the greater part of their existence, Catholic Americans were overwhelmingly Democrats. Prior to the New Deal, Catholics were inclined to the party because a majority were

¹⁷ Max Leclerc, “*Choses d’Amérique. Les crises économique et religieuse aux États-Unis*, in *Documents of American Catholic History*, ed. John Tracy Ellis (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1962), 491-494.

¹⁸ Leo XIII, *Testem Benevolentiae*, in *Documents of American Catholic History*, ed. John Tracy Ellis (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1962), 553-542.

¹⁹ McAvoy, *The Great Crisis in American Catholic History*, 261.

immigrants. This tendency, along with the anti-Catholic disdain found among members of the Republican Party, kept Catholics as a loyal Democratic demographic. Following this pattern, the first Catholic to run for President, New York Governor Al Smith (d. 1944), ran as a Democrat. This pattern would continue after the New Deal. As shown in Figures 1-3, Catholics in the mid-20th century voted Democratic more often than the rest of the population in presidential races, and they overwhelmingly voted for Democrats in both House and Senate races.²⁰

The early and mid-20th century often saw Catholics as proponents of liberal social policies. Labor and anti-poverty activist Dorothy Day (d. 1980) was among the most prominent of these Catholics. Her pre-conversion foray into leftist-anarchist politics made her friendly to some of their sentiments, and her Catholic Worker Movement and its newspaper bore a striking resemblance to socialist newspapers of the time. Additionally, labor leader Caesar Chavez (d. 1993) incorporated both Democratic pro-labor politics and Catholic spirituality into his largely Hispanic Catholic movement. Michael Harrington (d. 1989), a product of the Catholic Worker movement who later became an atheist, wrote the influential exposé on poverty *The Other America* in 1962.²¹

Given the context of the times, the political layout of American Catholics makes perfect sense. Catholics are called to serve the oppressed, give aid to the immigrant, and respect the rights of workers. The pro-union, immigrant friendly Democratic Party was a logical choice for Catholics. The recent encyclical of Pope Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum* (1893) gave ample outline and magisterial support to these endeavors.²² Additionally, none of the official tenants of

²⁰ Valentino and Iyengar, “American National Election Survey.”

²¹ Michael Harrington, *The Other America* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1962).

²² Leo XIII. *Rerum Novarum*, in *Catholic Social Teaching Collection*, ed. Robert Barron, (Park Ridge, Illinois: Word on Fire, 2020).

Democrats at this time contradicted with the Catholic faith.²³ When choosing between the two parties, choosing the Democratic Party seemed both reasonable and faithful.

In *The American Catholic Experience*, Jay Dolan focuses on the wedding of Catholics to the Liberal Reform movement of the mid 1900's. Starting with the reforms of Franklin Roosevelt's administration and culminating in the labor movement, Dolan writes:

It was clear by the 1950s the marriage between Catholicism and the American liberal reform movement was consummated. The idea that Catholicism and liberalism were compatible was no longer in question. Catholic support for the labor movement during the 1930s and 1940s was a major reason for this development.²⁴

This wedding would give lay Catholics a basis to apply Catholic social teaching throughout the tumultuous era of labor reforms and civil rights. Catholics such as Dorothy Day,²⁵ Cesar Chavez,²⁶ and Matthew Ahmann (2001)²⁷ would lead lay Catholics in implementing Catholic social teaching through the liberal reform movement. Once the Democratic Party absorbed the liberal movement under John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson, Catholics became solidly wed to the party.

²³ When reading this, popular support of Jim Crow laws and other racist policies by so-called "Dixiecrats" might come to mind as an objection for faithful Catholic support for the Democratic Party in the early 20th century. For the purposes of this analysis, only official national platforms formulated during presidential elections are used to determine party policies. As far as these were concerned, the Democratic Party did have official platforms against the migration of Asians in the early 20th century. But between 1928 and into the late 1930's, the platforms of the Democratic Party are either race-neutral or even slightly friendly towards racial equality. After WWII, the Democratic Party nationally would become increasingly supportive of racial equality and would fully embrace the movement in the 1950's and 60's. See John Woolley and Gerhard Peters, *The American Presidency Project*, University of California in Santa Barbara, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/>.

²⁴ Jay Dolan, *The American Catholic Experience: A History from Colonial Times to the Present* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992) 407.

²⁵ See Mel Piehl, *Breaking Bread: The Catholic Worker and the Origin of Catholic Radicalism in America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982).

²⁶ See Bennett Spencer, "Civil Religion in a New Context: The Mexican -American Faith of César Chávez," in *Religion and Political Power*, eds. Gustavo Benavides and M. W. Daly (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989).

²⁷ See Paul T. Murray, "From the Sidelines to the Front Lines - Mathew Ahmann Leads American Catholics into the Civil Rights Movement," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 107, no. 1 (2014): 77-115.

The Spirit of Vatican II and Kennedy's Gambit

The 1960's brought about a revolution in American Catholicism. On January 25, 1959, Pope John XXIII (d. 1963) declared his intention to call an ecumenical council, and the Roman Curia was busy in preparation for the opening of the council in October of 1962. Neither the Church in America, nor in the rest of the world, had anticipated the announcement by the Holy Father and excitement swept through the Church universal. Meanwhile in the United States, Catholics were elated by the election of the first Catholic president in 1960. Unfortunately, both happy occasions would further set the stage for the political division in the American Church. Indeed, the ideological elements underlying these events would reveal themselves later.

Beginning with Vatican II, the Council placed an emphasis on three key points, namely freedom of conscience, religious liberty,²⁸ and ecumenism.²⁹ The first two would later be misinterpreted as justification for dissent from the Magisterium when a layperson disagreed with official Church teaching. Increased ecumenism would give rise to contact with Protestants and eventual adoption of some of their political preferences.

Just as warping of the Second Vatican Council would come later to shake the Church, so would some of the actions of the first Catholic president. Ever wary of the historic anti-Catholic bias of the nation, John F. Kennedy (d. 1963) set out to placate any worries in a speech to the Protestant Greater Houston Ministerial Association.³⁰ In his speech he emphasized his belief in a separation of church and state. He stated:

²⁸ See Vatican Council II, *Dignitatis Humanae*, in *Vatican Council II: Constitutions, Degrees, Declarations*, vol. 1 of *Vatican Council II*, ed. Austin Flannery (Northport: Costello, 2004).

²⁹ See Vatican Council II, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, in *Vatican Council II: Constitutions, Degrees, Declarations*, vol. 1 of *Vatican Council II*, ed. Austin Flannery, (Northport: Costello, 2004).

³⁰ John F. Kennedy, "Faith Speech," September 12, 1960, speech, Greater Houston Ministerial Association, Houston, Texas, web file, 11:14, <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=16920600>.

I believe in an America where the separation of church and state is absolute, where no Catholic prelate would tell the president (should he be Catholic) how to act, and no Protestant minister would tell his parishioners for whom to vote.³¹

Regarding how he would act in regard to Church teachings and moral issues, Kennedy said:

Whatever issue may come before me as president, if I should be elected — on birth control, divorce, censorship, gambling, or any other subject — I will make my decision in accordance with these views, in accordance with what my conscience tells me to be the national interest, and without regard to outside religious pressures or dictates. And no power or threat of punishment could cause me to decide otherwise.

But if the time should ever come — and I do not concede any conflict to be remotely possible — when my office would require me to either violate my conscience or violate the national interest, then I would resign the office; and I hope any other conscientious public servant would do likewise.³²

As will be seen later, this section of the speech has been echoed by Catholic politicians when the planks of their party platform come into conflict with the moral teachings of the Church. The politician justifies his or her dissent from the Church by compartmentalizing the morals held by their faith and the morals held by their party. While Kennedy himself never faced such a moral conflict in office, many Catholic politicians since have. Claire Wolfteich in her book *American Catholics Through the 20th Century* identifies this moment as crucial to American Catholic politics. She states:

John F. Kennedy won for Catholics public visibility and a place. Yet I would argue that he did so at an unacceptable theological cost. When so many laity yearned to integrate their lives, to overcome fragmentation, Kennedy argued for a compartmentalized faith.³³

³¹ Ibid, 1:37-1:54.

³² Kennedy, "Faith Speech," 8:56-9:48.

³³ Claire Wolfteich, *American Catholics through the Twentieth Century* (New York: The Crossroads Publishing Company, 2001) 80.

While the words of Wolfeich might be harsh against the sentiments of the late president, subsequent history illustrates how Kennedy's interpretation would later be utilized by Catholic politicians to separate the morals of the faith from their public agendas.

***Humanae Vitae* and respect for the Magisterium**

During and after the council, various Protestant denominations shifted their views on birth control to be in line with the commonly accepted views of the contemporary era. In America, many Catholics were hopeful the Church would do the same. Indeed, a special pontifical commission was set up in 1963 to discuss the matter.³⁴ The conclusions of this commission were ultimately leaked to the public and suggested that a possible change in Church teaching was imminent. However, Pope Paul VI (d. 1978) kept in line with previous tradition and overruled his own commission, issuing *Humanae Vitae* on July 25, 1968. This encyclical was extremely unpopular in America, with 54 % of Catholics opposed to its teaching.³⁵ William V. D'Antonio and his colleagues in *American Catholics Today* argue that this was the defining moment in the split in the American Church. They argue that a wide spectrum of religious belief had been expanding in the Church over the past decades and that *Humanae Vitae* caused the final fragmentation. The first camp were the "conservative" Catholics who placed great value on the institutional authority and tradition of the Church. To them, *Humanae Vitae* upheld the credibility of the Church and her tradition by not contradicting previous Church teaching on the matter.³⁶ Opposed to them were "progressives." They were more concerned with individual

³⁴ Wolfeich, *American Catholics*, 91.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 93.

³⁶ William V. D'Antonio, James D. Davison, Dean R. Hoge and Mary L. Gautier. *American Catholics Today: New Realities of Their Faith and Their Church*. (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2007) 89.

autonomy and believed that spiritual authority resided in the individual believer.³⁷ The test of obedience to *Humanae Vitae* brought this division into the public light.

However, this religious division did not yet materialize into a political division, possibly because of the nonpolitical nature of the issue. Whether Catholics did or did not use contraception was of little concern to the national body politic. Thus, while a Catholic might hold artificial birth control to be moral or immoral, this issue would not necessarily cause a discernable political split. Catholic voting patterns changed little before and after *Humanae Vitae*.

What can be presumed is that this widespread rejection of the Magisterium after *Humanae Vitae* might have desensitized American Catholics to the importance of the Church's Magisterium. Thus, when later political dissent arose against the Magisterium, dissenting from the Church publicly seemed less objectionable.

The Point of No Return: Roe v. Wade (1973)

The Supreme Court legalized abortion before the third trimester nationwide in the 1973 landmark decision *Roe v. Wade*.³⁸ By the time of the next presidential election cycle in 1976, each party would adopt either pro-choice³⁹ or anti-abortion⁴⁰ campaign platforms. The Democratic Party quickly adopted a defense of the Supreme Court's decision.⁴¹ Thus, Catholics within the Democratic Party had to decide whom to disobey: the party or the Church. Dave

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 89-90.

³⁸ *Roe v. Wade*, 410 U.S. 113 (1973), <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/410/113/>.

³⁹ "1976 Democratic Party Platform," The American Presidency Project, University of California in Santa Barbara.

⁴⁰ "Republican Party Platform of 1976," The American Presidency Project, University of California in Santa Barbara, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/1976-democratic-party-platform>.

⁴¹ Dave Bridge, "How the Republican Party Used Supreme Court Attacks to Pursue Catholic Voters," *U.S. Catholic Historian* 34, no. 4 (December 2016): 99. <http://rave.ohiolink.edu/ejournals/article/344803484>.

Bridge argues that the Republican Party had started to draw disillusioned Catholic Democrats into their party in the 1960's and 1970's, and the 1973 decision accelerated their efforts.⁴²

William Prendergast, too, points to this era as the fall of the Democratic stronghold of Catholics.⁴³ Catholics who stayed behind in the Democratic party now had to deal with a disconnect between their politics and the Church. The National Conference of Catholic Bishops (NCCB) involved itself in the politics around the Roe issue. The NCCB (which would later become the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops) launched an initiative to amend the U.S. Constitution and reverse the effect of Roe.⁴⁴ This would eventually spawn the National Right to Life Committee where Evangelicals and Catholics worked in tandem to end abortion.⁴⁵ The initiative of the Catholic Bishops in America was directly in contrast to the post-Roe Democratic Platform of 1976 which stated,

We fully recognize the religious and ethical nature of the concerns which many Americans have on the subject of abortion. We feel, however, that it is undesirable to attempt to amend the U.S. Constitution to overturn the Supreme Court decision in this area.⁴⁶

The bishops were invited by the born-again Baptist Democrat Jimmy Carter to discuss the issue of abortion, one of the first meetings of its kind. In the end, the prelates expressed their “disappointment” at Carter’s willingness to avoid all together the decision of the Court, despite the president’s supposed personal pro-life convictions.⁴⁷ Catholic politicians such as New York Governor Mario Cuomo (d. 2015) would come under the public scrutiny of his archbishop, John

⁴² Bridge, "How the Republican...", 79-106.

⁴³ See Prendergast, *The Catholic Voter in American Politics*.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 169-170.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 170.

⁴⁶ “1976 Democratic Party Platform.”

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

Cardinal O'Connor (d. 2000), for his pro-choice convictions.⁴⁸ Thus, it might be argued that *Roe* signals a definitive turning point for three reasons; the adoption of the pro-abortion plank in the Democratic platform, the cultivation of Catholics into the Republican Party, and the heightened political involvement of the Catholic hierarchy. Yet, while *Roe v. Wade* might seem to be the definitive point of the division *prima facie*, the reality is more complex. Catholic voting patterns did not change until the mid-1990's and the early 2000's. The division did not occur in 1973 when *Roe* was decided, nor when the Democratic party adopted a pro-choice platform and the Republicans a pro-life one in 1976. Rather, the division occurred slowly as the turn of the century approached.

While the Democratic platforms of 1976, 1980, and 1984 merely aimed to uphold the decision of the Supreme Court in *Roe v. Wade*, the 1988 platform takes a sharp turn. In this year the Democratic Party announced: "the fundamental right of reproductive choice should be guaranteed regardless of ability to pay." In 1992 the party platform advocated for the goal of making abortions "less necessary," but at the same time advocated for making the service more accessible. Similar language can be found in the platforms of 1996, 2000, 2004, 2008 and 2012. 2016 saw the Democrats adopt the repeal of the Hyde Amendment as part of their platform and proposed repealing the Helms Amendment to allow the Federal Government to provide money for abortions outside the United States. In 2020, the Democratic Platform dropped any mention of attempting to make abortions rare, as the previous platforms had.⁴⁹ The gradual adoption of an increasingly pro-abortion platform by the Democratic Party in the years after *Roe* placed Catholic Democrats in a difficult position. The subsequent purging of pro-life Democrats from

⁴⁸ See Robert N. Karrer, "Abortion Politics: The Context of the Cuomo-O'Connor Debate, 1980–1984." *U.S. Catholic Historian* 34, no 1 (2016).

⁴⁹ Woolley and Peters, *The American Presidency Project*.

the party in the early and mid-1980's failed to ease the minds of some Catholic voters.⁵⁰ Over time, some Catholic Democrats such as Gov. John Bel Edwards of Louisiana⁵¹ or Gov. Bob Casey Sr. of Pennsylvania (d. 2000),⁵² would remain in the party but would work against the increasingly pro-abortion platform. Others such as President Joseph Biden would begin their political career working to limit various abortion practices, but in the end expand both the scope of and funding for abortion.⁵³ However, some in this group, including Biden, would later advocate federal protections for abortion and for codifying into federal law the precedents of *Roe v. Wade* (1973) and *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* (1992) after their overturning in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health* (2022).⁵⁴ Finally, some Catholic Democrats such as Rep. Nancy Pelosi, would work to expand both funding and access to abortion throughout their tenures in office.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ Karrer, "Abortion Politics," 107-108.

⁵¹ Gov. Edwards, a Catholic Democrat, has signed multiple laws restricting abortion in Louisiana. The most recent of them is SB 342 which was signed into law as Act 525 on June 22, 2022. The law bans abortion in Louisiana after six weeks into the pregnancy. See Office of the Governor of Louisiana. "Notice: Bills Signed by Gov. Edwards." June, 22, 2022. gov.louisiana.gov/index.cfm/newsroom/detail/3728.

⁵² The pro-life laws of Gov. Casey lead to him being named as a defendant in *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*. See *Planned Parenthood of Southeastern Pa. v. Casey*, 505 U.S. 833 (1992), <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/505/833/>.

⁵³ During his tenure as a senator Mr. Biden voted consistently for the bans on partial-birth abortions, including the Partial-Birth Abortion Ban Act of 2003. However, Mr. Biden also voted for multiple bills aimed at expanding both access to and funding for abortion, including S Amdt. 593 to lift restrictions on use of Department of Defense facilities for abortions. See both "Roll Call Vote 105th Congress-1st Session," United States Senate, July 10, 1997, and "Roll Call Vote 108th Congress-1st Session," United States Senate, October 21, 2003.

⁵⁴ See both U.S. Congress, House, *Women's Health Protection Act of 2022*, HR 8296, 117th Cong., 2nd sess., Passed in House July 15, 2022, and Joseph Biden, "Statement from President Biden on the Senate Vote on the Women's Health Protection Act," May 11, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/05/11/statement-from-president-biden-on-the-senate-vote-on-the-womens-health-protection-act/>.

⁵⁵ Mrs. Pelosi voted against each version of the Partial-Birth Abortion Ban Act, including the final version in 2003. She also voted against the Hyde Amendment which prevents Medicaid funding for being used for non-life-threatening abortions and voted to expand abortion access through H. Amdt. 209, which would have allowed for military members to procure abortions in overseas military hospitals. She also voted for the *Women's Health Protection Act*. See "Roll Call 216 | Bill Number H.R. 1815," Clerk of the United States House of Representatives, May 25, 2005. "Roll Call 309 | Bill Number H.R. 2518," Clerk of the United States House of Representatives, June 30, 1993. and "Roll Call 530 | Bill Number S.3," Clerk of the United States House of Representatives, October 2, 2003.

Post-Roe Protestant Ecumenism

Another variable in the post-Roe era contributing to the division among Catholic voters was increased contact and dialogue with conservative Protestants. The declaration of Vatican II on ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, encouraged Catholics to pray and dialogue with their Protestant brothers and sisters.⁵⁶ Unsurprisingly, the subsequent exchanges between the two traditions led to some Protestant concepts emerging among the Catholic laity. A profound theological example of this comes in the First Catholic Charismatic Renewal which started in the late 1960's. The First Renewal emphasized the working of the Holy Spirit in the individual person and was suspicious of clerical involvement.⁵⁷ This emphasis on personal experiences with the Holy Spirit and deemphasis on the role of the hierarchy brought some Catholics theologically closer to their Pentecostal and Evangelical brothers and sisters and undoubtedly marked a weakening of trust in the authority of the hierarchy. Concurrently, the post-Roe pro-life movement helped to increase the influence of the conservative ideals from American Evangelicalism on American Catholicism. As Seth Dowland writes in his paper “‘Family Values’ and the Formation of a Christian Right Agenda,” the collaboration between Catholics and Conservative Christians through the pro-life movement helped to bring Catholics into the conservative fold, and eventually into the Republican Party.⁵⁸

In the end, no one event caused the Catholic Church in America to divide politically. Each type of event ranging from the theological to the political provided an impetus for the Catholic voting block to divide. The individualism and Americanism simmering under the

⁵⁶ See Vatican Council II, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, in *Vatican Council II*, ed. Austin Flannery.

⁵⁷ For a full treatment of the First Catholic Charismatic Renewal, see Vincent M. Walsh, *A Key to the Charismatic Renewal in the Catholic Church*. (St. Meinrad: Abbey Press, 1974).

⁵⁸ Seth Dowland, “‘Family Values’ and the Formation of a Christian Right Agenda,” *Church History* 78, no. 3 (September 2009): 606–631.

surface during the first part of the century came to a boil in the American response to *Humanae Vitae*, and finally boiled over in the post-Roe United States. Thus, Catholics seemingly united in faith became divided in politics.

Part 3: American Politics and Communion with the Church

Clearly by the end of the 20th century, and indeed into the 21st century, there exists a political divide among American Catholics. But is this division of any moral or political importance? Catholics themselves only comprise a minority of the population at 21%. But while Catholics only comprise a minority of the population, they make up more than a quarter of Congress at 27%.⁵⁹ The way Catholics vote still holds sway on the national body politic.

Additionally, one could reasonably picture a political system where Catholics choose different political parties based on prudential decisions and informed preferences while remaining true to their Catholic faith. Thus, a division in voting behavior among Catholics is not a problem. However, this does not seem to be the case. There are, and probably will remain, many Catholics who choose the doctrines of their political party over the doctrines of the Church. Besides occupying the headlines of Catholic and secular media, this topic is profoundly important for it involves the moral issue of the relationship between truth and power. For Catholics, this relationship involves the magisterial teachings of the Church as the canons of truth as that truth's relationship to civil and political life. Assent to the core dogmatic and doctrinal teachings of the Church is essential to a Catholic's informed conscience. If orthodoxy, or right practice derived from true doctrine, underlies the moral activity of men and women in

⁵⁹ Jeff Diamant, "Faith on the Hill: The religious composition of the 118th Congress," *Pew Research Center*, January 3, 2023, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2023/01/03/faith-on-the-hill-2023/>.

politics, then the connection between what the Church teaches and how a Catholic behaves is part and parcel of political life.

The Authority of the Magisterium

The teaching office of the Church, known as the Magisterium, is responsible for the pronouncement and interpretations the truths (moral and theological) bequeathed to the Church by Christ. The Magisterium does not create dogma or doctrine; rather the Magisterium exists to serve and interpret the revelation of God as passed down through Scripture and Tradition. As the Second Vatican Council teaches:

But the task of giving an authentic interpretation of the Word of God, whether in its written form or in the form of Tradition, has been entrusted to the living teaching office of the Church alone. Its authority in this matter is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ. Yet this Magisterium is not superior to the Word of God but is its servant.⁶⁰

To be clear, not everything pronounced by a man with a miter represents the binding and authentic Magisterium of the Church. If the pope were to declare his love for Hawaiian pizza, the faithful would not be bound to order the dish. Neither would the Archbishop of Chicago declaring fidelity to the Bears prohibit the faithful of the archdioceses from rooting for the Packers. Rather, only certain statements and documents carry the weight of the Magisterium, some more so than others. Avery Cardinal Dulles in his book *Magisterium: Teacher and Guardian of the Faith* creates a simplified list of such statements as measured by the connection of their contents and circumstances to the Church's own "Profession of Faith." These levels are:

1. Doctrines of Faith (belong to the primary object of infallibility)
 - a. contained in Scripture⁶¹

⁶⁰ Vatican Council II, *Dei Verbum*, in *Vatican Council II: Constitutions, Degrees, Declarations*, vol. 1 of *Vatican Council II*, ed. Austin Flannery (Northport: Costello, 2004) § 10.

⁶¹ Those truths which were divinely revealed by God in Sacred Scripture are also considered infallible. However, the intent of the sacred author, historical circumstance, and the genre of each portion of Sacred Scripture must be taken into account when determining the message of God in Scripture. For more information see Vatican Council II, *Dei*

- b. defined (by a pope or council)
 - c. taught by the ordinary and universal magisterium as divinely revealed.
2. Doctrines infallibly taught as inseparably connected to revelation (belong to the secondary object of infallibility)
 3. Doctrines authoritatively but non-infallibly taught by the Magisterium⁶²

The first level of teaching is to be held by the faithful with “firm faith.”⁶³ Items in this first category are an exercise of the primary object of the infallibility of the Church as protected by the Holy Spirit and include, “everything contained in the word of God, whether written or handed down in Tradition, which the Church, either by a solemn judgment or by the ordinary and universal Magisterium, sets forth to be believed as divinely revealed.”⁶⁴ These types of teachings, called revealed truths, include solemnly declared revealed truths such as a dogma defined by an ecumenical council, or a dogma declared *ex cathedra* by the pope. Non-solemnly proclaimed revealed truths can also be found in this category, such as the belief that murder is a sin or other dogmas taught in Sacred Scripture.⁶⁵ These teachings hold the greatest weight in any exercise of the Magisterium. To deny an article of faith in this category places the person within the realm of the canonical crime of heresy.⁶⁶ As Dulles writes, “Obstinate denial or obstinate

Verbum, in *Vatican Council II*, ed. Austin Flannery, § 11-13. For a recent reiteration on Church teaching regarding the infallibility of scripture, see Vatican Council I, *Dei Filius*, in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Council*, ed. Norman Tanner (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1990) chap. 3, § 8.

⁶² Avery Cardinal Dulles, *Magisterium: Teacher and Guardian of the Faith* (Naples, Florida: Sapientia Press of Ave Maria University, 2007), 83.

⁶³ See Vatican Council II, *Dei Verbum*, in *Vatican Council II*, ed. Austin Flannery, § 5.

⁶⁴ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Profession of Faith” (Rome: Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 1989). Also see Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium*, in *Vatican Council II: Constitutions, Degrees, Declarations*, vol. 1 of *Vatican Council II*, ed. Austin Flannery (Northport: Costello, 2004) § 25.

⁶⁵ Joseph Ratzinger and Tarcisio Bertone, “Commentary on the Profession of Faith’s Concluding Paragraphs,” *Origins* 28 (1998): § 11.

⁶⁶ *Code of Canon Law* (Vatican City, Vatican City: 2022), cc. 750, 751, https://www.vatican.va/archive/cod-iuris-canonici/cic_index_en.html.

doubt of any doctrine of the Catholic faith is a sin of heresy. It makes one liable to the canonical penalties specified for heresy, including excommunication.”⁶⁷

The second level of authoritative instruction includes “everything definitively proposed by the Church regarding teaching on faith and morals.”⁶⁸ These are expounded in a similar manner as the above: in solemn council, *ex cathedra* by the pope, or through the ordinary and universal magisterium.⁶⁹ An exercise of the secondary object of infallibility,⁷⁰ these doctrines are to be firmly accepted and held by the faithful.⁷¹ These doctrines are connected to the revealed teachings of the Church mentioned above, and the connection can be either logical or historical.⁷² An example of a doctrine logically connected to a revealed truth would be the grave evil of euthanasia.⁷³ An example of a doctrine with a historical connection would be the doctrine of the male-only priesthood.⁷⁴ While Dulles does not attach the word heresy to one who is in continual denial of these claims, he states those who deny them are no longer in full communion with the Catholic Church.⁷⁵

In the last category are non-definitive teachings of the bishops and the popes. These require the “religious submission of will and intellect” by the faithful.⁷⁶ *Lumen Gentium* states,

Religious submission of will and intellect is to be given in a special way to the authentic Magisterium of the Roman pontiff even when he is not speaking *ex cathedra*; in such a

⁶⁷ Dulles, *Magisterium: Teacher and Guardian*, 88.

⁶⁸ CDF, “Profession.”

⁶⁹ Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium*, in *Vatican Council II*, ed Austin Flannery § 25.

⁷⁰ Dulles, *Magisterium: Teacher and Guardian*, 88-89.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² Dulles, *Magisterium: Teacher and Guardian*, 88.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 89.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, as quoting Ratzinger and Bertone, “Commentary on the Profession of Faith’s Concluding Paragraphs,” 117.

⁷⁶ CDF, “Profession.”

way, that is, that his supreme Magisterium is respectfully acknowledged, and the judgment expressed by him is sincerely adhered to.⁷⁷

This category constitutes the largest number of teachings and includes concepts subject to change due to temporal conditions, teachings decided by the prudence of the author, or other teachings beyond the protection of infallibility. In the case of these teachings, preference should be given to the Church, but extremely rare circumstances could arise where one could validly dissent from these teachings without jeopardizing communion with the Church.⁷⁸ However, the tradition of the Church does not condone grandiose public displays of disagreement. Rather, the Church encourages a private and respectful dialogue with ecclesial authorities when one truly believes there has been error so as to maintain respect for the authority of bishops and to avoid scandalizing the faithful.⁷⁹

Unlike the former two categories, there is no defined state into which Catholics enter when they deny a teaching of this third category. While heresy and loss of communion accompany denial of doctrines found within the first two categories, there is no such state defined for denial of teachings in the third category. But not much imagination is required to envision when one dissenting from a teaching of this third category could end up dissenting from a teaching in one of the other infallibly protected categories. Catholics who disagree with one of these third level teachings and in the process also publicly deny the authority of their bishop to issue such teachings, find themselves rejecting the doctrine of the teaching authority of the episcopacy, a teaching protected by the primary object of infallibility, and thus would be themselves liable to the canonical penalty of heresy.

⁷⁷ Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium*, in Vatican Council II, ed Austin Flannery, § 25.

⁷⁸ Dulles, *Magisterium: Teacher and Guardian*, 93-94.

⁷⁹ Dulles, *Magisterium: Teacher and Guardian*, 96-99 as citing Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Donum Veritatis*, (Rome: Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 1990) § 24-31, 122-123.

Degrees of Cooperation in Evil

In addition to the above, Catholicism also has a concept about the degrees of cooperation in sin. As the Catechism states;

Sin is a personal act. Moreover, we have a responsibility for the sins committed by others when *we cooperate in them*:

- by participating directly and voluntarily in them;
- by ordering, advising, praising, or approving them;
- by not disclosing or not hindering them when we have an obligation to do so;
- by protecting evil doers.⁸⁰

The key words here are “by participating directly and voluntarily.” For example, if a Catholic voter at the polls is confronted with a choice between two politicians, and both politicians supported some policies which stood in opposition to the teachings of the Church, a Catholic could make a prudential judgment in selecting the lesser of two evils and vote for one of them without formally cooperating in the sin of the politician. The action of the Catholic voter (voting) is only an indirect, and possibly unintentional, participation in the evils the politician might support. Additionally, a Catholic voter could not be blamed for voluntarily supporting either candidate since only two undesirable options were given.

All being said, in keeping with the guidance found in the rest of this portion of the *Catechism*, a Catholic voter would be required to denounce the anti-Catholic positions of such a candidate and should refrain from praising such a candidate for those specific actions. A Catholic voter also could not vote for a candidate *because* they contradict the teaching of the Church, but

⁸⁰ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed., (New York: Doubleday, 1995) para. 1868

rather they could do so under certain circumstances *despite* the contrary positions of the politician.

However, for the Catholic politicians themselves there is less of an avenue for escape. A politician is almost always the immediate actor in a political situation, and thus is almost always directly and voluntarily participating in political acts. If a Catholic politician decides to take up a position clearly condemned by the Church and proceeds to act on such a position in legislation or other political action, such a politician would be directly committing a sin.⁸¹

American Political Policies and the Magisterium

So what acts or policies may or may not a Catholic enact or support? What, then, are the political positions that remain orthodox? Here follows a list of political topics and the positions a Catholic could promote while remaining faithful to the teachings of the Church. This list is not entirely inclusive but offers some examples.

Abortion

As chronicled above, the decision of the Supreme Court in *Roe v. Wade* (1973) has caused the hierarchy of the American Catholic Church to come into conflict with politicians, specifically those in the pro-choice Democratic Party. The Church has throughout her history condemned the practice of abortion. The *Catechism* quotes the strong condemnations of abortion

⁸¹ For more information see Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. "Doctrinal Note on some questions regarding The Participation of Catholics in Political Life." (Rome: Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 2002) www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20021124_politica_en.html.

by both the *Didache*⁸² in A.D. 100 and *Gaudium et Spes*⁸³ in A.D. 1965 as evidence of this unchanging position.

However, a pro-choice Catholic could simply argue this teaching is not authoritative or binding on them. But the Magisterium does not support this. While canonical penalties and speculation about when life begins has ebbed and flowed with new scientific discoveries, the Church has always condemned the practice of abortion.⁸⁴ This teaching throughout Church history would qualify the prohibition of abortion as a doctrine taught universally by the Magisterium. Thus, denial would either be heretical or at the very least put the person out of full communion with the Church. A person who therefore works actively to expand or promote abortion would be at most a material heretic and at the least outside of communion with the Church.⁸⁵

This issue comes to a head in the post-Roe era. Catholic politicians who once merely tolerated the legality and government support of abortion under Roe have come out in support of actively protecting abortion in a post-Roe United States.⁸⁶ While toleration of an evil can be

⁸² “A further commandment of the Teaching: Do not murder; do not commit adultery; do not practice pederasty; do not fornicate; do not steal; do not deal in magic; do not practice sorcery; do not kill a fetus by abortion or commit infanticide.” See *The Didache*, in *Ancient Christian Writers*, vol. 6, ed. Johannes Quasten and Joseph Plumpe, trans. James Kleist (New York: Newman Press, 1948) § 2.

⁸³ Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes*, in *Vatican Council II*, ed. Austin Flannery, § 27, 51.

⁸⁴ See quotations of various church documents from the *Didache* to Pope John Paul II in Jimmy Akin, *The Fathers Know Best* (San Diego: Catholic Answers Press, 2010) 231-236.

⁸⁵ There is a difference between what the Church considers a *material* heretic and a *formal* heretic. A material heretic may express views that are heretical, but mitigating circumstances lessen their culpability and thus they are not formal heretics. For example, Thomas Aquinas argued against the concept of the Immaculate Conception. However, at his time the doctrine had not been defined *ex cathedra* as it now has been, thus his culpability for rejecting a doctrine which has now been firmly revealed is lessened and thus Thomas Aquinas can still be venerated as a saint. A formal heretic would be someone who, with full knowledge and consent, despite repeated urgings to reconsider one’s position, denies divinely revealed truths. While we as humans cannot judge the soul of a person to discover degrees of heresy, we can observe the outward actions of a person and decide if they manifest material heresy. Though it is important to note that putting oneself in a position of material heresy does risk the possibility of formal heresy.

⁸⁶ Many politicians who identified as Catholic voted to encode the protections for abortion found in *Roe v. Wade* in federal law through the Women’s Health Protection Act of 2022. While the bill ultimately failed to become law, the

morally acceptable, active support of promoting and protecting an evil condemned by the Church cannot.

Centralization of Government

While the Church has no issue with a unitary government, she does advise that most decisions be made at the most immediate level of individual action. In short, the principle of subsidiarity requires society and government be structured so that respect for persons as agents of their own good is maintained.⁸⁷ This principle is also applied by the Church at the macro-level as well: the greater society should not take upon itself what can be done by smaller groups or institutions.⁸⁸ The *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* states, “Subsidiarity is among the most constant and characteristic directives of the Church’s social doctrine and has been present since the first great social encyclical.⁸⁹” This doctrine has been repeated over the past century through various social encyclicals. The unambiguous acceptance of the doctrine by the universal and ordinary Magisterium places this teaching under the secondary object of infallibility.⁹⁰ However, the principle requires prudence as to which tasks should be assigned to the appropriate level of organization, leaving a Catholic with a great deal of discretion in enacting this principle.

roll call vote includes many yeas from prominent Catholic politicians. See U.S. Congress, House, Women's Health Protection Act of 2022, HR 8296, 117th Cong., 2nd sess., Passed in House 15 July 2022.

⁸⁷ “Moreover, We consider it altogether vital that the numerous intermediary bodies and corporate enterprises—which are, so to say, the main vehicle of this social growth—be really autonomous, and loyally collaborate in pursuit of their own specific interests and those of the common good.” From John XXIII, *Mater et Magistra* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1961) § 65. Also see Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, (USCCB Publishing: Washington, D.C, 2005), § 185-186.

⁸⁸ Pontifical Council, *Compendium*, § 186.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, § 185.

⁹⁰ See Thomas Storck, “What Authority Does Catholic Social Teaching Have?” *Ethika Politika*, September 29, 2014, <https://www.ethikapolitika.org/2014/09/29/authority-catholic-social-teaching/>.

Death Penalty

Like the above, support for the death penalty has politically divided Catholics, partially due to a development in doctrine on behalf of the Church herself. For centuries the Church allowed the state to execute people, sometimes on charges of heresy, and thus at the very least has tolerated the practice.⁹¹ However, the use of state sponsored death camps in the 20th century by both the Nazis and the Soviets brought the issue of human dignity front and center for the Church, and thus she began to reconsider the prudence of the death penalty.⁹² John Paul II in his 1995 encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* sums up the matter. Regarding the death penalty he writes:

On this matter [the death penalty] there is a growing tendency, both in the Church and in civil society, to demand that it be applied in a very limited way or even that it be abolished completely. The problem must be viewed in the context of a system of penal justice ever more in line with human dignity and thus, in the end, with God's plan for man and society. The primary purpose of the punishment which society inflicts is "to redress the disorder caused by the offence." Public authority must redress the violation of personal and social rights by imposing on the offender an adequate punishment for the crime, as a condition for the offender to regain the exercise of his or her freedom. In this way authority also fulfils the purpose of defending public order and ensuring people's safety, while at the same time offering the offender an incentive and help to change his or her behaviour and be rehabilitated.⁹³

These changing attitudes manifest themselves in the *Catechism*. Paragraph 2267, which deals with the death penalty, has been amended over time to reflect this development. The first edition of the *Catechism* in 1992 tolerated the use of the death penalty, but only if other options were unavailable. The most recent edition of the *Catechism* was edited by Pope Francis in 2018 to state:

⁹¹ In his 1520 bull *Exsurge Domine*, Pope Leo X declared the statement: "That heretics be burned is against the will of the Spirit" is either, "destructive, pernicious, scandalous, and seductive to pious and simple minds." See Leo X, *Exsurge Domine*, in Henry Denzinger, *The Sources of Catholic Dogma*, trans. Roy J. Deferrari, (St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co, 1957) 240-243.

⁹² John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1995) § 27.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, § 56.

Recourse to the death penalty on the part of legitimate authority, following a fair trial, was long considered an appropriate response to the gravity of certain crimes and an acceptable, albeit extreme, means of safeguarding the common good.

Today, however, there is an increasing awareness that the dignity of the person is not lost even after the commission of very serious crimes. In addition, a new understanding has emerged of the significance of penal sanctions imposed by the state. Lastly, more effective systems of detention have been developed, which ensure the due protection of citizens but, at the same time, do not definitively deprive the guilty of the possibility of redemption.

Consequently, the Church teaches, in the light of the Gospel, that the death penalty is inadmissible because it is an attack on the inviolability and dignity of the person, and she works with determination for its abolition worldwide.⁹⁴

However, the key term here is “inadmissible,” not “intrinsically evil.” In keeping with the continuous teaching of the Church, the current version of the *Catechism* does not condemn the death penalty as intrinsically evil. But considering modern alternatives, the hierarchy of the Church has decided that the practice is no longer admissible.

As for the magisterial weight of this revision, Pope Francis did not assert this revision definitively, nor was the revision brought about dogmatically as the result of a council.⁹⁵

However, the *Catechism* in and of itself is an expression of the non-infallible Magisterium of the pope, thus qualifying this revision as a non-definitive but authoritative teaching of the Church.⁹⁶

While a person might have difficulty with these sorts of non-definitive statements, they are to

⁹⁴ *Catechism*, para. 2267

⁹⁵ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Letter to the Bishops Regarding the New Revision of Number 2267 of the *Catechism* of the Catholic Church on the Death Penalty,” (Rome: Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 2018).

⁹⁶ The *Catechism* itself is an expression of the non-definitive teaching authority of the Roman Pontiff. While the pope can teach infallibly when speaking *ex cathedra*, neither Pope John Paul II nor any of the subsequent pontiffs have claimed the *Catechism* to be an exercise of such magisterial authority. While parts of the *Catechism* might quote infallible statements from Scripture or the Tradition, the composition and wording of the *Catechism* itself is not an exercise of infallible teaching. However, the pope has the magisterial authority to normally teach on faith and morals, and the faithful are bound to give “religious submission of mind and will” to those teachings. Thus, the parts of the *Catechism* which do not directly draw upon infallible statements do draw upon this non-definitive authoritative magisterium of the pope. See John Paul II, *Fedei Depositum*, in *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1995) para. 3, and Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium*, in *Vatican Council II*, ed Austin Flannery, § 25.

remain obedient to the authority of the Church and express their disagreement in a private and civil manner. This would seem to exclude public promotion of preserving the death penalty.⁹⁷

Gun Control

Because of the unique nature of widespread civilian firearm ownership in the United States, there is very little in the universal teachings of the Church which deals directly with civilian firearm ownership and regulation. In both the *Compendium*⁹⁸ and the *Catechism*,⁹⁹ small arms and their ethical implications are discussed within the context of large-scale military conflicts and internal uprisings. However, both passages recognize the right and the duty of the government to regulate the sale and production of firearms in consideration of the common good. Both documents in and of themselves are an exercise of the non-infallible but authoritative Magisterium of the Church, and both documents provide enough ambiguity to allow a wide range of prudential judgment on the issue by faithful Catholics.

Immigration

The Church teaches that in obedience to Christ's command to care for the poor, more prosperous nations are "obliged, to the extent they are able, to welcome the foreigner in search of the security and the means of livelihood which he cannot find in his country of origin."¹⁰⁰ This statement echoes Pope John XXIII in his encyclical *Pacem in Terris* where he writes,

Again, every human being has the right to freedom of movement and of residence within the confines of his own State. When there are just reasons in favor of it, he must be

⁹⁷ The Republican Party officially defends the validity of the death penalty in its platform. Presumably, a Catholic politician would have to dissent from this tenant of the Republican party to avoid dissenting from the Church. See "2016 Republican Party Platform," The American Presidency Project, University of California in Santa Barbara, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/2016-republican-party-platform>.

⁹⁸ Pontifical Council, *Compendium*, § 511.

⁹⁹ *Catechism*, para. 2316.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, para. 2241.

permitted to emigrate to other countries and take up residence there. The fact that he is a citizen of a particular State does not deprive him of membership in the human family, nor of citizenship in that universal society, the common, world-wide fellowship of men.¹⁰¹

Pope John XXIII, also writes,

For this reason [the issue of political refugees], it is not irrelevant to draw the attention of the world to the fact that these refugees are persons and all their rights as persons must be recognized. Refugees cannot lose these rights simply because they are deprived of citizenship of their own States.

And among man's personal rights we must include his right to enter a country in which he hopes to be able to provide more fittingly for himself and his dependents. It is therefore the duty of State officials to accept such immigrants and—so far as the good of their own community, rightly understood, permits—to further the aims of those who may wish to become members of a new society.¹⁰²

The *Catechism* summarizes both statements. The immigrant has a right to immigrate, but also carries an obligation to his or her new country of adoption. Conversely, political authorities are obliged to aid immigrants and refugees, but also have a right to uphold the common good and subject immigrants to “various juridical conditions.”¹⁰³

But in the same fashion as many of the other elements of Catholic social teaching, the Church does not prescribe the exact way these mandates should be carried out. Clearly a country such as the present-day United States has the financial ability to assist migrants but subjecting them to various reasonable legal conditions is not prohibited. Two extremes seem to be implicitly condemned. A country could not prevent all migrants from entering the country. However, a country has the right to consider the common good regarding the immigration process and subject immigrants to some orderly and fair procedure. Thus, the general discernment between these two norms leaves great room for prudence for a Catholic politician.

¹⁰¹ John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris*, (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1963) § 25.

¹⁰² John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris*, § 105-106.

¹⁰³ *Catechism*, para. 2241.

As for the authority of this teaching, *Pacem in Terris* is an exercise of the pope's non-definitive authoritative teaching. Pope John XXIII does not claim to be speaking *ex cathedra* in the letter, and the issue of refugees and immigration specifically is sparsely found in the rest of the universal teaching of the Church. However, if a Catholic were to completely deny service to the poor and to the needy (migrants included), this would be a violation of the direct teachings of Jesus thus denying a doctrine of the faith protected by the primary object of infallibility.

Economic Justice

In the Catholic Church, various areas of economic justice have been considered with subjects as broad as economic philosophies and as narrow as a living wage. Like the rest of Catholic social teaching, the economic philosophy of the Church revolves around the infallible teaching of the dignity of the human person. *Rerum Novarum* was the first encyclical to explore the relationship between God-given human dignity and the economic sphere, and subsequent pontiffs have built upon this teaching. While teachings regarding some economic topics hold more authoritative weight than others, the central tenant of the inherent dignity of man who is made in the image and likeness of God is infallible.

Minimum Wage

Drawing from scripture, the Church commands that workers and employers be able to enter into free relationships regarding employment, and the worker should faithfully and fully complete the work agreed upon.¹⁰⁴ However, in exchange the employer is to provide wages

¹⁰⁴Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, § 20.

significant enough to “support a frugal and well behaved wage-earner.”¹⁰⁵ The Church also rejects a totally free-market concept of wages. As Pope Leo writes,

Wages, as we are told, are regulated by free consent, and therefore the employer, when he pays what was agreed upon, has done his part and seemingly is not called upon to do anything beyond. The only way, it is said, in which injustice might occur would be if the master refused to pay the whole of the wages, or if the workman should not complete the work undertaken; in such cases the public authority should intervene, to see that each obtains his due, but not under any other circumstances.

To this kind of argument a fair-minded man will not easily or entirely assent; it is not complete, for there are important considerations which it leaves out of account altogether.¹⁰⁶

However, the Church does not postulate nor dictate directly as to how a living wage should be established or enforced. While the state is recognized as possessing the duty to protect the worker from unfair wage practices, *Rerum Novarum* and subsequent encyclicals on the issue do not prescribe how this protection should be enacted. Once again, a Catholic is left with a great deal of prudential judgment as to how to enact a living wage.¹⁰⁷ This teaching has been repeated by the ordinary and universal Magisterium since the papacy of Leo XIII and is connected to the divinely revealed doctrine of the dignity of man, thus making the teaching protected by the secondary object of infallibility. Therefore, those who would deny this teaching would be out of full communion with the Catholic Church.¹⁰⁸

Labor Unions

The Church encourages the creation of workers unions, and Pope Leo XIII extolls their virtues in *Rerum Novarum*.¹⁰⁹ Leo XIII praises the many positive impacts these types of groups

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., § 45.

¹⁰⁶ Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, § 43-44.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., § 45.

¹⁰⁸ See Storck, “What Authority Does Catholic Social Teaching Have?”

¹⁰⁹ Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, § 49.

can have. However, labor unions by themselves are neither good nor evil, but rather involve the ability to do great good on behalf of the dignity of the worker. Pope Pius XI in 1931 encouraged the bishops to vet secular labor organizations before allowing the laity to join them, suggesting some labor organizations could work contrary to the teachings of the Church.¹¹⁰ The attitude of the Church towards labor unions is thus not built out of a concern for the unions themselves, but a concern for the dignity of the workers.¹¹¹ The dignity of man, a divinely revealed doctrine protected by the primary object of infallibility, can be protected by the existence of good labor unions. With this, a Catholic politician would not be able to outright ban these sorts of associations. However, if such an association became a detriment to the dignity of workers or the common good, its status as a labor union does not protect it from legal sanction.

Private Property

The Church recognizes that people have a right to that which has been justly acquired by them and can do so with those things as they please, so long as their use is not immoral or harmful to the common good. While the Church does not condemn *voluntarily* giving away property, she does condemn *forced abolition* of the right to property. When Pope Leo XIII wrote *Rerum Novarum*, he was responding in part to the suggestion of the Marxist-socialists of the time who proposed the abolition of this right.¹¹² The pope writes:

To remedy these wrongs the socialists, working on the poor man's envy of the rich, are striving to do away with private property, and contend that individual possessions should become the common property of all, to be administered by the State or by municipal bodies. They hold that by thus transferring property from private individuals to the community, the present mischievous state of things will be set to rights, inasmuch as each

¹¹⁰ Pius XI, *Quadragesimo Anno* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1931) § 35.

¹¹¹ See John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens*, (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1981) https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091981_laborem-exercens.html.

¹¹² Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*, ed., A. J. P. Taylor (London: Penguin Group, 1985) 104-105.

citizen will then get his fair share of whatever there is to enjoy. But their contentions are so clearly powerless to end the controversy that were they carried into effect the working man himself would be among the first to suffer. They are, moreover, emphatically unjust, for they would rob the lawful possessor, distort the functions of the State, and create utter confusion in the community.¹¹³

Since the promulgation of *Rerum Novarum*, multiple encyclicals have been written on the legitimacy of private property. This repetition has earned the teaching a place in the universal Magisterium and, because of the connection of the teaching to the commandment against stealing, a divinely revealed teaching protected by the primary object of infallibility, the teaching on private property falls under the secondary object of infallibility.¹¹⁴ Those who deny the teaching would be out of full communion with the Church.

Laissez-faire Capitalism

The Church recognizes that the State has a duty to protect the common good, even if this entails interference in the economic sector.¹¹⁵ However, this is to be done following the principle of subsidiarity. The role of the state in protecting the common good, even at the expense of some economic interference, has been repeated by the ordinary and universal Magisterium and thus falls into the same category of authority as the above.¹¹⁶ A fuller treatment of this very complex topic is beyond the scope of this essay, for it would involve another longer thesis. Interested readers should read John Paul II's *Centesimus Annus* promulgated in 1991.¹¹⁷

¹¹³ Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, § 4.

¹¹⁴ See Strock, "What Authority Does Catholic Social Teaching Have?"

¹¹⁵ Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, § 16.

¹¹⁶ See Strock, "What Authority Does Catholic Social Teaching Have?"

¹¹⁷ John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1991) www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_01051991_centesimus-annus.html.

Natural Environment

The Magisterium has only recently directly addressed the issue of environmental protection. The first mention of environmental care in any magisterial documents was in 1971 and comes from a paragraph in *Octogesima Adveniens* by Pope Paul VI.¹¹⁸ The *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church* published in 2004 addresses the subject in part, and Pope Benedict XVI touched on the issue briefly in his 2009 encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*.¹¹⁹ In the *Compendium*, the Church recognizes the stewardship of man over the natural order as given to him by God during creation,¹²⁰ and that this responsibility for the environment to be “the common heritage of mankind.”¹²¹ The Church allows for civil authorities to place regulations on the use of natural resources for the sake of the common good, recognizing that a completely *laissez-faire* system in regards to the environment might do more harm than good.¹²² However, in doing so civil authorities cannot violate the dignity of man in the name of environmental preservation.¹²³

Pope Francis finally gave the topic a full treatment in the encyclical *Laudato Si'* in 2015.¹²⁴ In short, Pope Francis laments the greedy consumption of the earth without any regard for either how human interference affects the earth, or the rest of mankind. Thus, not only is the earth harmed ecologically, but so are humans who are left without clean air or water. This

¹¹⁸ Paul VI, *Octogesima Adveniens*, (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1971) § 21, www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_letters/documents/hf_p-vi_apl_19710514_octogesima-adveniens.html.

¹¹⁹ Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2009) https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate.html.

¹²⁰ Genesis 1:28-30 (NAB).

¹²¹ Pontifical Council, *Compendium*, § 467.

¹²² *Ibid.*, § 469-470.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, § 483.

¹²⁴ Francis, *Laudato Si'*, (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015).

technocratic mindset views nature merely as a resource to be exploited with very little concern for other humans in the present or future.¹²⁵

Once again, while the dignity of man is an infallible teaching of the faith, many of the stipulations regarding protection of this dignity in relation to the environment are relegated to the authoritative but non-definitive teachings of the Church. The issue simply has not been developed in the same way as other aspects of Catholic social teaching. However, two extreme positions seem to be prohibited. On one hand, a Catholic cannot advocate for or enact policies that abuse the environment. On the other, a Catholic cannot trample human dignity in a quest to protect the environment. Thus, there remains great room for prudential decisions by a Catholic.

War and Peace

The just war theory of the Church was first developed by St. Augustine of Hippo (d. 430), a fifth century North African Bishop. He held that war could be conducted as long as two sets of conditions were met: *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello*. The first set consider the reasons why a nation would go to war, and the second consider the moral conduct of a nation during the war.¹²⁶ Augustine writes:

A great deal depends on the causes for which men undertake wars, and on the authority they have for doing so; for the natural order which seeks the peace of mankind, ordains that the monarch should have the power of undertaking war if he thinks it advisable, and that the soldiers should perform their military duties on behalf of the peace and safety of the community. When war is undertaken in obedience to God, who would rebuke, or humble, or crush the pride of man, it must be allowed to be a righteous war.¹²⁷

¹²⁵ Ibid., § 30, 106.

¹²⁶ Joseph Fornieri, "St. Augustine," in *An Invitation to Political Thought*, eds. Kenneth Deutsch and Joseph Fornieri (Wadsworth-Cengage Learning: Belmont, 2009) 100.

¹²⁷ Augustine, *Contra Faustum*, trans. Richard Stothert, from *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series*, vol. 4, ed. by Philip Schaff. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1887.) 22:75.

This theory would be developed by St. Thomas Aquinas in the 13th century. Aquinas stated that in order for a nation to go to war, five *ad bellum* conditions must be met. First, the nation going to war must have a just cause such as protecting people from aggression in a defensive war, restoring the rights of those who have had them taken away, or reestablishing a just political order. Second, a just authority in accord with the precepts of the common good must declare war. Third, war must be the last option after all other peaceful political options have been exhausted. Fourth, there must be a reasonable chance of obtaining the just objectives of the war before belligerents can be committed to combat. And fifth, a nation must have good and just intentions, such as the restoration of peace, to go to and continue war.

During a war a nation must abide by the two *in bello* criteria. First, the destruction of the war must be proportionate to ending the war. Excessive force which causes more damage or suffering than necessary to end the violence of the enemy belligerents is forbidden. Second, the force employed by a nation must be discriminatory. A nation cannot target persons who are not involved in the war effort. Thus, the intentional targeting of civilians or children, hospitals or churches, are prohibited.¹²⁸

The Church has continued to uphold the validity of the just war theory into the modern century. However, with the massive destruction of World War II and the invention of the atomic bomb, the Church has begun to reconsider whether there can still be proportionality and discrimination in warfare. As stated previously, for a war to be just the destruction must be intentionally targeted only at combatants and other apparatuses of a belligerent nation's war

¹²⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, vol. 2, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Providence (New York: Benziger Brothers, Inc., 1947), II-II, q. 40, a.1. Also see Kenneth Deutsch, "St. Thomas Aquinas," in *An Invitation to Political Thought*, eds. Kenneth Deutsch and Joseph Fornieri (Wadsworth-Cengage Learning: Belmont, 2009) 139-140.

effort. But armaments such as chemical weapons, fire bombs, and especially nuclear missiles do not allow for targeting of specific belligerents, and some are even intended to destroy entire non-belligerent civilian populaces. This reality led John XXIII to write:

Men nowadays are becoming more and more convinced that any disputes which may arise between nations must be resolved by negotiation and agreement, and not by recourse to arms.

We acknowledge that this conviction owes its origin chiefly to the terrifying destructive force of modern weapons. It arises from fear of the ghastly and catastrophic consequences of their use. Thus, in this age which boasts of its atomic power, it no longer makes sense to maintain that war is a fit instrument with which to repair the violation of justice.¹²⁹

Subsequent pontiffs have echoed Pope John XXIII's wariness regarding the morality of modern war. But this development has not led the Church to require a nation to adopt uncompromising pacifism in the face of unbridled aggression. The *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* states, "A war of aggression is intrinsically immoral. In the tragic case where such a war breaks out, leaders of the State that has been attacked have the right and the duty to organize a defense even using the force of arms."¹³⁰

Because the just war theory of the Church is connected directly to the revelatory statement in scripture of "thou shall not kill," and has been upheld by the ordinary and universal Magisterium throughout the ages, this teaching is at the very least protected by the secondary object of infallibility. The commandment not to murder, as a part of Scriptural divine revelation, is protected by the primary object of infallibility. A politician who votes in favor of, or actively

¹²⁹ John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris*, § 126-127.

¹³⁰ Pontifical Council, *Compendium*, § 500.

supports the continuation of an unjust war would at the very least be outside of full communion with the Church, and at the very most a material heretic.¹³¹

Same-sex Unions

The Catholic Church regards marriage as a natural vocation created by God whereby a man and a woman are unified, and their union is ordered towards the procreation and raising of children.¹³² This natural vocation was later established by Christ as a sacrament.¹³³ Thus the Church does not consider the issue of marriage to merely be a religious or sacramental issue but also a foundational moral issue which can be discerned through reason.

In terms of Church teachings, the idea of same-sex marriage is a sort of contradiction. In both the philosophy and theology of the Church, marriage can only occur between two people of the opposite sex. Thus, to call the union between two members of the same sex “marriage” would be akin to calling the sky the ground. The Church draws her position both from scripture¹³⁴ and tradition,¹³⁵ and since the institution of marriage in the natural order is explicitly stated in Genesis as being between one man and one woman, the teaching is a doctrine of the faith. Thus, a Catholic who claims marriage can be between two members of the same sex, or anything other than one man and one woman would be espousing heresy.

As for same-sex civil unions, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 2003 issued a document which dealt directly with this subject.¹³⁶ The document stresses that persons

¹³¹ For a thorough treatment of the issue of war, peace, and nuclear armament in the context of contemporary America, see National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response*, (Washington, D.C., United States Catholic Conference, 1983).

¹³² *Catechism*, para. 1603.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, para. 1601.

¹³⁴ Genesis 2:21-24 (NAB).

¹³⁵ Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes*, § 48.

¹³⁶ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Considerations Regarding Proposals to Give Legal Recognition to Unions Between Homosexual Persons,” (Rome: Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 2003).

who experience homosexual attraction should “be accepted with respect, compassion and sensitivity in society.”¹³⁷ However, the document also states that same-sex civil unions should not be considered equal to marriage and thus should not have the same legal functions as marriages, such as the adoption of children.¹³⁸ Further, the document states;

If it is true that all Catholics are obliged to oppose the legal recognition of homosexual unions, Catholic politicians are obliged to do so in a particular way...

When legislation in favour of the recognition of homosexual unions is proposed for the first time in a legislative assembly, the Catholic law-maker has a moral duty to express his opposition clearly and publicly and to vote against it. To vote in favour of a law so harmful to the common good is gravely immoral.

When legislation in favour of the recognition of homosexual unions is already in force, the Catholic politician must oppose it in the ways that are possible for him and make his opposition known.¹³⁹

Thus, according to the Congregation, a Catholic politician could not support the creation or perpetuation of statutes which legally recognize same-sex unions.

While Church teaching on the nature of marriage as well as the morality of same-sex acts are both found directly in scripture and are thus infallible,¹⁴⁰ the directions above regarding a Catholic’s political approach to same-sex unions are only an exercise of the Church’s authoritative but non-definitive magisterium. While advocating for the creation of laws which support so-called same sex marriage would be outright heretical, defiance against the directions of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith places a Catholic into a precarious, but undefined, state of disobedience.

¹³⁷ Ibid., § 4.

¹³⁸ Ibid., § 5.

¹³⁹ Ibid., § 10.

¹⁴⁰ See Leviticus 18:22, 20:13 as well as Romans 1:26-27, 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 and 1 Timothy 1:8-11 (NAB).

Dissent in Context

Given the issues above, the reader will not have a difficult time compiling a list of Catholic politicians who dissent from Church teaching on some or possibly many of the aforementioned political issues. Republicans and Democrats who call themselves Catholics tend to defer to their party platform rather than to the Church when morals and politics intersect.

This dissention places a Catholic in serious spiritual danger. A Catholic's communion with the Church is not merely membership in a social club but rather opens a person to the grace of God. If a Catholic denies teachings protected by the primary or secondary objects of infallibility, they are potentially out of full communion with the Church and thus have possibly cut themselves off from the grace offered to them by Christ through His Church.

The Political Division in Context

Over the past century the once homogeneous Catholic population has become fractured politically. For better or worse, the gambit of John F. Kennedy worked, thus allowing Catholics to enter the American political arena. However, when secular political parties no longer aligned with the teachings of the Church, Catholic politicians often chose party dogma over Church doctrine. This came to a head in the 1970's with the ruling of *Roe v. Wade* (1973) and the subsequent adoption by the Democratic Party of a hardline pro-abortion stance over the next couple of decades. As the Democratic Party purged those Catholics with pro-life convictions, the Republican Party actively worked to cultivate them, thus forming the current divide. In the process, American Catholics have deferred not to the Church of Christ for guidance or moral

security, but rather to secular political parties. Thus, politicians who claim membership in the Catholic Church often act directly against her precepts, and countless laity follow suit.

For the American Catholic Church of today, this mass dissension is of the utmost importance. For one, many of the points Catholics dissent from in politics are protected by the infallible charism of the Church, thus the Catholics who dissent from these teachings are placing themselves outside of communion with the Church and in spiritual peril. Secondly, this is a symptom of the already weakened recognition of the Magisterium in the United States. Since the widespread dissent against the teachings of *Humanae Vitae* in 1968, the Catholic Church in the United States has faced a laity which largely disregards the authority of the Church hierarchy. The political division is in part a symptom of this problem.

In a more secular sense, religion was once regarded as the primary teacher of virtue, and thus was responsible for the formation of the type of citizens necessary to steward the American republic.¹⁴¹ As observed by Alexis de Tocqueville during the early days of the American republic, the foundational values of the United States first came from the churches, then entered the halls of the law. However, with the relativization of morals this concept has been cast aside. The Catholic Church once offered, and still does offer, a coherent tradition of virtue which can be applied in the civic life of the republic. For the past two thousand years, the Catholic Church has formed and tested a moral and ethical framework that has a coherence and consistency not found in the other less-centralized denominations, a framework that in theory could serve as providing the foundational values of a democratic system.

¹⁴¹ Alexis de Tocqueville remarks on the integral nature of religion in upholding the American republic: "In America religion is the road to knowledge, and the observance of the divine laws leads man to civil freedom." See Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. Bruce Frohnen, trans. Henry Reeve, (Washington, DC: Regnery, 2002) 31.

Unfortunately, the idea of common values, morals, or foundational beliefs have all been relativized in the contemporary era. Common beliefs such as the value of life, the dignity of man, and the purpose of nature have thus become the subject of personal choice and whim. This newfound license has removed from the Lockean ideology of the United States the vital check needed to sustain a proper understanding of natural rights theory, and thus a hyper-individualism has resulted. Again, the Church stands to offer a solution. The philosophy of the common good which permeates Catholic social teaching is designed to prevent such hyper-individualism, but even Catholics themselves have decided to ignore these teachings.

In this sense, American Catholics have now been fully Americanized. They have adopted the same hyper-individualism and disregard for religion Pope Leo XIII warned against in 1895. The American Catholic has now truly become American in the worst sense of the term, with a hyper-individualistic focus on self as the arbitrator of all. Catholics have joined the American political sphere, a place nearly devoid of common values while refusing to adhere to the common values of their own Church. In traversing this fraught landscape, Catholics have placed themselves in spiritual danger by placing their parties and themselves, as opposed to Christ and his Church, at the center of their moral conscience.

As to how to rectify this crisis, the author does not pretend to have a solution. Perhaps the answer lies in better catechetics, teaching the next generation the social doctrine handed down through the ages so that they may fare better politically in the years to come. Perhaps the authorities of the Church should not merely focus on one issue at a time but begin to focus on the underlying Americanism which has infected the Church in America. Whatever the solution, action must be taken soon, for if Catholics have adopted political hyper-individualism with such strength in the last century, who knows what the next century could bring.

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