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Essay: Pittsburgh Catholics

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As a historian, I?ve studied three generations of Pittsburgh Catholics: grandparents, parents and the students I teach. They?re good people, loyal, devout and engaged -- and each cohort different from the next. The greater finding is that even in the 1950s, American lay Catholics were ahead of the church, meaning the still-to-come Second Vatican Council (1962-65), which added legitimacy and energy to their impetus for reform.

What happened in the middle of the 20th century was that lay Catholic behavior changed relative to long-standing popular practices, practices understood as central to ?acting Catholic.?

From the mid-1950s, American lay Catholics participated less regularly in the range of traditional devotional exercises: They went to fewer novenas, perpetual eucharistic adorations, and group rosary recitations. Yet they continued to flock to Masses, perhaps in even greater numbers than just a few decades earlier.

While it is not clear why the laity changed, evidence points us to a few significant developments. The laity had by then become more highly educated, middle class, more central to American social, cultural and political power. Scientific and medical advancements had removed many of the powerful anxieties that shaped American outlooks on everyday life. They no longer feared epidemic disease and deadly infections. World War II and the Korean War were over. Equally significant, women had entered the paid work force in rising numbers.

Catholics did not reject Catholicism in the 1950s; in fact, they appeared to do the opposite. They embraced their religion powerfully, but differently. They sought to engage it with the same vigor and assent with which they had once participated in devotions. In 1958, roughly three out of every four American Catholics reported they attended Mass every week. They followed the Latin liturgy through the side-by-side English translations in their missals. They returned home from college eager for a new enhanced role in their parishes and Catholic organizations.

Young suburbanites built churches and schools at an incredible rate. But they were no longer content to merely attend Mass, they sought to participate in their church.

They also rejected many of the social and cultural strictures that constituted the Catholic ghetto. They worked and socialized with and even married Protestants and Jews. They rejected the Legion of Decency?s denunciations of movies. They lived more comfortably in a religiously heterogeneous society, and they cherished their faith. To see all this as a trend toward secularization, as some do, mischaracterizes the development.

Church officials were not quite ready for this new 1950s laity. Bishops generally supported Catholic Action, the Christian Family Movement and other strong programs of lay engagement with their faith and the world, but they continued to affirm the appropriateness of the devotional structures that the laity had begun to reject. It is fair to say that church officials did not yet understand how to accommodate a highly educated, confident and increasingly independent laity who wanted to play important roles in their parishes and organizations.

The arc of lay Catholic will and willingness to fully participate in church life at every level continued to the present. Clearly, today there?s disaffection toward the institutional church, but not from American Catholics? concerted efforts to engage the world informed by Catholic tradition and theology.

Vatican II had come at a propitious moment for American laity. It opened the possibility of a new form of Catholicism that resonated more fully with their lives. Not only did the council place great emphasis on the common baptism of all Catholics (laity and clergy alike), and define the church as the people of God, but it created a sense of a dynamic church, a church that was responsive and socially responsible.

The church that emerged from the council was pastoral rather than juridical, emphasized inner transformation over external behavior. There was now space for an energized and active laity to bring their religious sensibility more fully into the public sphere and to let that engagement inform their theology.

The American church embraced this dynamism as laity and church officials together sought a fuller understanding of their faith and ways to live that faith authentically to improve their communities and the world. They struggled with big social issues, such as race relations and changing gender roles, economic inequalities and war. The fact that American Catholics divided over how to understand and to address these issues reflected their genuine engagement with a complicated world. The U.S. bishops engaged in a transparent and consultative process to reach authoritative statements on these important moral questions and their pastoral letters shaped the broader American discourse significantly.

Authenticity was critical to this new dynamic Catholicism. While Catholics did not all agree on the means, policies or tactics to achieve social and personal good, they privileged the honest search for genuine understanding and answers.

Pope Paul VI?s *Humanae Vitae* played a critical role in separating that authentic search for a livable theology from the strictures of official church policy. While many Catholics had come to see their partnership with theologians and clergy in apprehending the world and shaping their behavior in (and toward) it, they saw the affirmation of traditional church prohibitions against contraception as a mere flexing of institutional power.

The encyclical addressed an issue vital to lay Catholics, one that affected their lives much more powerfully than it did the celibate clergy. And the prohibition contradicted the advice of the theological commission that Pope Paul himself had charged with studying the issue. The decision demeaned the very sensibility that had so energized lay Catholics.

In the eyes of lay men and women, any further search for understanding and working for good might coincide with or confront official hierarchical pronouncements. Historians can trace the lay response to the flexing of institutional power in a number of ways. Social surveys reveal that Catholics largely rejected the prohibition against contraception. They practiced birth control just as readily as did their Protestant and Jewish neighbors. Moreover, Catholics identified the individual and not church leaders as the final locus of moral authority on whether to use birth control.

Over time, Catholics came to see the individual as the final moral authority on most moral issues. Lay men and women continued to attend to moral questions, but they saw church leaders as less and less relevant to the search for authentic answers.

In addition, from the time the encyclical was issued in 1968, church attendance dropped dramatically. If 65 percent of lay Catholics reported attending Mass weekly in 1968, only half did so a decade later.

Humanae Vitae established a serious rift between the laity and church officials on important moral questions, but the clergy sex abuse scandals that erupted in the 1980s and then again at the century?s end eroded lay confidence in church officials even further. Weekly Mass attendance dropped once more, this time down below

40 percent. That was below the pattern for American Protestants. The American laity increasingly worried that church officials prized institutional stability over even the safety of their own children.

Lay Catholics today clearly rely on their conscience more than they rely on church officials to determine what moral positions to maintain. But this does not mean that they have become less interested in moral concerns, or that they do not approach these concerns from a perspective shaped powerfully by their understanding of Catholic values and mores.

Their increasing disaffection from institutional authority derived not from a rejection of Catholic moral criteria. No, it was from the laity exercising these criteria to judge church officials? actions. In sum, the American laity remains highly Catholic, even when they no longer practice the particular forms of devotion so common a half century ago.

Timothy Kelly is associate professor of history at St. Vincent College, Latrobe, Pa.

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