

AMERICA'S RELIGIONS

FROM THEIR ORIGINS
TO THE TWENTY-FIRST
CENTURY

Peter W. Williams

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at specific times during Lent and Holy Week. Although the liturgy was traditionally celebrated in Greek, Old Church Slavonic, and other languages of the Old World, it has in recent times been translated into English to accommodate the large majority of American Orthodox no longer familiar with these ancestral tongues. Practical considerations have also led most to abandon the traditional Julian calendar for everyday purposes, although it is still utilized for determining parts of the liturgical cycle. Other differences from Western practice include the use of the term "Epiphany" to designate the commemoration of the baptism of Jesus, rather than the appearance of Jesus to the Magi; the use of leavened bread mixed with wine in the distribution of the Eucharist; and the practice of *chrismation*, an anointing administered immediately after baptism, rather than in a separate, later rite such as the West's sacrament of confirmation.

In addition to the seven sacraments or mysteries shared with the Roman church, Orthodoxy recognizes a number of other rituals as sacramental in character. Among these is the administration of the *tonsure*—a symbolic clipping of hair—to those taking monastic vows. Monasticism has played an important role in Orthodoxy from early on, and Mount Athos on the Greek coast has been a major center of Orthodox spirituality. Monasticism also plays an important role in Orthodox polity, since bishops are usually elevated from the ranks of celibate monks. (Widowers who have taken monastic vows are also eligible.) Other clergy may marry before they receive ordination, but are thereafter barred from the episcopate. Clergy, laity, and bishops all participate in councils that set policy for the entire communion. In the United States, the scarcity of bishops and clergy in the early years led to a stronger role for the laity in governance. The exact character of polity varies according to the size, needs, and traditions of the several branches of Orthodoxy represented in North America, but continuity within the apostolic succession of bishops is a constant.

In the Christian spectrum today—especially in the United States—Eastern Christianity remains something of an anomaly. In terms of Will Herberg's classic typology of "Protestant, Catholic, Jew," Eastern Christians fall through the cracks (together with Anglicans, many of whom reject such easy classification). Although Eastern ways of belief and worship closely resemble those of the more familiar Roman Catholic tradition in many ways, the issue of papal supremacy has placed the Orthodox churches in closer alliance with the Protestant churches on such matters as participating in the National and World Councils of Churches. (Their conservatism on a number of social issues, however, has led some Orthodox churches to grow cautious about participation in these ecumenical bodies and even to the complete withdrawal of others.) Although their ethnic identities remain distinct and in many ways restrictive, their continued vitality on the American scene is a caution against too facile a reduction of America's religious communities into generic categories which are easy to think of but poor reflections of a complex reality.

CHAPTER 6

The Roman Catholic Tradition

The Roman Catholic Church is the largest single religious organization in the United States today. Like those of many religious groups, its name, which had been bestowed upon it after the English Reformation by Anglicans hostile to the papacy in Rome, originally had derogatory connotations. In recent times, however, the name is widely accepted in English-speaking countries as proper and official. Until the Reformation era, the modifier "Roman" was unnecessary, since the Catholic Church, with its center in the Roman papacy, was officially the only representative of Christianity in Western Europe. Despite the challenges that began in earnest with Luther's protests in the early sixteenth century, the Roman Catholic Church represents to this day the largest single tradition within the Christian religion, as well as the most universally dispersed.

Roman Catholicism affirms the traditional teachings of the early church as expressed in the creeds of Nicea and Chalcedon, the decrees of subsequent ecumenical councils (worldwide assemblages of bishops, held periodically, such as the most recent Vatican II), and the dogmatic pronouncements of the popes. It shares with virtually all other Christian groups a belief in the inspired and authoritative character of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures (the Old and New Testaments) together with the so-called Apocrypha.

However, it also maintains that scripture can only be interpreted properly through the *magisterium*, or teaching authority, of the institutional church. The fullness of this authority resides in the papacy, which is the custodian of the body of teaching known as *tradition*. Tradition is based on revelation as contained in scripture, but also includes doctrines, such as the bodily assumption of the Virgin Mary into heaven. These are not explicit in scripture but have developed within the Catholic community over the centuries from implicit scriptural evidence. The pope is further able to make infallible pronouncements on matters of faith and morals when he speaks *ex cathedra*, that is, officially from his "chair"—a symbol of his office.

A major key to understanding the Catholic theological perspective is through its approach to the relationship of the realms of "Nature" and "Grace." The Catholic Church has traditionally taught that the realm of nature is God's creation. Though finite and flawed, nature, including humanity, is fundamentally good. Human nature has been corrupted by original sin; still, it is capable of redemption through divine grace, which is potentially available to all of humanity.

The usual channel of such grace is the sacraments. These rituals, seven in number, are said to have been instituted by Jesus Christ. They are ordinarily administered by the clergy, who are thus empowered by ordination to the priesthood (itself a sacrament) or, in some cases, by a bishop (for example, confirmation and ordination). Sacraments employ both verbal and material elements, and are examples of the Catholic belief that grace, or divine saving power, does not repudiate but rather builds upon and perfects a natural substratum.

As should be evident from the above, the Catholic Church has always placed great emphasis on the institutional church as an intermediary between the divine and the human. From the time of the Council of Trent (1545–63), the church was identified primarily with the clergy, or priests, and the hierarchy, or bishops headed by the pope. The Second Vatican Council (1962–65), however, redefined the character of the church through a much greater emphasis on the role of the laity (a category which includes nuns and sisters, who, though “religious professionals,” cannot receive ordination because of their sex).

Traditional Catholic ethics, which is frequently called “moral theology,” is based on the notion of *natural law*, an idea which correlates with the theology of nature and grace. This fundamental approach in both theology and ethics is derived from the thought of the thirteenth-century philosopher St. Thomas Aquinas (1225–74), who adapted the categories of the Greek philosopher Aristotle for Christian purposes. According to natural law theory, all important human activities have a proper goal which is defined by nature and knowable by reason unaided by grace. For example, sexual intercourse has as its natural goal procreation, and the use of artificial contraceptives to thwart the fulfillment of this goal is unnatural and therefore immoral.

Needless to say, this particular application of natural law theory has been extremely controversial. Since Vatican II, a diversity of teachings on a wide variety of ethical matters, including the morality of nuclear warfare and capital punishment as well as sexuality in its various forms, has arisen within the American Catholic community. (The difficulties of the American ethicist Charles Curran and the German theologian Hans Küng with the Vatican over their teachings on a variety of matters from contraception to papal infallibility are illustrative of the ferment and tensions within the international Catholic community.) Similarly, new theological approaches influenced by contemporary philosophical movements such as existentialism and phenomenology have arisen to challenge traditional scholastic philosophy and theology based on Aquinas’s teachings. Central to this reconceptualization of theology has been a movement away from a focus on objective, external processes, goals, and criteria toward an emphasis on the individual self in personal relationship with God and the Christian community. Continental European theologians such as Bernard Häring, Karl Rahner, Hans Küng, Bernard Lonergan, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, and Edward Schillebeeckx—some of them still controversial—have all exercised an important influence on contemporary American Catholic thought.

One way of understanding both the centrality of sacramental worship to Catholicism and the ways in which thought and practice have changed significantly in the wake of Vatican II is to look more carefully at each of the seven sacraments, a number fixed during the later Middle Ages after long debate as to the precise number. These seven can be separated analytically into two categories: those which are usually received once (at most) during the course of the life cycle, and those which are received on a regular basis.

To begin with the latter, the rite that has traditionally been known as *penance* has undergone some of the most dramatic reinterpretation in recent years. For centuries penance had been administered on a very individualistic basis in which penitents would confess their sins to the priest, usually while kneeling in a confessional (a wooden box designed for the purpose with screens between priest and penitents to provide an atmosphere of anonymity). After confessing their sins, penitents would receive absolution, or a declaration of divine forgiveness, from the priest, and be assigned a set of prayers or other pious acts to be performed as a condition of this forgiveness. Criticism of this approach arose on the grounds that the process had become too mechanical and impersonal, with excessive emphasis on a legalistic and objective recitation of particular deeds. As a result of post-Vatican II shifts in perspective, the sacrament, now known as *Reconciliation*, more frequently takes place with the priest and penitent facing one another. Emphasis is placed on a subjective transformation of one’s priorities and relations with others. The practice of a more generalized absolution of whole groups has come into use in some parts of America, but does not enjoy official institutional sanction as an ordinary procedure.

The other sacrament that is intended to be received on a regular basis is the *Eucharist*—also known as “Holy Communion”—which is the core of the church’s central ritual, the Mass. The Mass, which is closely paralleled by the eucharistic rites used by Anglicans and Lutherans, developed gradually over many centuries, and still uses Latin and Greek forms to indicate sections which originated in early Christian usage, though it is now rendered solely in the vernacular. The following is an outline of the Mass as now usually celebrated by American Catholics:

A. Introductory Rites

1. Entrance hymn
2. Greeting by celebrant and response by people
3. Rite of blessing and sprinkling with holy water (on special occasions)
4. Penitential rite: general confession of sin and absolution, including the *Kyrie Eleison*: a Greek form, “Lord have mercy”
5. The *Gloria*, retaining its Latin name: “Glory to God in the highest . . .”
6. The opening prayer

B. The Liturgy of the Word

1. Old Testament reading

2. A psalm, recited alternately by the reader and the congregation
 3. New Testament reading
 4. Gospel reading
 5. The homily (sermon)
 6. The profession of faith (the Nicene Creed)
 7. General intercessions: prayers for specific categories of intentions
- C. The Liturgy of the Eucharist
1. The Offertory
 2. The Preface
 3. The *Sanctus*: "Holy, holy, holy . . ."
 4. The prayers of the Canon and the Consecration
 5. The memorial acclamation (one of several forms)
 6. The final doxology
 7. The Lord's Prayer
 8. The Sign of Peace: the congregation greets one another
 9. The breaking of bread, with recitation of the *Agnus Dei*: "Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world, have mercy on us."
 10. Administration of Communion (bread and wine)
 11. Silent prayer after Communion
- D. Concluding Rite: greeting, blessing, and dismissal

The Mass takes its name from its concluding words in Latin, *Ite, missa est*: "go, you are sent forth." Its exact form has varied over the centuries; the present-day English version is based on the Latin form dating to the time of the Council of Trent, which led to the standardization of a great deal of Catholic practice. In addition to the use of the vernacular, the reforms of Vatican II have brought about several other noteworthy changes. Instead of being turned toward an altar, the celebrant (that is, the priest) now faces the congregation over an altar table that has been moved out from the wall. The congregation takes a more active role in responding to the priest, and participates in bringing forward the elements (bread and wine) and in exchanging the sign of peace (usually a handshake). Scripture is read by lay people, including women. The priest is free to improvise some of the prayers, which formerly had set forms, and is also encouraged to present a well-crafted homily or sermon, an art form frequently neglected in earlier American Catholic practice.

Music during worship is another area in which considerable change has taken place since Vatican II. During the nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries, Catholic liturgical music was rather eclectic, and tended toward the operatic or sentimental when used at all. The liturgical movement led in the United States by the Benedictine monks at St. John's Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota, emphasized the revival of Gregorian chant as part of a new stress on a dignified, participatory liturgy. Since Vatican II, chant has yielded to congregational singing, an experience to which many

Catholics had never been accustomed. Current collections used in Catholic worship reflect the general broad range of sources found in the hymnals used by Episcopalians, Lutherans, and Presbyterians, though some with specific Catholic themes—for example, devotion to Mary—provide small notes of distinctiveness. "Folk Masses" with guitars and folksongs became popular during the late 1960s, and are still celebrated in some parishes.

The other five sacraments can be arranged in the order of the progress of the individual human life cycle. Parallels with these rituals in many other religious cultures present no problem theologically; the Catholic idea of grace building on and completing what has already been anticipated in nature legitimates these correspondences or, in some cases, appropriations. The same argument holds for the divisions of the liturgical year, which are betokened by the changing colors of the vestments of the priest and the cloths draped over the altar. This annual cycle begins with Advent, a period of waiting and preparation, which is observed during the four Sundays preceding Christmas. Christmas Day, which is not fixed on the (unknown) actual birthdate of Jesus but rather on the Roman festival of the unconquered sun, is another good example of the appropriation of religious symbols from other cultures with a Christian reinterpretation. The year continues through other major holy days commemorating major events in the life of Jesus (his Epiphany and Circumcision); of Mary (her Immaculate Conception—that is, freedom from original sin—and bodily Assumption into heaven); and those of other saints, especially All Saints' Day on 1 November. Easter, preceded by the forty penitential days of Lent and coming usually in the early spring, is another good example of the coincidence of an event of the utmost significance for Christians—the Resurrection of Jesus—with both the Jewish Passover and the more general celebration of the annual renewal of nature.

The first of what might be called the sacraments of the life cycle is that of Baptism, or Christian Initiation. Baptism was available in the early church only to adults after a considerable period of instruction. After Christianity had become the official religion of the empire, it was routinely administered to newborn infants by sprinkling (aspersion) rather than immersion. Although infant baptism is still the norm, a new emphasis since Vatican II has also revived the importance of the symbolism of the initiation of adults in the early Christian manner. Since infant baptism is a vicarious process, with the parents and god-parents providing the witness, the sacrament of *Confirmation* provides for a conscious completion of the initiatory process by the "candidate" at a later age. In traditional American Catholic practice this took place around the age of eight or nine, but more recently is carried out in adolescence. Baptism is performed by a priest, although lay people may confer it in unusual circumstances; confirmation is ordinarily administered by a bishop. In newer Catholic churches, the baptismal font, or basin, has been replaced by a larger structure in the narthex, or "gathering."

The onset of adulthood traditionally involved a choice between marriage or the

religious life, each of which was acknowledged sacramentally. Holy orders, or ordination, is the ritual of entry into the priesthood, and is also administered by a bishop. Women entering religious orders participate in elaborate ceremonies in which they take solemn vows, but these are not technically sacraments. Matrimony, or marriage, does have a sacramental character, and is technically dissoluble only through an annulment, or declaration that a proper marriage has never taken place because of nonconsummation, lack of free consent on the part of both parties, or other technical reasons. In practice, the binding character of both of these sacraments has come into question in recent years. Diocesan marriage tribunals have extended the grounds of annulment to psychological as well as physical and legal criteria, and many Catholics simply obtain civil divorces. The status of divorced Catholics, who are technically unable to receive Communion, is thus a sensitive point, and many support groups have arisen to help them deal with the situation. Similarly, the reappraisals of the priesthood brought about by Vatican II have resulted in many priests seeking and obtaining dispensation from their vows, while others have simply left.

The last of the "life cycle" sacraments was formerly known as "Extreme Unction"—the anointing with oil of the gravely ill and dying. Its revised name, "the Anointing of the Sick," has given it a less dire character; it is no longer administered solely to those close to death, but rather in cases of reasonably serious illness, with an emphasis on its life-affirming character, and may be administered communally. Cremation of the dead had long been banned because it had at one time been practiced as a denial of Catholic teaching on the resurrection of the body. More recently, though, it has reemerged as a permissible option under some circumstances. Burial in consecrated ground—that is, a Catholic cemetery—is still the preferred means of the disposal of the earthly remains of the dead.

A final topic of distinctively Catholic belief and practice is the complex of devotions focusing on Jesus, the Virgin Mary, and the saints. Many of these practices originated in the "Baroque" era of piety that flourished in France and Italy during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Prior to Vatican II, "para-liturgical" practices such as the recitation of the Rosary and other prayers and pious acts focusing on the Virgin Mary and the saints had become central to the religious life of many Catholics, and were promoted actively by many religious orders. The liturgical movement helped undermine these practices by its focus on the Mass as an event in which the laity were to participate actively, rather than attend to their own devotions while the priest conducted the liturgy unilaterally. The emphasis on the dialogic character of worship promoted by the council has resulted in a deemphasis on devotional practices, though many older Catholics still find them rewarding and many conservatives actively advocate their revival. On the other hand, the new interest in female religious symbolism promoted by the feminist movement in theology has focussed attention on the significance of the Virgin Mary, though from a very nontraditional perspective.

As should be clear from the discussion of the development and general character of Roman Catholicism, the tradition's stress on the importance of the institutional church as a channel for divine grace, together with its Roman heritage, combine to create an elaborate and intricate structure of organization and governance. The basic structure of the Catholic Church is hierarchical, that is, resembling a pyramid in which power is concentrated at the top and is diffused downward through increasingly broader layers.

At the very top of this pyramid of authority is the bishop of Rome—the *pope*—who as supreme pontiff holds ultimate authority over the entire church. The pope is assisted in his duties by the *curia*, or cabinet, which consists primarily of *cardinals* (see below) and other bishops residing in Rome who preside over the various divisions of papal government, with corresponding titles such as "secretary of state." The pope and his advisors reside in the Vatican City, a small area of only a few acres within the city of Rome but entirely independent politically and possessing all of the agencies of government. These include a diplomatic corps with representatives throughout the world's capitals, and even a small army of sorts, the colorful Swiss Guards. The Vatican is all that remains of the Papal States, a belt of territory which bisected the Italian peninsula and over which the pope presided as political ruler until the achievement of Italian unification in 1870.

The *College of Cardinals*, which supplies the highest level of staffing for much of the Vatican's activities, is a group of men, of late about 130 in number, whose sole official duty is the election of a new pope when the office falls vacant by death or, rarely, by abdication. (The pope traditionally serves for the remainder of his lifetime after election.) Almost all of the cardinals are bishops, usually archbishops of major cities, appointed by the pope. Until recently, the college (and the papacy) were dominated by Italians, but since the reign of John XXIII it has become more cosmopolitan in membership, with a number of third-world cardinals appointed in the last few decades. (The election of John Paul II, formerly archbishop of Kraków, Poland, as pope in 1978 also put an end to the longtime hold on the papacy by Italians.) Although any Roman Catholic male can theoretically be named a cardinal, in practice the college's ranks have been filled by prominent archbishops.

The rank of cardinal is largely honorific, with the election of the pope as the only distinctive function. More central to the church's structure is the office of *bishop*. Bishops are said to be direct successors of the apostles, and the doctrine of the apostolic succession is crucial to the church's notion of authority. (This idea is also accepted by a number of other religious groups, such as the Eastern Orthodox and Anglican churches, but the Roman Catholic Church does not recognize all of these claims as valid.) Administratively, bishops preside over territories called *dioceses*, geographical units into which virtually the entire earth is divided. Each bishop has full power over the ecclesiastical life of his diocese, including finances, property, personnel matters (especially the assignment of priests), and teaching and worship.

A bishop answers directly only to the pope, although the notion of collegial sharing of authority with clergy and laity has become more important since the Second Vatican Council. In terms of worship, two of the seven sacraments of the church, ordination to the priesthood and confirmation, can ordinarily be administered only by bishops.

Although all bishops are considered to be successors to the apostles, not all bishops have equal prestige and authority. Bishops of large and important cities in the Catholic world are often given the title of *archbishop*, a designation which goes with responsibility for a particular territory known as an archdiocese. Bishops of other cities are officially known as *suffragan* bishops; however, they enjoy the same fullness of power as an archbishop, whose only real additional function is the right to convene the bishops of his *province*, that is, the territory composed of the dioceses of which his, the archdiocese, is first among equals. Archbishops or bishops of large dioceses may also be assisted by *auxiliary* bishops. Finally, a *bishop coadjutor* is sometimes appointed when a bishop is old or infirm. Such a bishop functions as an assistant until the senior bishop's death or retirement, at which time the coadjutor automatically becomes bishop in his own right.

Bishops, cardinals, and popes are all chosen ultimately from the ranks of the *priesthood*, the basic group of "professional religious" men in the church whose professions are given spiritual legitimation through the sacrament of ordination. Priests are distinguished from the laity primarily through their power to administer the sacraments. However, priests have many other duties and functions, including the administration of a parish, or basic geographical division of the church (usually a town or urban neighborhood, all of the Catholic inhabitants of which are in theory expected to attend the church designated for that parish), pastoral counseling, preaching, and the various other activities usually associated with the Christian ministry. A priest who is in charge of a parish is known as a *pastor* or *rector*; any assistants he might have are called *assistant pastors* or *curates*. *Monsignor* is an honorary title sometimes bestowed by the pope on senior priests as a special recognition of their services.

Not all priests, however, are assigned to parishes, especially those belonging to religious orders. The major division of the priesthood is usually given as that between the *secular* clergy, who are part of the diocesan hierarchy and who answer directly to a bishop, and the *regular* clergy, who belong to religious orders such as the Jesuits or Dominicans and who answer to their order's superior. The term "secular" does not indicate a lack of religious zeal, but rather refers to this sort of priests' residence in the world (Latin *saeculum*), usually in a parish. "Regular clergy," on the other hand, are those who live according to a rule (Latin *regula*), frequently in communities by themselves apart from the secular world. Regular clergy were originally monks, such as the Trappists, who continue to live in monasteries and have little contact with the outside world. Others, such as Jesuits, Dominicans, and Franciscans—orders of

priests, brothers, or *friars* originating in the later Middle Ages or Catholic Reformation eras—are active in the world, and may function as missionaries, teachers, or at times as parish priests. Members of religious orders also take vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience as part of their commitment, while secular clergy may own private property. The latter, however, are supposed to be obedient to their bishops, and cannot marry under the prevailing code of church discipline.

In addition to the clergy, other members of the church dedicate their lives totally to religion without being ordained. Men in this category are usually known as brothers, who perform menial tasks in some religious orders, or who sometimes, as in the case of the Christian Brothers, belong to orders composed primarily of unordained men who engage in teaching and other distinctive tasks (including wine-making). Women, on the other hand, are not able to receive the sacrament of ordination under any circumstances, but are able to enter into religious orders and take vows similar to their male counterparts and likewise live in community. Although women religious are usually referred to generically as *nuns*, this term is more properly reserved for those who live in communities secluded from the secular world and dedicated to a purely contemplative life. Religious women who engage in such tasks as teaching and nursing, such as the Sisters of Mercy and the Sisters of Charity, are technically referred to as *sisters*. (In the United States, though, this distinction has never been much observed.) Since religious women cannot be ordained, their status is technically that of *laity* (as opposed to *clergy*).

Finally, the large majority of the world's Roman Catholics are not ordained and do not belong to any religious order, but live their lives in the secular world in the pursuit of any number of occupations while presumably attending church and receiving the sacraments with some regularity. These are the laity, or laymen and laywomen. In the years before the Second Vatican Council, these laity were generally regarded as rather passive in their role in the church in comparison with the clergy and other religious, and did not ordinarily play a major role in the decision making and teaching roles of the church. In more recent times, however, the role of the laity has been redefined in more positive and active terms. This activity has taken such forms as participation in parish councils, which help in the planning and execution of parish activities, and in teaching at a variety of levels, from parochial elementary schools which can no longer rely on large numbers of teaching sisters to seminary theological faculties.

This lengthy account of the belief, worship, and organizational structure of Roman Catholicism indicates the importance placed by this tradition on the objective, formal aspects of the religious life. This has been in large part an outgrowth of its distinctively Roman cultural heritage, with an analysis of which the following chapter begins. The development of the Western, Roman tradition of Christianity over nearly two millennia can be read as an ongoing interplay or dialectic between these powerful forces of order and other impulses in revolt against a centralization, uniformi-

ty, and traditionalism perceived as overly rigid and spiritually deadening. In some cases—most dramatically the era of the Reformation—that tension has resulted in a revolutionary sundering of the unity which Roman Christianity has so prized. In others, it has led to the flourishing of internal diversity. That dialectic received new impetus in the later twentieth century as a result of Vatican II, and any ultimate resolution of those tensions remains doubtful. This is perhaps for the best: were it to be achieved, it might be a sign that the tradition's centuries-old vitality was finally nearing a close.