

REVITALIZING CATHOLICISM IN AMERICA

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Russell Shaw and David Byers, *Revitalizing Catholicism in America* (Our Sunday Visitor, 2023)

Authors Russell Shaw and David Byers in their new book *Revitalizing Catholicism in America* (Our Sunday Visitor, 2023) present evidence for the nation's largest religious body to be in a decline. To revitalize Catholicism in America, they say, we must start with what is true (doctrinally and otherwise) and also to examine Catholicism's relation to the broader culture. How does this impact the Church too? Telling the truth about Catholicism in America involves admitting that things have not gone well in large sectors of ecclesial life from one end of our country to the other. Take, for example, the Sacrament of Baptism. Shaw and Byers cite the statistics on infant baptism, comparing 1970 with 2019. During that nearly fifty-year stretch, infant baptisms dropped from 1.089 million to 582,331—a decline of fifty percent! The decline was even greater for the Sacrament of Holy Matrimony. In 1970, there were 426,309 Catholic marriages; in 2019, there were but 137,885—a fall-off of more than seventy-five percent! Meanwhile, the total Catholic population in the United States grew from 54.1 million to 72.4 million in that same period of comparison.

Along with statistics on Baptism and Marriage, Shaw and Byers offer statistics on Mass attendance, priestly ordinations, enrollment in Catholic schools and a few other indices or barometers of Catholic life. In every area, the Church has lost ground (in the 1970s and 80s not that much but with faster and faster acceleration after that). The cause of so much ground being lost? Without a doubt it is secularism. To

put a finer point on it though, Shaw and Byers maintain that the decline has occurred because instead of evangelizing the secular culture, Catholics were instead evangelized by the secular culture. (p. 33)

Secularization also obviously raises the issue of assimilation. How much assimilation can there be for Catholics before the faith is chiseled away partly or wholly? We can begin to answer that question by saying a fair amount or even a large amount provided the Catholic subculture remains intact. And for a while it did in America. The Catholic subculture acted as a kind of cellular membrane—allowing in to the body or organism things judged not detrimental to Catholicism and holding at bay other things considered threatening to the faith. This approach of selective permeability worked well when immigration levels from Europe were high and religious solidarity helped to buffet Catholics against any isolation stemming from prejudice and discrimination. The massive influence of American culture however and its ability to confer or withhold prestige and status according to alma mater (the Ivy League colleges and a handful of other schools), its promotion of enviable professional accomplishments (especially in law, the professoriate and in business) and the ambition of having a home address in suburbia (not far from cities like New York, Washington, D.C. and some other urban areas) have proven too much for the plausibility of the Catholic subculture. Shaw and Byers put it this way: “[T]he failure—or inability—of Church institutions to offer sufficiently persuasive grounds for remaining attached to Catholicism in the face of serious inducements to disaffiliate” (p. 38) helped bring about a collapse of the Catholic subculture.

Serious inducements to disaffiliate, as Shaw and Byers note above, and hostility. “Except for the abuse of Blacks and Indians,” Shaw and Byers write, “there is little if anything in American history to compare with the outpouring of

hostility and contempt lately directed at Catholics and other Christians by Hollywood, major news organizations, and even secular academic institutions.” (p. 48) And what is behind this hostility? Shaw and Byers cite Mary Eberstadt whose books include *Adam and Eve after the Pill* (2012), *It’s Dangerous to Believe* (2016) and *Adam and Eve after the Pill, Revisited* (2023). She, among a host of commentators, holds the position that opposition to the Sexual Revolution has engendered the hostility being directed at Catholics and some other Christians. It is good to recall here that Catholics and other Christians who oppose the Sexual Revolution are minorities themselves among the baptized. And, further, they practice the faith with an ardor not usually observed in other adherents. Important too is that the Catholic Church has not officially abandoned pre-Sexual Revolution positions in exchange for “better press” and more favorable treatment from the ruling elites.

The question is always going to be then: What are believing and practicing Catholics supposed to do? Shaw and Byers identify three stances (or “versions” as Shaw and Byers call them) which can be adopted. The first is basically not to do anything because at some unknown point in the future the decline will level off. The second is known in some circles as the Benedict Option, keeping in mind the title of Rod Dreher’s book (2017) and obviously before that, Saint Benedict (480 – 547). This second stance is effectively a retreat or withdrawal from the culture. The third stance is what the authors call new communities for a new Catholic subculture. The emphasis with the third stance is on evangelization, what our authors consider “an irreplaceable element of Catholic identity.” (p. 59) The third stance, by the way, is what Shaw and Byers favor. H. Richard Niebuhr (1894 – 1962) offered something akin to these stances or versions in his landmark book *Christ and Culture* (1951), wherein the American Protestant theologian discussed various typologies in relation to the interaction of faith and culture.

The last major part of the book is the authors setting forth a way for the revitalization of the Church in America to happen. It consists of nine “action points” or recommendations to implement. For the record, I mention each one here: (1) heed the universal call to holiness; (2) discern, accept and live out your personal vocation; (3) rid yourself of ways of thinking and acting that smack of clericalism; (4) do your bit to build the new Catholic subculture; (5) encourage and contribute to a new apologetics; (6) do apostolate; (7) be an evangelizer; (8) do your part in promoting and practicing shared responsibility; (9) insist on accountability, and practice it yourself.

Let me say that all nine “action points” or recommendations are consistent with what Shaw and Byers present throughout their short volume. Next, I want to add that it is unlike some other offerings on the market which call for the Church to change her doctrine and discipline. Faithful Catholics will be pleased with a book by two authors who want only for the Church to breathe again with the fresh air of faith. For that to happen, we cannot continue to ingest the toxic fumes of a culture turned in on itself, and with more and more antipathy for Catholicism.

The effort to breathe again with the fresh air of faith will take enormous resolve and an extraordinary amount of work by clergy and lay people alike. This review referenced statistics at the start; I wish to offer a few more words about how to read pastoral statistics. Having gone through a period in the 1970s and 80s when many were heard to say, “We’re not concerned about numbers,” now we are deeply concerned about them. And for good reason. Without numbers and substantiated data, we are unable to exercise a necessary and sustained stewardship for the future. At some point, then, the Catholic Church may hardly be recognizable as the Church of the Acts of the Apostles wherein growth and holiness are real and evident to the eye. Indeed, it is growth through holiness that puts to

the lie the wry observation of Ralph Martin quoted by Shaw and Byers: "Business as usual [is] going out of business." (p. 36) If the Church were a business, her numbers now would be on par with Bud Light's after its recent disastrous marketing campaign using Dylan Mulvaney.

Statistics are important to the Church for they give us a first look at what is happening to life in the Spirit. They obviously don't tell us the whole story. But they begin to give us snapshots of whether or not the Catholic faith is being passed on generationally. Shaw and Byers are convinced that the Catholic faith is not being transmitted even by the once vaunted Catholic school system. They write that "[l]arge numbers of American Catholic children and young people now receive little or no formation in the Faith, with the predictable result of ignorance of what the Church teaches and carelessness in religious practice – supposing that these kids practice at all, as many do not." (p. 63) On this point of religious illiteracy leading to non-practice of the Catholic faith, Shaw and Byers cite the published work of Christian Smith and Amy Adamczyk in a volume entitled *Handing Down the Faith* (2021). Smith and Adamczyk place the blame on parents for raising their own children to be so intellectually ignorant of the Faith and to be so unserious about practicing it. As a way of attempting to remedy this grave pastoral problem, Smith and Adamczyk advise that parents who have "clear and implemented life standards and expectations for their children" and express these "with expressive emotional warmth and relational bonding" (p. 65) are in the best position to see that an "effective religious transmission" (p. 66) takes place.

Well, is there any good news on the horizon, you might be wondering. Yes, there is—but in the form of small seeds. Homeschooling and classical academies do not have long histories on the American scene but already have demonstrated that they are a kind of leaven in the world. There are also

those educational institutions which make the grade and make it into the Cardinal Newman Guide. Making that list of authentically Catholic schools is the institutional equivalent of what Smith and Adamczyk counsel for parents at home. Schools that have “clear and implemented life standards and expectations” for their students are the best environments for the Faith to take root and grow in the lives of young Catholics.

As a country, we seem to be having a lot of trouble right now with “clear and implemented life standards and expectations.” This is traceable, I think, to the increasingly widespread denial of truth and norms for living and loving in our culture. We see too the hideous aim of wanting to quash the “emotional warmth and relational bonding,” the trust, that is, that ought to exist between parents and their children by third parties who fancy themselves as enlightened educators.

As we learned during the pandemic, live streaming Masses is not the way to encounter the Lord and His Church as we ought—much less can it revitalize Catholicism in America. What it comes down to is what Shaw and Byers say about maintaining a Catholic subculture. It’s a matter of existential faith. Do you believe? Do you believe that Catholicism is true? If so, embrace the Faith. For hearing and understanding the word, you will bear fruit and yield a hundred or sixty or thirtyfold. (cf. Matt 13:23)

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