

Passing on the Faith—a Personal Approach

by Mark Massa, SJ

ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE said it first. Religion flourishes in the United States because it is completely voluntary and all religious groups must compete.

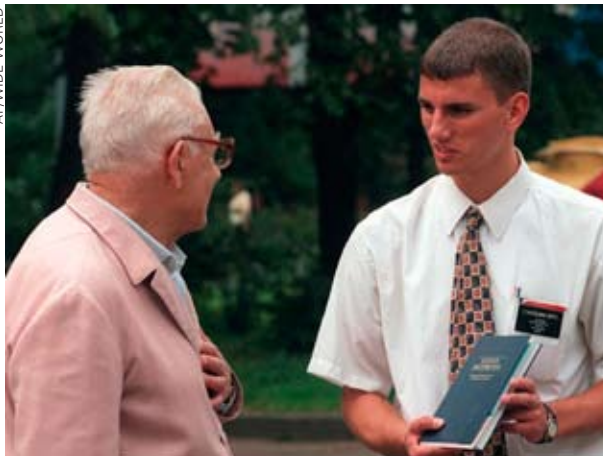
Among the country's religious groups, two models, "total culture" and "evangelical outreach," have made the United States the most religious nation of the industrialized world.

The total-culture model offers a religious identity that meets individuals' needs for social location, family values, and group interaction by providing a nourishing if sometimes confining network of institutions from cradle to grave. The aim is a complete identity— theological, cultural, and sometimes even political (witness the connection of U.S. Catholics to the Democratic Party that perdured until the Reagan Revolution of the 1980s).

Evangelical outreach, on the other hand, has won the membership sweepstakes by warmly nurturing individual piety and offering an intense cultural ideology to the 40 percent of Americans who claim to have had a born-again experience. The evangelical model has achieved success not through institutional networks but through appeals to individuals. Though distrustful of popular culture and the media, the evangelical tradition can claim the most successful media productions aimed at religiously curious people.

Until the 1960s, Catholicism in the United States opted quite successfully for the total-culture model, constructing what historian Charles Morris has termed a Catholic mini-state. As Garry Wills described the experience in his essay *Memories of a Catholic Boyhood*, "We spoke a different language from the rest of [America] . . . odd bits of Latinized

English that were not parts of other six-year-olds' vocabulary—words like contrition and transubstantiation. The words often came embedded in formulae (imperfect contrition), and the formulae were often paired in jingles (imperfect contrition and perfect contrition). The-



The evangelistic spirit that has been animating Mormon youth for generations might be a "best practice" that Catholics could adopt for the transmission of their faith.

ology was a series of such distinctions: mortal sin and venial sin, matter of sin and intention of sin." For good and for ill, Catholics grew up differently from Protestants. As Wills recalled, "There were some places we went [that] others did not—into the confessional box, for instance."

All of this changed after World War II. Critics of the breakup of "total Catholic culture" blame the so-called liberalizing effects of Vatican II or point to Paul VI's teachings on birth control in his 1968 encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, citing the mass noncompliance that ensued. But in fact the dissolution of the American Catholic "ghetto" was well under way before 1962, the year Vatican II opened. I would place it in the middle of the twentieth century, after the GI Bill allowed Catholic lambs to nibble at Yale and Columbia ivy and many Catholic families moved into middle-class affluence, culminating in a cultural arrival of sorts with Ken-

nedy's presidency. It was at the end of this period, roughly 1945 to 1965, that Irish Catholics became (and remain) the wealthiest and best-educated non-Jewish ethnic group in the United States.

Leaving the ghetto was necessary, appropriate, and quite predictable in light of the experiences of other religious groups in the United States that had once stood apart from the mainstream, including the Quakers, the Methodists, and the Lutherans. And yet, it seems to me, Irish Catholics—followed by German and Italian Catholics—embraced the liberal mainstream values of the post-World War II world with a fervor and devotion that were, in retrospect, far too uncritical and far too celebratory of American culture for the long-term health of their religious community, leaving Catholicism in the United States with an identity crisis.

Consider the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Mormons ask their young believers to take two years out for "witnessing," articulating their faith to non-Mormons in the United States or abroad. An impressively high 40 percent of Mormon young adults go on mission; their families, their mini-state leads them to interrupt their education on behalf of their religion.

Compare this to the contemporary American Catholic community, where a debate roils on about how effective it has been in passing on its faith. These debates are fraught with emotion—as any Catholic with a teenager knows. Though the statistics are controverted, at bottom is a sense among American Catholics that "something has gone wrong" in the imparting of religious literacy to young people.

Notre Dame sociologist Christian Smith, the principal investigator in the

2005 report *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, mined studies of young people and sent questionnaires to thousands of teenagers. The findings, good news for Mormons and evangelicals, were disquieting for Catholics.

Catholics, writes Smith, run more institutions directed at passing on their faith to young people than all the other religious groups combined, but Catholic youth are the least likely to be able to describe their beliefs or the faith of their Church. The phrase he applies to young Catholics is “incredibly inarticulate.”

Catholic youth, writes Smith, make up the largest subgroup of adherents to the real faith of the American teenager, a faith he terms “moralistic therapeutic deism.” The creed has five points:

- God is nice
- Most people are nice
- Most people—save for Adolf Hitler—go to heaven
- All other theological and ethical statements are relative, being true primarily if they work for you
- Whatever

How is it that Mormon teenagers can willingly articulate their beliefs to others while Catholic youth, inheritors of a religion that has been in the business of passing on faith exponentially longer than the followers of Joseph Smith, by and large cannot? I can't help but think that the most effective strategy for the Catholic community in the United States for the 21st century would be to become more evangelical.

The *Dictionary of Christianity in America* notes evangelicalism's “stress on the personal experience of the grace of God, usually termed a ‘new birth’ or ‘conversion.’” Evangelicalism emphasizes a personal ability to verbalize religious faith and the need to spread that faith to others.

Such evangelicalism has been a predominantly Protestant expression of faith in North America. But we should be careful about equating “Protestant” with “evangelical.” The Society of Jesus is a resolutely evangelical order with a profoundly evangelical spirituality. At the heart of Jesuit spirituality is the Spiritual Exercises. Their purpose: “conver-

sion of the heart.” The individual is told to pray explicitly for this outcome, in Jesuit parlance, “praying for the fruit of the Exercises.”

Jesuit spirituality is much like that of many other religious orders, and its Exercises are much like many other Catholic spiritual exercises—including Kairos retreats. The Exercises are explicitly evangelical in that they aim at an individual affective experience of grace in the context of which a “life choice” is made. Those who have experienced the fruit of the Exercises—or the full force of a Kairos retreat—can verbalize an intensely personal religious encounter and articulate the resulting choices.

This kind of personal religious experience—dare I say, conversion—should be made universally available, in fact normative, for American Catholics. The older Catholic model, with its emphasis on the communal, the mediated, and the sacramental nature of Catholic Christianity, should be balanced by a complementary emphasis on direct experience of the holy.

I tell my freshmen, “Sitting at Mass doesn't make you a Christian any more than sitting in a garage makes you a car.” Life as a Catholic isn't only, even primarily, about encountering Jesus in the Eucharist. It is, in the main, about serving as Jesus' disciple and giving witness to that life of discipleship.

Balancing the sacramental and evangelical within Catholicism would address two major problems within the Church: clericalism and the priest shortage. As anyone who has participated in an Ignatian retreat knows, the majority of spiritual directors at Jesuit and other Catholic retreat houses in the States are not priests; they are women.

Spiritual direction, campus ministry, and preaching all rest on a model of authority different from that of clerical ordination. French social scientist Émile Durkheim pointed out more than a century ago that there is “traditional authority,” passed on institutionally through protocols such as ordination, and “charismatic authority,” which emerges outside institutional channels. Ordination has nothing to do with charismatic authority. A horrible preacher before ordination will be a horrible preacher

after ordination as well. A more evangelical understanding of Catholicism would enable the charismatic gifts present in the Catholic community—especially those possessed by lay men and women—to build up the community.

In reaction to the Reformation, the Council of Trent opted for a more communal, hierarchical, and sacramental model of Christianity that came to define Catholic belief as being about dogma and described the Catholic encounter with the holy as being about receiving Communion. But the medieval Church had previously done a better job of balancing the sacramental and evangelical, the communal and personal. Lay guilds, lay appointment of certain clerical positions in parishes, and the influence of the lay friars of the Franciscan and Dominican orders all gave Catholicism then a much more democratic and pluralistic piety than post-Reformation Catholicism has offered since.

Catholic Christianity has always recognized charismatic authority, if sometimes reluctantly. Dominic, Francis, and Ignatius—all originally viewed as suspect by the institutional Church of their day—achieved canonical approval by channeling their charismatic world views into religious orders. The time has come to broaden the appreciation of charismatic authority beyond the confines of religious orders and ease some of the burden that the Catholic community now places on its shrinking population of ordained clergy. To do so would also take up the promise of Vatican II, built on the insight that the Church is the entire people of God, and make the Catholic tradition more accessible and more understandable to all Americans. **□**

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