

Reflections on New Momentum in the Church

Panel of the Conference on the Catholic Church in America: 2006
September 20-21, The Catholic University of America

Paul Sullins, Life Cycle Institute

Speaking institutionally, no one is a member of the Catholic Church. The thought may startle, but it is true. All who claim the identity of Catholic are, instead, members of other organizations or communities—parishes, dioceses, religious communities or lay prelatures—which are themselves, in various ways, related to a bishop who is in communion with the Bishop of Rome. Sociologists term this arrangement a subsidiary (as opposed to direct membership) organizational form, and indeed its development in the Church is directly related to the Catholic social ideal of subsidiarity.

First articulated in the 1931 encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno*, the principle of subsidiarity proposes that institutions should be so structured as to preserve the greatest amount of local autonomy. This idea reflects, in the social sphere, the same distinctly Catholic impulse that led, in earlier ages, to the development of widespread devotion to saints and the envisioning of a hierarchy of angels carrying out God's will among men. For Catholics--in contrast to Protestants, who focus on an immediate apprehension of God via a perspicuous revelation--God's transcendence typically meets us through intermediaries.

Accordingly, unlike most Protestant confessional churches, which are comprised of a single group of persons, the Catholic Church is a collection of many diverse groups, an institution of institutions, literally a church of churches. The persons in these groups may have widely differing political philosophies, aesthetic sensibilities, languages, nationalities, even different spiritualities and theological inclinations, yet it is the genius of Catholicism to bring them together into a common identity in Christ. This diversity in unity, in fact, is part of what we mean when we call the Church "Catholic".

Because it is much easier to found a new group than to reform an old one, the growing edge of the life of the Church is often expressed in the newer of the many groups that make up its life. Recently the Life Cycle Institute at the Catholic University of America took a reading on the "New Momentum" in the Church today by hearing from representatives of five relatively new groups in the Church. The groups represented included the well-known international renewal movements of Opus Dei and Communion and Liberation. The Voice of the Faithful, a lay group formed in the wake of the 2002 sex abuse scandals, was also represented. Finally, two groups that address what might be termed infrastructure issues were discussed: the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' Office of Hispanic Ministry, and Founders and Donors Interested in Catholic Activities. Together, these presentations provided an intriguing picture of new developments in the life of the American Catholic Church.

It may seem odd to speak of Opus Dei, founded in 1928, and Communion and Liberation, which began in 1954, as examples of "new momentum", yet each of them began slowly, and have developed a much larger prominence and activity just in the past two decades. They are also

new in the sense that each responds to the quite modern need to find a personal walk or encounter with Christ in the midst of a secular society to which religious faith seems external. Both of these groups try to provide structured ways in which the disconnected persons of modernity can find community and support for living out their faith. Each began in a small way, with the work of a single individual, and grew relationally and organically into a movement that spans nations and cultures. Neither can be considered a reform movement, except perhaps in the sense of trying to reform individuals; both work within and wholeheartedly support the structure and hierarchy of the Church.

Mr. Russell Shaw, a member of Opus Dei (“The Work of God”) for 25 years, observed that, in contrast to the caricature of Opus Dei presented in the recent popular film *The DaVinci Code*, “Opus Dei is not about power. . .It's about doing God's will.” Founded in 1928 in Madrid by Father Josemaria Escriva, it was brought to the United States in 1949 by three young Spaniards who began their work in Chicago, Illinois. Today there are about 3,000 members throughout the U.S., with concentrations in the major urban areas of Milwaukee, St. Louis, Boston, New York, Washington, D.C., Los Angeles, and San Francisco. About 100 of these are priests; the rest are laypersons, most married, and consequently about half men and half women. There are also a small number of celibate lay members, known as “supernumeraries”.

The primary activity of Opus Dei is to provide “ongoing spiritual formation and direction to individual women and men who will, one hopes, carry the gospel into the settings where they naturally find themselves—their homes, neighborhoods, classrooms, and workplaces.”

Although a small proportion of those who receive spiritual direction from Opus Dei join the organization, the vast majority do not. According to Mr. Shaw, an estimated two hundred thousand American Catholics have made a retreat or day of reflection or received some form of spiritual direction or support from Opus Dei. A consequence of its focus on spiritual direction is that there are only a few Opus Dei institutions in the United States, consisting principally of several retreat centers and schools. Opus Dei runs two universities, in Pamplona, Spain and Rome, Italy. The organization has no need or plans to found other institutions.

Mr. Shaw concluded by sharing that he had found Opus Dei to be “a very rewarding way—though certainly not the only way or a perfect way—of trying to live as a serious Christian in the world. It will not be the unique source of the future spiritual renewal of the Church, but it will certainly be one source.”

Monsignor Lorenzo Albacete shared about the work of Communion and Liberation (CL). This apostolate aims to be “a movement of persons who have been changed by an encounter, who tentatively make the world, the environment, and the circumstances that they encounter more human.” Like the woman at Jacob’s Well, Christ meets us in an ongoing encounter that recreates our character and community. We cannot put fixed forms or formulae to this experience, but meet the incarnate Christ, not as a dead doctrine, but as a present event which becomes a sign of communion. CL, asserted Msgr. Albacete, “is not a particular form of spirituality or ethics, nor a movement of Church reform, nor a program . . . It is the communication of an experience and a method of education of following its implications.”

CL has about 1,000 members in the United States, distributed in over 120 communities. These numbers are only estimates since no formal membership records are kept. Those who wish to commit themselves to a more formal adherence to the charism join what is called the “Fraternity of Communion and Liberation” following a simple rule of suggested activities called “gestures”, which include daily prayer, common catechesis, charitable work, spiritual reading, singing, vacation, and contributing to a common charitable fund. Affiliated with this charism are more formal associations: “Memores Domini”, an association of lay men and women living in poverty, virginity and obedience; the “Fraternity of St. Charles Borromeo” for priests ordained for missionary work; the “Society of St. Joseph” for mature men and women who follow a life of virginity without living in community; and “Stadium Christi,” groups of diocesan and religious priests who follow the charism.

CL began in 1954 in Milan, when Father Luigi Giussani began sharing these principles with high school students. The work began to grow rapidly during the 1970s among college students in Italy, who formed fraternities and became involved in university governing councils. By the early 1980s, Pope John Paul II received over 10,000 lay members and 500 affiliated priests in special audiences. Today the movement has a presence in most countries of the world. In the United States it sponsors summer vacation trips for college students.

A much newer and distinctly American group was represented at the conference by the Voice of the Faithful, a Boston-based group formed in response to the sexual abuse crisis in 2002. Mary Pat Fox, president of VOTF, shared with the conference her commitment and optimism for helping to improve the health of the Church in America. Unlike the previous two groups, the focus of VOTF is not to develop personal spirituality but to support the victims of sex abuse and non-abusing priests, and to promote structural change in the governance of the Church.

“VOTF”, said Mrs. Fox, “is an organization that wants to make change happen.” Its mission is “to provide a prayerful voice, attentive to the Spirit, through which the Faithful can actively participate in the governance and guidance of the Catholic Church.” VOTF advocates that bishops who have failed to protect the people of their diocese from abusive priests should be removed from ecclesiastical office, and promotes greater involvement by laypersons in the decision-making processes of parishes and dioceses. Currently the organization is circulating petitions calling on the USCCB to improve its response to the sex abuse crisis and increase financial accountability in Catholic dioceses and parishes.

The key to effective change is more active lay involvement in the Church: “[I]n order for our Church to be a healthy sustainable Church, the laity must re-examine our role and take on greater responsibility in the governance and guidance of the Church.” Mrs. Fox reported, “Our members are highly educated and our Church is very important to us. In a study conducted by Dr. Bill D’Antonio and Dr. Tony Pogorelc of the Life Cycle Institute, they reported that 87% of the members of Voice of the Faithful have at least a college degree, greater than 70% attended Catholic Grammar School, 60% Catholic High School and greater than 50% also attended Catholic College. About 25% have degrees in theology, canon law or scriptures. Most of us are lectors, Eucharistic Ministers, on parish councils, or teach CCD. And when asked how important the Catholic Church is to us personally, 61% answered that it is the most or one of the

most important parts of our lives.” Today’s laypersons “are no longer uneducated members that sit in the pews ready to pray, pay and obey or to look to the clergy for validation.”

Although just four years old, VOTF today claims 35,000 members and over 120 active affiliates in every region of the U.S. and in Australia, Ireland, and Canada. VOTF has what sociologists would call a more rational organizational structure than either Opus Dei or CL. Unlike them, there is no single dominant personality responsible for the founding of VOTF. Records are kept on membership, financial, and affiliate group matters. The group has a clear, businesslike organizational structure, with elected officers and clearly stated goals and working groups. In general, while Opus Dei and C & L are focused on improving persons’ spirituality, while accepting the Church’s structure as it is, VOTF is focused on improving the Church’s structure, while accepting people’s spirituality as it is. VOTF’s motto is to “Keep the Faith and Change the Church”.

Two final speakers represented activities devoted to improving the maintenance or infrastructure for organizational initiatives in the Church: Founders and Donors Interested in Catholic Activities (FADICA), and the USCCB Office of Hispanic Ministries.

FADICA is a consortium of charitable foundations and individual donors that works to strengthen Catholic life and service by helping its members to be better informed, involved and effective in addressing Church needs by their philanthropy. It does not make grants or grant referrals, but helps to promote research, education and the exchange of information and experience for the benefit of those interested in giving to Catholic causes.

Frank Butler, the president of FADICA, related that FADICA came into being in response to the growing wealth and status of Catholics in America. Catholics today are as wealthy as any group in America, but they have not developed the culture or habits of financially supporting the work of the Church at the same level as do other American churches. To address this, FADICA encourages reflection on how the Church can work to create a culture of giving and gratitude and how Catholics of means might use their resources to defend life and fight poverty, disease, and war.

Mr. Butler shared that progress in enlisting the laity in this task will depend upon a climate change within the church, where we put aside fractious squabbles and suspicion and promote a stronger sense of belonging and mutual respect.

A large and growing social group among American Catholics is persons of Hispanic origin. Alejandro Aguilera-Titus, Associate Director of the Secretariat for Hispanic Affairs of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, spoke to the conference about the past, present and future of Hispanic ministry in the United States.

Hispanics have emerged from the blending of different races and cultures, which has resulted in a new people. Even though Hispanics find their ancestors in many different countries, most share a common faith and language, as well as a culture rooted in the Catholic faith. Hispanic ministry is not a one-way street. It is both the church’s response to the Hispanic presence among it, and the Hispanic presence’s response as church. The goal of such ministry is that, over time, the

Hispanic members of the Church will feel welcomed, affirm their Catholic identity, and develop a sense of ownership and stewardship as full participants in the life of the Church.

Catholic Hispanic ministry began on a national level shortly after World War II. Since then it has grown and matured with much success. Today, the development of Hispanic Ministry hinges on the pastoral process of *Encuentro*: a coming together of the Church to discern the direction, priorities and pastoral action in ministry among Hispanics. In 1987 the bishops published a national Pastoral Plan for Hispanic Ministry, which presents a model for ministry that is evangelizing, communitarian and missionary. The commitment of Hispanics to become active participants and to offer their unique contributions in the life of the Church and society—versus *being assimilated*—has been a key value and principle for Hispanics/Latinos in ministry.

Since 1960, 71% of the numerical growth in the Catholic Church has been due to the influx of Hispanics. Today more than a third of all Catholics, and half of all Catholics under age 25, in the United States is Hispanic. Thirty-seven of the U.S. bishops are of Hispanic origin, and more than 80% of U.S. dioceses have staff devoted to diocesan Hispanic ministry. Due to demographic trends already in place, the population of Hispanics, and their concentration in the Catholic Church, will increase dramatically over the next generation. This growth presents an ongoing need for the Church to address resistance, increase Hispanic leadership and ministry in all areas, and fully integrate Hispanics in the life and work of the Church.

Together, these five groups present a picture of a Church that is alive and growing in vital and creative ways. Although quite diverse, they shared a fundamental common feature: each of the groups exists, not as an end in itself, but only as a means to further the larger work and life of the Church. Like saints and angels for our time, they (each in its own way) seek to bring the life of God into the ordinary, concrete life of the faithful.