

WHAT IS A LIBERAL CATHOLIC?

MICHAEL NOVAK

Early in that symbolic year, 1960, Thomas T. McAvoy wrote that "the social and religious position of Roman Catholics in the United States in this second half of the twentieth century will depend upon the natural sequence of events in the social and religious realms." (*Roman Catholicism and the American Way of Life*.) The intervening years have been full of events. The meaning of the phrase "liberal Catholic," has, indeed, changed dramatically.

What is a liberal Catholic?

For one thing, not so many formerly liberal Catholics like to be called "liberal." "Radical" is the preferred encomium.

"Father Murray's last pupils at Woodstock," writes Garry Wills, "thought his brand of liberalism simply obsolete or irrelevant." He elaborates: "Much of youth's disillusionment in the late sixties came from the discovery that liberals were only the left wing of the Establishment, and that they conceived of no position leftward of their own as legitimate. American liberalism was just not a very daring thing; and Catholic liberalism was even less venturesome than the nonreligious kinds." Garry Wills has over the years demonstrated in his writings a peculiarly ideosyncratic understanding of liberalism; and his writings show that he has passed from conservatism to radicalism without ever going through liberalism. Still, his descriptions of the decline of Woodstock (in *New York Magazine* and *Worldview*) show that he is the only writer who can rival Mailer in the brilliance, surprise and penetration of his concrete perceptions.

There are rival theories about what has happened to liberal Catholicism. One short suggestion: the discovery of sex. For celibates, of course, it has been a literal discovery but even

for the enthusiastically, devoutly, liturgically married, it is a rushing sort of liberation—at just the right moment of middle age. The "revolution" is, after all, a revolution in cultural style, in sensibility, in values. It is "dionysian." It is emphatically of the body. To consciousness III, the restraints of consciousness II are a "hang-up."

The sex theory, so far found only allusively, is probably powerful and deep; so much so that jokes best relieve its tension. The extent to which the Catholic tradition depends on sexual restraint, both for good and for ill, has scarcely been examined. The voyage out of the ghetto is often sexual in symbol.

Often, however, we have imagined that sexual frankness is a privilege of the very wealthy, or at least of the educated and the artistic; it is "liberation." But the cultures of the poor have their own sexual frankness; it is "suppressed violence." The country is even beginning to feel, Wills tells us in *New York*, "a spread of diluted redneckism," including the "sexual frankness" and "earthy language" associated with George Wallace. So that lower-middle-class whites, rural and urban, are now being given their sexual due, and setting some sort of standard for the nation. "Above all," Wills writes, "the muggy atmosphere of mixed sex and violence, continual, subliminal, like a never-ending cicada screech. Wallace without the use of his lower body is like Elvis told to sing without his pelvis." And like Murray's last students at Woodstock, without their girls?

Another theory is that American Catholics who used to be liberal have at last become Protestants, not in the religious but in the cultural sense. Estimating the uses of morality in politics, they do not turn to that most central of all the questions John

Courtney Murray posed, in *The American Proposition*: "At this juncture I suggest that the immediate question is not whether the free society is really free. . . I suggest that the immediate question is whether American society is properly civil." And Murray went on to cite, not a merely aristocratic or Brahmin conception of civility, but Thomas Aquinas by way of Thomas Gilby, O.P. Rather, the new radicals turn to questions of moral purity, witness, protest, outrage, the indignation of the pure before the seemingly stupid steadiness of those with dirty hands.

Who would have thought, a decade ago, that the realism and restraint of the Catholic political tradition would have given way so swiftly to the cultural style that in every generation brings us a new Prohibition, a new struggle between Good and Evil, new tests for the nation's righteousness?

Who would have thought, a decade ago, that in adapting themselves to "the modern world," so many intelligent Catholics would have left behind their own strengths and modeled themselves upon the systems of moral outrage cultivated by that "constituency of conscience," those "principled" and "enlightened" citizens, so numerous among our educated elites?

For a long time, critics of American Catholicism—I among them—urged Catholics to stress and to develop the *American* side of their dual identity. But not without bringing to Americanism something new, something distinctive, something *Catholic*. Well, in a way, there is something distinctive about "the new Catholic Left." It is more symbolic, more romantic, more dashing, more liturgical in its protest than other groups. We all have reason to be grateful for it. It has achieved a certain Chestertonian flamboyance

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ity mysticism remains doubtful and even alien. As an enterprise in its own right there is no good reason why it should cease to be intriguing.



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in Vietnam? Everything we do has economic implications, and it is obvious that Lockheed and many generals have a direct economic interest in the war. However, it seems equally obvious that even if the U.S. kills the last Vietnamese and occupies the country for a hundred years the war in Vietnam is economically, by any standard, a complete catastrophe. P. Berrigan talks about expenditures of the order of 300 billion dollars. Those figures are out of proportion with any profit all American corporations can make all over the world. Of all human passions the love of money is not the worst. Pride was Adam's sin. Pride, ambition for power, domination of people, hate, those are the spiritual roots of evil. We had our little Napoleon and when he withdrew at the sight of the coming Waterloo he was replaced by the embodiment of deceit and cynicism.

P. Berrigan does not give its due to human stupidity. Doesn't he listen to Sunday sermons, and read the speeches and predictions of our generals and admirals?

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To the Editors: I deeply admire Philip Berrigan ["An Open Letter to a Bishop," May 26] and his brother, Dan. For me they have been heroes for a number of years. I am a parish priest and have privately and publicly resisted the war in Southeast Asia for a number of years. I read the letter to Bishop Baum with much interest. I am afraid that I found Philip Berrigan to be rather arrogant in his judgments of American Catholics and clergy. He accuses the American Catholic people of being afraid of questioning, initiative, creativity, courage, fear of sacrifice, loneliness, criticism, self, neighbor, Gospel, Christ. He iden-

tifies such people as "them." I wish that he would have included himself and Dan to some degree, as courageous as they have been. My criticism is this: Philip Berrigan's judgment of the scene is too simplistic. Perhaps that is the special license of the prophet. It just makes the rest of us feel sort of shabby.

There is more than one way of suffering. There is more than one type of violence. There is more than one type of loneliness. I think this, perhaps, is a lesson that Bishop Baum could teach Philip Berrigan in their fraternal relationship. There is a tension, a strong tension, for a priest between wanting to go all out in his opposition to the war or to the "powers" and yet still retain an effective relationship with the community he was ordained to serve as presiding brother. I am not sure Phil understands this tension. He has resolved it in one way. I only request that he show greater respect for those who are laboring to resolve the tension along other lines. We both seek the same goals, I think.

I deeply admire the Berrigan brothers and the others who have given such dramatic witness to the values of the Gospel. I only ask for some understanding for those of us, clergy and lay, who are trying to witness to these same values in other ways.

(REV.) WILLIAM D. STEELE



Michael Novak (Cont.)

in act, cut a beautiful swath across our nation's history, and provided legends to parallel ancient lives of saints. It has provided much-needed food for our imaginations.

But what I miss, and perhaps I am not alone, is a vigorous sense for small detail, humble coalitions, comfortableness with the mediocre qualities of the human personality (not least of our heroes), willingness to use and to shape power and to bear its ambiguities, close measuring of interests and resources, steady resistance to and suspicion of enthusiasm, an instinct for the necessity of institutions and the

long-range view. I miss, in short, a respect for the organic inter-relatedness of persons, families, institutions, societies, that used to be deemed pre-eminently Catholic. (We were, in Tillich's phrase, too "priestly" and not sufficiently "prophetic.")

The liberal Catholic is and remains a person of empirical, pragmatic temper, tutored by a larger sense of self, communities and history than the classic traditions of English or American philosophy provide. His task is, and remains, a task of enlarging the givenness of American culture: making a distinctively Catholic contribution.

What distinguishes the liberal Catholic from the conservative Catholic is his critical openness to the intellectual and social achievements of modern and (largely) non-Catholic cultures. What distinguishes him from the radical Catholic is, first, his avoidance of "the myth of the Pure Protester;" and, secondly, his instinct for the cultural values of the lower middle class, as a corrective against those of the "enlightened" and the (romanticized) "poor."

What distinguishes the liberal Catholic from the secular liberal *used to be* his resistance to a merely bureaucratic, technical, managerial "realism," in the name of a more organic, communal Christian realism. What distinguishes him *today* tends to be a continuance of that resistance, plus the opening of a second front: his resistance to the new, chic swing of the pendulum of self-righteousness, not least among those who used to be liberal but now are converted and pure.

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