

# CATHOLICS IN AMERICA

*Russell Shaw*

Russell Shaw, *Catholics in America* (Ignatius Press, 2016)

Who says Catholics don't have a presence in today's American politics to match the presence they once had? It all depends on which Catholics—and what version of Catholicism—you have in mind.

As their vice-presidential candidate for 2016 the Democrats offered us Tim Kaine, a Catholic senator from Virginia who says his faith is his guide. But Kaine votes pro-choice on abortion, and he told the Human Rights Campaign that the Church would come around on gay marriage. As their VP pick the Republicans tapped social conservative Indiana Governor Mike Pence. A cradle Catholic, Pence now worships in an evangelical megachurch where services feature colored lights and bands.

The Catholic roots of both featured prominently in media coverage of the campaign.

As if that weren't enough, in August sitting vice president Joe Biden, a pro-choice Catholic Democrat who spearheaded the Obama administration's shift to all-out support for gay marriage, officiated at a same-sex wedding in his official residence. This was apparently more than the hierarchy could take. Three bishops, including Archbishop Joseph Kurtz of Louisville, president of the bishops' conference, released a statement calling Biden's action a scandal.

In their several ways, politicians like Kaine, Pence, and Biden illustrate the impact of cultural assimilation on Catholic religious identity that I analyze in my book *Catholics in America* (Ignatius Press). The thesis, which I first discussed in an earlier volume called *American Church*, is simple: assimilation—Americanization, it's commonly

called—contributes to undermining the Catholic identity of a large number of American Catholics, to the point that the very future of the Church in the United States is threatened.

Of the trio mentioned, Pence is the wild card. Kaine's and Biden's differences with the Church involve repudiating some of its teachings. But Pence appears to have repudiated the Church by simply walking away from it. Switching religions, as Pence has done, is itself a common American practice. The Catholic Church is particularly vulnerable, losing many more members yearly in this way than it gains by conversions.

*Catholics in America* contains profiles of fifteen prominent individuals—from Archbishop John Carroll to author Flannery O'Connor—whose lives in various ways shed light on the central question in the assimilation debate: is it possible to be a good American and a good Catholic? Answers range from the testy no of cantankerous Orestes Brownson, the leading American Catholic public intellectual of the nineteenth century, to the heartfelt yes of Brownson's old friend, Father Isaac Hecker, founder of the Paulist Fathers.

Others profiled include such figures as Cardinal James Gibbons of Baltimore, de facto primate of the American hierarchy who for four decades steered the course of Catholic assimilation with a firm but diplomatic hand, Archbishop Fulton Sheen, premier Catholic televangelist during the religious boom of the 1950s, Dorothy Day, countercultural, controversial co-founder of the Catholic Worker, who is now being considered for canonization, and Father John Courtney Murray, S.J., the leading Catholic theological apologist for the American church-state arrangement.

The book looks at two Catholic politicians: Al Smith and John F. Kennedy. The stark contrast between their approaches to the relationship between faith and politics speaks volumes about assimilation.

Born in 1873 on Manhattan's Lower East Side, Smith was a proud New Yorker and practicing Catholic who rose from humble beginnings to become a four-term governor of New York and a candidate for the White House. When he sought the Democratic party's vice-presidential nomination in 1924, Franklin Roosevelt called him "the Happy Warrior." Four years later the Democrats chose him to head the ticket.

With the nation in 1928 at the peak of an economic boom (soon to end with a stock market crash and the onset of the Great Depression), it's doubtful any Democrat could have been elected president that year. But Smith didn't just lose, he lost badly, with 40.77% of the popular votes and 87 electoral votes to GOP candidate Herbert Hoover's 58.2% and 444 electoral votes. Traditionally Democratic states like Texas, Oklahoma, and Florida all went Republican. Many votes were cast against Smith, the *New York Times* concluded, "because he was a Catholic."

That was hardly a surprise. The Ku Klux Klan, re-founded in 1915, was a significant force in those days, aiming its vitriol at Blacks, Jews, and Catholics. A senator from Alabama, Thomas Heflin by name, earned a measure of fame denouncing "the Roman hierarchy and the political machine." And the venerable *Atlantic Monthly* weighed in with an open letter by a New York lawyer named Charles Marshall questioning Smith's commitment as a Catholic to religious liberty and his views on education issues. Smith responded vigorously, but it was clear early on that his religion would be an issue if he ran in 1928.

And so it was. An avalanche of anti-Catholic animus greeted his candidacy. Declaring that with Smith in the race "Rome has reached one of its long-sought goals," a Protestant magazine spoke for many when it pronounced "the mere mention of a Roman Catholic as President" to be cause for alarm. "Rome has not changed...Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty," the editorial proclaimed.

Incensed by the attacks, Smith responded in a speech on September 20 in Oklahoma City. His passionate, blunt rebuttal elicited genuine concern for his safety.

After citing his scandal-free record in public life, Smith turned to his religion and the opposition he was encountering on account of it.

"I can think of no greater disaster to the country than to have the voters...divide upon religious lines," he said. "Our forefathers, in their wisdom, wrote into the Constitution of the United States that no religious test shall ever be applied for public office." And that was "not a mere form of words," the candidate added, but "the most vital principle that ever was given to any people."

"I attack those who seek to undermine it," Smith concluded fervently, "not only because I am a good Christian, but because I am a good American and a product of America and of American institutions. Everything I am, and everything I hope to be, I owe to those institutions." A few weeks later he suffered overwhelming defeat in an election in which bigotry had played a major role.

Practically speaking, that was the end of Smith's political career. He died in 1944. But he had accomplished a great deal. Not the least of his achievements was to help pave the way for another Catholic politician: John F. Kennedy.

Born in 1917, Kennedy was Smith's antithesis in many ways. Smith's family was poor, Kennedy's family very wealthy. Smith was a self-educated man of the people, Kennedy a Harvard-educated elitist (but with no significant education in Catholicism). Smith was a faithful husband, Kennedy a womanizer. Smith was a devout Catholic, while Kennedy's Catholicism was at best superficial.

After seeking but failing to gain the Democratic nomination for vice president in 1956, Kennedy and his advisers began

weighing a run for the presidency in 1960. They knew from the start that his religion would be a problem.

Well before the issue came up in an actual campaign, Kennedy sought to deal with it in a *Look* magazine interview with prominent journalist Fletcher Knebel. Summing up, Knebel said of the senator from Massachusetts, "His theme is that religion is personal, politics are public, and the twain need never meet and conflict." Reactions in the Catholic press were not enthusiastic. "To relegate your conscience to your 'private life' is not only unrealistic, but dangerous as well," remarked Catholic weekly magazine *Ave Maria*.

But the religious issue wouldn't go away. Soon after Kennedy was nominated for president, 150 prominent Protestant leaders headed by Dr. Norman Vincent Peale, author of the bestselling self-help book *The Power of Positive Thinking*, issued a statement calling the Catholic Church a "political organization" and questioning Kennedy's ability to "withstand the determined efforts of the hierarchy to work its will in American political life."

Kennedy reacted quickly in an address delivered on September 12, 1960 in Houston to an audience of Protestant ministers. The speech remains a turning-point—not just for the Kennedy candidacy but, as later events have shown, for Catholic participation in American political life.

In a key passage, he said: "Whatever issue may come before me as president—on birth control, divorce, censorship, gambling or any other subject—I will make my decision...in accordance with what my conscience tells me to be in the national interest, and without regard to outside religious pressures or dictates." Here was the sort of separation of faith from public life that the Second Vatican Council five years later would call "one of the gravest errors of our time."

Instead of that, Vatican II (in its Pastoral Constitution on

the Church in the Modern World) declared that people of faith should be “proud of the opportunity to carry out their earthly activity in such a way as to integrate human, domestic, professional, scientific and technical enterprises with religious values.”

Kennedy squeaked by the GOP’s Richard Nixon in November, losing 6.5% of the votes of Protestant Democrats and independents together with a hefty 17.2% of the Southern vote because of his religion, but compensated by getting 80% of the votes of Catholics. His short, dramatic presidency came to a tragic close by assassination on November 22, 1963.

The Kennedy profile in *Catholics in America* concludes this way:

“Many Catholic politicians have followed the path marked out by JFK in Houston. Catholic officeholders and candidates who lend support to causes like legalized abortion and same-sex marriage are in effect following his lead.

“Now as then, however, the issue isn’t taking orders from the pope and the bishops—something those supposedly power-hungry ecclesiastics neither expect nor want—but how to apply moral principles grounded in faith to real-world politics. John Kennedy’s innovative and influential approach lay in giving assurances that he wouldn’t even try. We are still living with the consequences.”

The politics of 2016 and the fresh evidence it has supplied of cultural assimilation operative in the world of politics vividly illustrate the truth of that.

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