

CATHOLIC COMPLACENCY

About a year ago, I was asked by a staffer for Tom Monaghan (of Domino's Pizza fame) to speak at the 2016 Legatus conference. He was upset that Catholics are too complacent; he wanted me to address why. Legatus, founded by Tom, is an organization of Catholic business elites, many of whom are CEOs. I was only too happy to oblige. At the end of January, I gave my talk in Orlando. I will touch on some of the highlights, not having enough space to do more.

Father Virgil Blum, S.J., who founded the Catholic League in 1973, often said that Catholics were eunuchs. I would agree, though I believe we have made some progress. The question is why. Why are we so complacent?

The short answer is: it's because we've made it. Having endured discrimination from the Founding to the mid-twentieth century, Catholics finally broke through and became assimilated. That was a victory, but it was not without a price.

When the United States was founded, Catholics were looked upon with skepticism, if not disdain. John Jay, our first Supreme Court Chief Justice, didn't trust Catholics. Like Milton and John Locke before him, he saw Catholics as disloyal—their primary allegiance, they contended, was to Rome.

The dominant WASP establishment did not look kindly on Catholics. Catholic kids understood this as well as anyone: they were forced to read the Protestant bible in the public schools; some were assigned *Irish Heart*, a book that denigrated the pope and Irish Catholics. When Irish and German immigrants came over in large numbers in the 1830s and 1840s, things got worse.

One person who had had it with the bigotry was the first bishop of New York, John "Dagger" Hughes. He earned his

nickname because he didn't take any guff from the bigots. Indeed, when anti-Catholic thugs threatened to come after Catholics in the 1840s—they had already ransacked his residence—he told the Catholic masses to arm themselves and stand guard outside the churches. They did.

Given the anti-Catholicism that marked the public schools, Bishop Hughes pushed for public monies for Catholic schools. When he was turned down, he threw down the gauntlet and implored Catholics to fund their own schools. That was the start of parochial education; the schools were founded as a reaction to discrimination.

The bigots kept fighting Catholics. The Ku Klux Klan, we should remember, was founded after the Civil War as a terrorist organization that targeted blacks, Jews, *and* Catholics. In some parts of the country, Catholics were the number-one target. Indeed, in Oregon in the 1920s, the Klan tried to force every Catholic school to close; a bill was drafted to mandate that all children attend public schools.

By the 1930s, Catholics almost gave up seeking assimilation. They founded parallel institutions: this was the start of Catholic lawyers, doctors, social scientists, writers, educators, poets—every professional group—founding their own organizations. It worked. Not only did they succeed economically, the WASP elite took note of their achievements. It laid the groundwork for the heyday of Catholicism, the 1950s.

When John Kennedy was elected in 1960, it signaled the end of rampant discrimination against Catholic men and women. But it also signaled the beginning of a new wave of anti-Catholicism: defamation against the Church.

The 1960s witnessed tremendous changes outside and inside the Church. Some were long needed, such as civil rights for African Americans. But on the cultural front, we were hit with

a tidal wave of radical individualism; it hasn't stopped yet. Inside the Church, the social effects of Vatican II led to an exodus of nuns and priests; too many sisters who stayed shed their habits, and some priests even shed their vows.

What the dominant culture and Catholic institutions had in common in the 1960s was the relaxation of norms. Moral relativism reigned—it still does. Bad as these forces were, it was the acceptance of Catholics by the Protestant establishment that led them to let down their guard.

Adding to the assimilation “victory” was affluence. The 1960s saw a burst of affluence. To be sure, earning a middle-class station in life is certainly a good thing, but when it makes us too comfortable, we tend to shut ourselves out from anything that doesn't directly affect us. So when the institutional Church is being defamed, we often look askance, concluding that Father Murphy was best suited to deal with such offenses. In short, affluence breeds complacency.

“Making it,” then, is a double-edged sword. Catholics have made it by climbing the economic ladder, but in the process they lost their master status—they are no longer Catholics first. Once the outsider, we have become the consummate insider.

Here's the rub: our culture has become increasingly debased, and needs to be changed, but Catholics have gone limp. That is one good reason why the Catholic League exists—we act as a catalyst to mobilize the faithful, imploring them to shrug off their complacency and get involved. There is too much at stake to take a passive stance.