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Sociologist has kept his eye on Catholicism

Tom Roberts | Dec. 11, 2013

Sociology was growing as a practical discipline in the United States in the early 20th century, and William V. D'Antonio was perfectly positioned to catch the wave about to roll across the academic landscape. At least one might reasonably gather that impression from the résumé.

He ultimately distinguished himself as a sociologist, most notably in recent years through a series of studies of U.S. Catholics. It is a work over time that shows a less unified and more contentious Catholic community than most bishops would care to acknowledge and also a more determinedly loyal and convinced community of believers than the wider culture might expect to find, especially given the church's woes in recent years.

Before his long career in sociology, however, a few bits of life got in the way, including World War II, a flirtation with the U.S. State Department, a job offer from the CIA, and a brief but stunningly successful career as a most unorthodox wrestling coach.

D'Antonio's is one of those quintessentially American stories that grew from the fertile soil of the immigrant experience of the early to mid-20th century. He lived a childhood defined by ethnicity, his recently arrived (between 1870 and 1890) clan along with other Italian families having taken over a previously Irish neighborhood in New Haven, Conn. His grandfather, he learned in answer to a childhood question of his father, was "a blockbuster." He had been the first, according to family lore, to buy a house from an Irish family. Soon after, "Uncle Joe bought a house across the street, Uncle Louie bought a house next to him," and by the time William arrived in February 1926, it had become an "Italian" block. Check three boxes on the questionnaire: American, Catholic, Italian.

He went to public school because his mother didn't want him to come under the control of the Irish nuns. His father was a postal worker who eventually became postmaster at the New Haven facility. There was a natural connection to the local university, which happened to be Yale, the only place the young D'Antonio applied. He was accepted and attended for two years, but like so many in his generation, now dubbed "the Greatest," his academic career was interrupted by the draft and a stint in the Navy.

That got him two years on the GI bill, and he finished with a degree in Latin American studies in 1948, the same year another Yalie from far different circumstances, George Herbert Walker Bush, graduated.

What followed immediately after graduation might now be worth hardly a mention on a résumé or during one of the many introductions he's been given as a speaker, author, panelist and self-proclaimed activist sociologist. But the several years he spent as a teacher at the Loomis School in Windsor, Conn., proved valuable in several ways. D'Antonio regards the private, all-boys high school as the place where he really learned to teach. It was also where he began wearing a bowtie (his wife had to show him how to tie it when students made fun of a clip-on version). And it was the place that provided the most unlikely bragging rights this side of, say, the Yale men's basketball team going deep into March Madness. D'Antonio to this day lights up recalling that he coached, to that point, the only undefeated team in the history of athletics at Loomis (since renamed the Loomis Chaffee School).

He got the job as head coach of a sport he had never engaged in and knew nothing about when the prior wrestling coach got drafted for the Korean War. It was 1951. D'Antonio said his secret was to keep his team calm going into matches. *The New York Times* caught up with the coach in 1952. At that point the team was "undefeated in fourteen matches over a two-year period." They eventually would lose two over the next year.

The *Times* asked D'Antonio how he kept his charges calm.

"It's simple," he answered. "Before matches, I read to the boys excerpts from *Winnie the Pooh*, 'Pogo' and E.B. White's *Stuart Little*. These children's stories seem to make them forget about their bouts, and when they go into a match they are very relaxed."

He also researched the sport and received instruction from actual collegiate wrestlers during the summers when he was working on a master's degree in Hispanic studies at the University of Wisconsin, Madison.

The stories for the wrestlers were hardly the last children's books he would read. He married Lorraine Giorgio in 1950. They had gone to high school together but only met and started dating following his graduation from college. They eventually had six children. Lorraine had graduated from Ohio State University with a degree in chemistry, but most of her professional experience was as a business manager of various organizations.

In his last semester in Wisconsin, D'Antonio took an elective because the visiting professor's name was Charles Loomis and he had ties to the school in Connecticut. The course was Latin American Social Organization and Institutions. And that was it. "I just ate up this stuff. I knew this was what I wanted to do."

Loomis, who was chair of the sociology and anthropology department at Michigan State in East Lansing, provided further involvement in sociology by inviting D'Antonio to accompany another Michigan State professor to the U.S.-Mexican border to help (D'Antonio had good Spanish) with a major study of U.S.-Mexican relations. The eventual result was a book, published in 1965, *Influentials in Two Border Cities*, with William H. Form, that established D'Antonio nationally as a political sociologist.

Before he went to the border, he had taken a stab at a State Department job. In 1954, he passed all the exams but the board deciding his fate split 3-3, uncertain, he said, "of my ideological orientations."

He tried again a year later, after he had worked on the border, and recalls that the panel ultimately questioned his lack of enthusiasm for selling the free enterprise system abroad. "I said, 'I don't think that's a job that the State Department should be focusing on.' " End of interview.

Political leanings (he's an unabashed progressive politically and ecclesiastically) proved no problem later when the CIA offered him a job while he was studying for a doctorate and teaching at Michigan State. The university more than matched the CIA offer -- with a bonus for continuing to direct the border project during the summer -- and sociology finally had him for good.

He went on to spend 12 years (1959-71) helping to develop a sociology department at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana at the invitation of then-president Holy Cross Fr. Theodore Hesburgh. D'Antonio said he is grateful for the cover and support Hesburgh provided on a number of issues ? particularly when, as part of the university's committee on population and responsible parenthood, D'Antonio dealt with the issue of birth control. The support was significant because sociology wasn't embraced by the church, especially some of its leaders, who were wary of academics whose data often ran counter to the church's official narrative. (The Notre Dame committee included several members who also served on the papal birth control commission, whose majority recommendation that the church change its teaching forbidding contraception was rejected by Pope Paul VI in 1968.)

D'Antonio was a member of the sociology department at the University of Connecticut from 1971 to 1982, and chaired the department from 1971 to 1976. He served as executive officer of the American Sociological Association from 1982 to 1991.

In 1987, he had retirement in sight. He was 61 and was looking at the final years of a long and distinguished career when the then-editor of the *National Catholic Reporter*, Tom Fox, and the then-publisher, William McSweeney, approached him with an idea for a project: a study of American Catholics. Dean Hoge, a fellow sociologist of religion, offered D'Antonio space at The Catholic University of America in Washington. Hoge, who died in 2008, became a close friend and colleague. D'Antonio would remain at Catholic University as a research professor of sociology.

A quarter of a century and a total of four surveys of Catholics later, D'Antonio and his various colleagues who worked as teams on the studies that were conducted every six years can look back on what stands as a unique contribution to understanding the church in the United States. They've produced a series of studies that, over 24 years, document the changing attitudes and concerns of Catholics as they respond to altering conditions in the church, from scandals to papal pronouncements. The studies, which have become a standard point of reference, also reflect the influence of the wider culture as it saw the growth of religion as an influence on national politics. They also documented a general decline among younger generations' attachments to the institutional church.

The four studies generated a host of articles, as well as a series of five books, the latest of which, *American Catholics in Transition*, was published this year by Rowman and Littlefield. The other authors of the volume are Michele Dillon, chair of the department of sociology at the University of New Hampshire and president of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, and Mary L. Gautier, senior research associate at the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University.

D'Antonio has authored or co-authored four other books, in addition to the five in this series, and one of those was also published this year. *Religion, Politics, and Polarization: How Religiopolitical Conflict Is Changing Congress and American Democracy*, also from Rowman and Littlefield, was co-authored with Steven A. Tuch and Josiah R. Baker. (Read a review of *Religion, Politics, and Polarization* [1].) Tuch is professor of sociology at The George Washington University and Baker is assistant professor of financial economics at Methodist University.

The book is the result of a 10-year process investigating how religion and the religious affiliation of members of Congress affect politics, including the growing polarization of recent years. It began, D'Antonio said, with a casual question about politicians and their positions on some of the more divisive cultural issues and expanded

over time.

"We got some small grant money, kept getting grad students to enter the data" and a decade later ended up with a deeply researched and analyzed record of 40 years of voting records.

D'Antonio is now working on a memoir, and one can almost see the draft of a questionnaire taking shape in his mind when, reflecting on a paper he's writing to deliver at the 100th anniversary of an Italian parish in Washington, D.C., he said: "We're in the twilight of our ethnicity, the twilight of the white, Western European immigrant experience, and coming on the sunrise of the period of the Hispanics, Asians and new Africans in America."

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