CATHOLICISM AND "THE GREATEST GENERATION"

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In a new book, NBC anchorman Tom Brokaw argues that those Americans who came of age during the Depression and the Second World War constitute our "greatest generation." Though I was not of that generation (I am one of those "baby boomers"), I would agree: there was something very special about that generation, and it is one that should make all Americans proud.

Brokaw is right to say that "This generation was united not only by common purpose, but also by common values—duty, honor, economy, courage, service, love of family and country, and above all, responsibility for oneself." Sounds remarkably like my Uncle Johnny, the Fordham graduate who fought in World War II. Happily, he still epitomizes the virtues Brokaw cited.

Brokaw's book is a snapshot look at a cross-section of the lives of ordinary Americans who made it the "greatest generation." The question remains, however, "What made these men and women so great?" What precisely was it that allowed them to embody such noble values? Clearly there were many contributing factors, but surely among them was the role that Catholicism played in the lives of non-Catholics, as well as Catholics.

The values that Brokaw discusses bear a striking resemblance to what are at root Catholic properties. Communitarian in nature, they are values that place the individual in a subordinate position to such greater social interests as family, community and nation. The communitarian element in Catholic social teaching is plain to see and is given premium status in its emphasis on self-denial: it is from this basis

that duty, responsibility and service spring.

While Catholicism was not alone in fostering common values in the 1930s and 1940s, it certainly played a significant role in affecting the cultural landscape. Even those who weren't Catholic experienced the effect of Catholic moral teaching, and this was especially true of those in the world of publishing, film, broadcasting, education and health. And because these are realms of society that provide no escape, the Catholic impact on the culture was palpable.

If it is true that the cultural ascendancy of Catholicism allowed for considerable social solidarity, it is also true that social cohesion was abetted by both the Depression and the Second World War: the war helped unite the country in a way we haven't witnessed since, and it came on the heels of the Depression, which, despite its heartache, also provided for a communitarian spirit. These were tough times, but they were also times of social bonding.

This was a period in American history when Catholicism "went public." Epitomized by "public Catholics" like Dennis Cardinal Doughtery, the Archbishop of Philadelphia, the Catholic Church in America had finally hit stride. Those who weren't Catholic also got a chance to be introduced to the Church via Hollywood. In 1938, Americans met Father Flanagan (courtesy of Spencer Tracy) in the movie, "Boys Town." Pat O'Brien, Karl Malden, Gregory Peck, Barry Fitzgerald and Bing Crosby tutored the public about the lives of other priests as well, projecting the very values that so impress Brokaw.

"Greatest generation" Catholics took their religion seriously. According to Charles Morris, the Philadelphia of the 1930s and 1940s posted a compliance rate with the Easter duty of approximately 99 percent. "Almost all Catholic children went to parochial elementary schools, and almost two-thirds went to Catholic high schools," says Morris. In addition, "It was not uncommon for the majority of adults to belong to parish

organizations like the Sodality and Holy Name Society." This chapter of our history, when the Forty Hours' vigil for the Blessed Sacrament was common, and Monday-night novenas were attended by ten thousand people in one parish, is labeled by Morris as "Triumphal-era" Catholicism.

The values that were dominant in the culture, such as those cited by Brokaw, were given public expression by this newly-charged Catholicism. After all, it was the values of duty, honor, service, love of family and country that were taught in the schools, values that found reinforcement in the Baltimore Catechism. And Brokaw's most celebrated value—responsibility for oneself—was given cultural support through the Confessional.

Modesty was a cultural staple back then, and it was another value that the Church delivered to the public. Listen to the answer that was given to the following question in 1939, "Do you think it is indecent for women to wear shorts for street wear?" Sixty-three percent said yes, 37 percent no. Women were harder than men on this question: 70 percent answered yes and 30 percent said no; among men the breakdown was 57-43. Even as late as 1948, the majority of Americans were opposed to women wearing slacks. And while it sounds odd to us now, in 1937 66 percent of the public said no to the question, "Would you vote for a woman for President, if she qualified in every other respect?"

Life and death issues also saw the impact of Catholic values on the culture. Consider the following question, asked by Gallup in 1938: "In Chicago recently a family had to decide between letting its newborn baby die and letting it have an operation that would leave the baby blind for life. Which course would you have chosen?" The overall tally was 63 percent in favor of the operation, and 37 percent in favor of letting the baby die. Those were exactly the figures that Protestants posted, but among Catholics the breakdown was 73 to 27; not so curiously, non-church members came in at 58-42.

There was growing sentiment in favor of the distribution of birth control but there was no soft middle ground when it came to divorce. Fully 77 percent said that divorce*should not* be easier to obtain, thus giving public life to Catholic teaching on the subject. It took the feminist movement of the 1960s to upend this position, as cries of injustice were voiced demanding no-fault divorce. Now only ideologues believe that no-fault divorce has helped women.

In 1938, radio owners were asked if they had heard any vulgar broadcast that offended them in the last year. Remarkably, 85 percent said no. This is even more incredible when one thinks what passed for vulgarity back then. Today, it is virtually impossible not to have one's sensibilities assaulted while simply driving to work: if it's not the commentary of radio talk-show hosts that offends, or the lyrics of pop music, it's a highway billboard or the bumper sticker in front of you that comes on like gang-busters.

It was in the 1950s that the "greatest generation" presided over families. This was a time when it seemed as though Catholicism had captured the culture. "The Catholic impulse," writes Morris, "was perfectly in accord with powerful forces that were transforming American society and culture in the 1940s and 1950s," so much so that Morris dubs this period, "A Catholicizing America." With Bishop Fulton J. Sheen dominating prime-time TV, it is with good reason that Protestants—who outnumbered Catholics 2 to 1—told sociologist Will Herberg that they felt "threatened" with Catholic domination.

The "greatest generation" had so much to teach, and it is not their failure that much of what they bequeathed has been lost. One does not have to be a romantic or a nostalgia-ridden neurotic to appreciate the degree of civility and community that existed not too long ago. Elementary etiquette, manners and deference to superiors were taken for granted. Manliness, and femininity, were also natural by-products. Yes, there was racism, sexism—injustice of all kinds—but at least within each

circle of race, ethnicity, community and family, there was a sense of cohesion. Now selfishness has become the characteristic cultural statement of our day, a trait that is as celebrated by our elites as it is exercised by the public.

The coarseness of our contemporary culture is due, in part, to the extent that Catholicism has receded in its influence. It has receded for two reasons: a) we have lost the will to engage the culture with the kind of passion we once did and b) the dominant culture, as formed by our elites, is increasingly unreceptive to Catholicism.

To recapture the culture, Catholicism will have to first awaken from its defensive posture. Internal divisions, scandal in the priesthood and financial woes have chastened the leadership, giving way to a mentality that plays not to lose, instead of playing to win. This will have to change, not only for the betterment of the Church, but for the betterment of society.

Regarding the dominant culture, it is the job of the Catholic League to fend off onslaughts against the Church. A hostile dominant culture surrounds us and it will not retreat without a battle. Unfortunately, too many Catholics still believe that the Catholic way is to make peace with the culture, and that is why they resist the work of the Catholic League. The league is forward-looking and will not succumb to the politics of accommodation. It is one thing to be prudential (a plus), quite another to be without principle.

The “greatest generation” paid its dues and it passed the baton to the rest of us. That baton was dropped by my generation and must now be fielded once again. What’s at stake is more than pride—the culture itself is on the line. Catholicism can play a role, a very big role, in regenerating the culture. Whether it seeks to grab the baton is uncertain, but one thing is for sure: the Catholic League will do all it can to see to it that it does.