



## U.S. Bishops in the Public Square: Prophets or Pilgrims ?

Michael Sean Winters

Volume 71, numéro 3, octobre 2015

La parole épiscopale

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1036269ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1036269ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

### Résumé de l'article

Dans cette contribution, on formule l'hypothèse qu'il y a deux styles de leadership dominants dans les discours épiscopaux qui émergent de nos jours aux États-Unis : un premier, plutôt agressif, qui adopte une attitude défensive vis-à-vis de la culture ambiante ; un second, plus traditionnel, qui se contente de relayer l'enseignement de l'Église et laisse les laïcs incarner cet enseignement dans la culture.

### Éditeur(s)

Faculté de philosophie, Université Laval

Faculté de théologie et de sciences religieuses, Université Laval

### ISSN

0023-9054 (imprimé)

1703-8804 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

### Citer cet article

Winters, M. S. (2015). U.S. Bishops in the Public Square: Prophets or Pilgrims ? *Laval théologique et philosophique*, 71(3), 419–430.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1036269ar>

# U.S. BISHOPS IN THE PUBLIC SQUARE : PROPHETS OR PILGRIMS ?

**Michael Sean Winters**

Institute for Policy Research & Catholic Studies  
The Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C.

*RÉSUMÉ : Dans cette contribution, on formule l'hypothèse qu'il y a deux styles de leadership dominants dans les discours épiscopaux qui émergent de nos jours aux États-Unis : un premier, plutôt agressif, qui adopte une attitude défensive vis-à-vis de la culture ambiante ; un second, plus traditionnel, qui se contente de relayer l'enseignement de l'Église et laisse les laïcs incarner cet enseignement dans la culture.*

*ABSTRACT : In this paper, it will be argued that there are two dominant styles of leadership which dominate in the United States today : one is the style of the culture warrior, who takes a defensive posture towards the dominant culture ; the other, more traditional, is that of the churchman, who teaches what the Church teaches, but lets the laity engage that teaching in the culture.*

---

In the United States today, two dominant styles of episcopal leadership have emerged. One is the style of the culture warrior, who takes a defensive posture towards the dominant culture, engages in highly publicized political and legal battles, and seeks to highlight those whose Catholic identity is understood to be mostly clearly distinct from the ambient cultural norms. The other, more traditional style, is that of the churchman, who teaches what the Church teaches, but lets the laity engage that teaching in the culture, who focuses on the Church's ministries and their work among Catholic and non-Catholic alike, and who is more concerned with seeking converts than with ferreting out heretics.

## I. A LONG TRADITION OF COLLEGIAL PRACTICES OF U.S. BISHOPS

You might say that episcopal involvement in politics and culture in the United States began before there was a bishop and before there was a United States. And, curiously, it began here in Canada. In early 1776, Father John Carroll accompanied Benjamin Franklin on a mission to Canada to try and convince the Canadians to join their neighbors to the south in revolt against King George III.

Father Carroll would become Bishop Carroll in 1789, the first bishop in the U.S.,<sup>1</sup> and two years later he convoked a meeting of 22 priests in his see city of Baltimore to discuss issues facing the nascent Church in the United States. In 1808, Carroll was made an archbishop and four suffragan sees were erected. Two years later, Carroll convoked the first meeting of American bishops and, in 1829, the first formal provincial Council of Baltimore was held. In 1852, the first Plenary Council of Baltimore was held with 6 archbishops and 35 bishops in attendance. The third, and last, Plenary Council of Baltimore was held in 1884 and the papal legate was Archbishop James Gibbons of Baltimore. Two years later, in 1886, Gibbons was made a cardinal and he would function as Primate of the U.S. Church in form if not in name until his death in 1921. Nonetheless, the American archbishops gathered for an annual meeting to discuss important issues under Gibbons' leadership.<sup>2</sup>

This development of what would become known as collegiality at the Second Vatican Council was not driven by any democratizing agenda. Nor did the bishops concern themselves greatly with relations with the federal government, at least not in the nineteenth century when the federal government was still quite small a player in U.S. culture. The meetings of American bishops were practical affairs, focusing on internal church issues like the need for Catholic schools, how to discipline errant clergy, and the need for a national Catholic university. The meetings reflected the lack of canon law at that time. For example, there were yet no canonically established parishes and, so, no canonically established pastors throughout the nineteenth century. The meetings of the bishops helped to resolve tensions between and among bishops, such as how to meet the needs of immigrants and the degree to which those immigrants should be expected to assimilate to the ambient culture. As well, the practice of meeting to discuss the needs of the Church grew out of the fact that there was yet no Apostolic Delegate or Nuncio in the U.S. The first Apostolic Delegate did not arrive until 1893.

The bishops of the U.S. certainly did not always agree with one another. On October 12, 1899, the archbishops of the Catholic Church in the United States gathered for their annual meeting. It was the first such meeting since Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Testem benevolentiae*, which had condemned the heresy of "Americanism," the belief that certain characteristics of the Church in the United States, such as separation of Church and State, should serve as an ideal for the universal Church.<sup>3</sup>

In reply to the encyclical, Cardinal Gibbons had written to Rome to assure the pope that no one in America held the doctrines condemned, that they were the fevered imaginings of Europeans hostile to American ways. Archbishop Frederick Katzer of Milwaukee wrote to Rome, suggesting that those who denied the heresy were really Jansenists. Katzer's letter was a direct affront to Gibbons. When the archbishops met, Katzer was not present. Archbishop John Ireland of St. Paul, one of

---

1. John Tracy ELLIS, *American Catholicism*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1969, p. 39.

2. Gerald P. FOGARTY, *The Vatican and the American Hierarchy from 1870 to 1965*, Collegeville, Liturgical Press, 1985, p. 27-31.

3. ELLIS, *American Catholicism*, p. 120-122.

Gibbons' closest allies, urged a resolution from the archbishops in opposition to Katzer and denying the errors condemned in the encyclical existed. The vote was tied until Cardinal Gibbons was called upon to cast the tie-breaker. It was his reputation the resolution was designed to defend. Here is how Ireland reported the event : "[Archbishops Riordan, Kain, Christie and I] tried to get a joint protest against the idea of existence of errors. Philadelphia almost joined in but Baltimore [Gibbons] cried 'peace, peace — death for the sake of peace,' and nothing was effected."

The divisions within the American hierarchy at the turn of the last century had several touchstones, but essentially, the "Americanizers," led by Gibbons and Ireland took a more favorable view of American ways, and the conservatives, led by Archbishop Michael Corrigan of New York and the German members of the hierarchy, advocated for greater Catholic separation and withdrawal from the ambient culture. The response to *Testem benevolentiae* may have been the high water mark of intra-episcopal hostility and it is, I believe, to the lasting credit of Cardinal Gibbons that he understood it was more important to avoid further antagonisms within the hierarchy than it was to defend his own position and reputation. Needless to say, this struggle was kept from the public and was only revealed later by historians.<sup>4</sup>

So, the seeds of what would become the national bishops' conference were planted in the nineteenth century. In those years, the Catholic Church was not a force on the national political stage. Catholics were still a minority of the population and they were mostly poor immigrants. Indeed, many of the more populist movements of the nineteenth and early twentieth century were anti-Catholic, from the Know Nothing Party before the Civil War to the Temperance Movement after it. The Young Men's Christian Association was devised to keep good little Protestant boys free from the nefarious influences of Catholics in urban areas.

Catholic political involvement started in large urban areas with lots of immigrants. The newly arrived immigrants would be received into the Church and the local Democratic Party at the same time. Both rose together and gained political control of large urban areas in the Northeast and Midwest. The Church also was actively involved in the labor movement that began to gain strength in the last years of the 1800s. Indeed, it was largely because of the significant Catholic presence in the labor movement that, in the U.S., the labor movement never adopted a Marxist ideology.

During World War I, the seeds of collegiality came to flower and the bishops established a National Catholic War Council to aid the war effort and provide for the spiritual needs of U.S. soldiers. When the war ended, the bishops decided to keep the organization going and renamed it the National Catholic Welfare Conference (NCWC) which received canonical recognition from Rome in 1922. Throughout the twentieth century, the NCWC, now the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), became the principal vehicle by which the bishops engaged the nation politically and culturally. For example, in 1919, the bishops issued a plan for social reconstruction after the war. Many of the provisions of that plan would find their way

---

4. FOGARTY, *The Vatican and the American Hierarchy from 1870 to 1965*, p. 177-185.

into Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal. The bishops' conference also served as a counterweight to the ambitions of prelates with powerful Roman connections, such as Cardinal Francis Spellman of New York. The conference provided a means for the bishops to unite their efforts not only in areas of social concern in the U.S. but in intra-ecclesial issues with the Holy See. By the time of the Second Vatican Council, the American hierarchy had a century and one-half of experience in the exercise of collegiality.<sup>5</sup>

The election of President Kennedy in 1960 announced that Catholics had arrived in American society, and Kennedy was not an exception. Catholics had been gaining access to key positions in law enforcement, corner offices at law firms, and been elected chairmen of the board at large corporations. The children and grandchildren of poor immigrants enrolled in college and joined the professional class. Catholics had arrived and, in politics, they were overwhelmingly Democratic. In the year of Kennedy's election, there were 90 Catholics in the U.S. House of Representatives of whom 76 were Democrats and only 14 were Republicans.

In the post-Vatican II years, the U.S. bishops' conference continued to be engaged in politics, mostly advocating for social justice policies that help the poor and fighting racial discrimination. In the wake of the riots that afflicted many U.S. cities after the murder of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the Catholic Church's anti-poverty efforts, now known as the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, became very active working in the inner cities, rebuilding neighborhoods. Many bishops made the costly and courageous decision to keep inner city Catholic schools open, even though most Catholics were fleeing to the suburbs and most of the students enrolled in the inner city schools were non-Catholics and very poor.

The identification of Catholics and Democrats began to change after the Supreme Court declared abortion a constitutional right in 1973. At the time, Republicans tended to be the pro-choice party and Democrats, mostly Catholic Democrats, were pro-life. But with the clamor for equal rights for women, it became difficult for Democratic candidates to stick to their pro-life position. Prominent Democrats like Al Gore, Ted Kennedy, Ed Muskie, and Dick Gephardt were all pro-life at the beginning of the 1970s. By 1988, when Ronald Reagan's term as president ended, 60 percent of Democratic Catholics in Congress were pro-choice. This created a divide between the hierarchy and their traditional political allies that would only widen over the years.<sup>6</sup>

In the 1980s, the U.S. bishops' conference, under the leadership of Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, issued two long teaching documents, pastoral letters, one on peace and the other on the economy. Both were drafted after a great deal of consultation with experts, with theologians, and with each other. Both documents also aligned the bishops more with the political left in America than with the political right, even though more and more bishops were increasingly listing abortion as their major con-

---

5. See *ibid.*, p. 215-216, 237-239.

6. See Michael Sean WINTERS, *Left at the Altar. How the Democrats Lost the Catholics and How the Catholics Can Save the Democrats*, New York, Basic Books, 2008, p. 127-129, 139-141.

cern. The economic pastoral letter did not have a great effect on popular attitudes because Americans' commitment to the free market has lost the ability to even hear a critique of market practices, but the peace pastoral did have an effect. The attitudes of Catholics changed. In 1983, only a third of U.S. Catholics believed America was spending too much on weapons and national defense. In 1984, after the pastoral letter and the attendant media coverage, 54 percent of U.S. Catholics held that belief. Perhaps more importantly, the language of Just War theory that the bishops relied upon has become the language with which most Americans, including our political class, discuss war. In a culture as Calvinistic as the U.S., this is a truly major development.<sup>7</sup>

I should note, also, that during Bernardin's leadership of the conference, the Church continued to loudly voice its opposition to legal abortion. But, conscious of the need to avoid partisanship, Bernardin argued that the Church's teachings on life represented a "seamless garment," that our opposition to abortion was linked with our opposition to war and to capital punishment. The Bernardin years extended long beyond his own tenure as the President of the conference in the late 1970s as many of his friends and other like-minded bishops led the conference through the end of the century, and throughout that time, the bishops' conference was a formidable force in Washington. The doors of all politicians in both parties were opened to them and when they spoke, precisely because they were so intent on not appearing partisan, both parties had to listen. They did not always get what they wanted : abortion remained legal, the Reagan administration continued to support corrupt regimes in Latin America, and Bill Clinton signed a welfare reform law the bishops opposed. But, by and large, their presence in the public sphere was consequential not least because it was quite consciously balanced.<sup>8</sup>

With the turn of the new millennium, the U.S. bishops faced a new challenge, the clergy sex abuse crisis. It is difficult to say how much this self-inflicted wound cost the Church. At a time when many Catholic laity did not believe in what the Church had to say about sexual matters, the hierarchy appeared like hypocrites, demanding heroic virtue from the people in the pews while covering up the criminal rape of children by the clergy. Yet, even here, in formulating a response, the bishops' conference proved itself overwhelmingly united, adopting the Dallas Charter for the Protection of Children, with its "zero tolerance" policy towards clergy who abuse children, by a nearly unanimous vote in 2002.

## II. THE PROBLEM OF THE "CULTURE WARRIORS"

Over the past decade, in addition to the challenges posed by the sex abuse crisis, the tradition of collegial action by the U.S. hierarchy became deeply threatened not by the forces of secularization, nor by a hostile U.S. government. Instead, it is threatened by a new group of bishops whom I call "culture warriors." These bishops see every disagreement as a civilizational struggle. They tend to see issues against an

---

7. See *ibid.*, p. 157-159.

8. See *ibid.*, p. 157.

apocalyptic backdrop, in which the forces of good and truth and beauty are always, and at all times, at war with the forces of evil and falsehood. They focus on those issues which tend to divide the political life of the nation — abortion, same sex marriage, and, now, religious liberty — and prioritize those issues above all others, placing themselves firmly in one political camp. Their ability to discern deeper currents in the culture is obscured by the need to adopt “sound bites” for the current struggle. Interestingly, because the emergence of the culture warrior model coincided with an opening up of key ecclesial positions to members of the laity, both in the bishops’ conference and in local diocesan curias, the culture warrior bishops are aided and encouraged by lay people largely drawn from the ranks of the Republican Party’s political apparatus, thus turning a reform generally considered “progressive” into a vehicle for a reassertion of traditionalist positions. I am told by more than one bishop that when they meet with their staffs, it is often the lay people who are the most doctrinaire and the clergy who are the most tolerant.

In her new book, *Law’s Virtues. Fostering Autonomy and Solidarity in American Society*, Notre Dame professor Cathleen Kaveny writes :

In my judgment, the rhetoric and mind-set of the “culture wars” do not facilitate the kind of nuanced, respectful discussion that citizens in a pluralistic society need to have about the relationship of law and morality. To see one’s fellow citizens as enemy combatants triggers an attitude that colors everything in terms of winning or losing a battle or the war. It can tempt politicians and activists to adopt an idealized political program in which full implementation is “victory” and deviation involves some degree of “loss.” It does not encourage us to frame the question in terms of what legal or political framework will best advance our common good — the common good of all of us, including those who disagree with us about what constitutes the common good.<sup>9</sup>

Sadly, too many bishops have adopted the culture warrior model, producing a corrosive effect on the public engagement of the U.S. bishops. And, to focus relentlessly and almost exclusively on sexual issues, at a time when the U.S. Church is still recovering from the sex abuse crisis, illustrates a tone-deafness that is astonishing and threatens to further weaken the regard in which the bishops are held by the laity.

To be clear : there is a role for the U.S. bishops in the public square and in politics specifically. But, when the Church presents itself as the guardian of transcendent truths about the human person, and then aligns itself with only one political party, the truths appear less transcendent and more partisan. Those who do not share that partisan affiliation feel left out and many, especially the young, begin to walk away from what they consider a too-politicized church. This happened in the early 1990s. After the fundamentalist organization the Moral Majority had been in business for ten years, conflating politics and religion in coarse and hoary ways, for the first time, there was a measurable uptick in the number of people who, when asked their religious identification, replied “none.” The “nones” are now the fastest growing religious identification in America.

---

9. Cathleen KAVENY, *Law’s Virtues. Fostering Autonomy and Solidarity in American Society*, Washington, D.C., Georgetown University Press, 2012, p. 275.

In the recent struggle over religious liberty, both the White House and the USCCB have not acquitted themselves well. Back in 1990, when the Supreme Court issued a ruling in the case *Employment Division v. Smith*, it was the conservative Catholic Justice Antonin Scalia who wrote a ruling that severely restricted religious liberty and the liberal justices who argued for stronger protections for religious freedom. The administration of Barack Obama has largely agreed with the position adopted by Scalia in its mandate requiring religious institutions to provide insurance coverage for contraception, sterilization and some drugs that the Church considers abortifacients. Some bishops tried their hand at constitutional scholarship with predictably sad results, turning complex legal issues into bumper sticker slogans and prioritizing the fight against the contraception mandate above all other issues in the 2012 presidential election. One bishop compared President Obama to Hitler and Stalin. Another said that voting for Obama risked a person's eternal soul. This is the kind of foolishness that makes people flee the Church and join the "nones."

The culture warrior bishops have even allowed this worldview to produce unhappy effects on the way they govern the Church, overturning basic pastoral instincts and distorting key moral concepts from our tradition. Let's take one example of how this model distorts pastoral instincts. In Denver, in 2010, when confronted with a decision by a pastor to bar the child of lesbian parents from attending a Catholic school, Archbishop Charles Chaput, who is now the Archbishop of Philadelphia, agreed with the pastor and wrote of the decision :

The policies of our Catholic school system exist to protect all parties involved, including the children of homosexual couples and the couples themselves. Our schools are meant to be "partners in faith" with parents. If parents don't respect the beliefs of the Church, or live in a manner that openly rejects those beliefs, then partnering with those parents becomes very difficult, if not impossible. It also places unfair stress on the children, who find themselves caught in the middle, and on their teachers, who have an obligation to teach the authentic faith of the Church. [...] Most parents who send their children to Catholic schools want an environment where the Catholic faith is fully taught and practiced. That simply can't be done if teachers need to worry about wounding the feelings of their students or about alienating students from their parents. That isn't fair to anyone — including the wider school community. Persons who have an understanding of marriage and family life sharply different from Catholic belief are often people of sincerity and good will. They have other, excellent options for education and should see in them the better course for their children.<sup>10</sup>

Set aside the paternalistic, "Bishop knows best," quality to the assertions about what is best for the child and the family. I am wondering about the claim "If parents don't respect the beliefs of the Church, or live in a manner that openly rejects those beliefs, then partnering with those parents becomes very difficult, if not impossible." How does that square with the fact that Catholic schools permit Protestants who "openly reject" certain Catholic beliefs ? Or non-Christians who "openly reject" the divinity of Christ ? Does the archdiocese of Denver deny admission to the children of parents who are divorced and remarried ? Or is it just the children of gays who get

---

10. M. SILK, "O'Malley v. Chaput : What a Difference a Diocese Makes !", Spiritual Politics blog, Religion News Service, May 14, 2010.



discriminated against? And how does Chaput's argument square with the argument made by the bishops in defending the DREAM Act, a law that granted a pathway to citizenship for the undocumented immigrants brought into the U.S. as children? If we agree that it is wrong to penalize the children of immigrants for the decisions of their parents, why should we penalize the children of gay parents for their parents' lifestyles? Most of all, how can Chaput justify — theologically or pastorally — baptizing the children of gay parents, and then denying that baptized child a Catholic education? Chaput's decision only makes sense if the objective is to score a point in the culture wars.

Of course, in Boston, Chaput's seminary classmate, Cardinal Sean O'Malley reached a completely different conclusion in circumstances that were almost identical, adopting a policy that does not discriminate against any children. Cardinal O'Malley is just as orthodox and, in some ways, just as conservative as Archbishop Chaput. The difference? O'Malley is not a culture warrior, he is a pastor. Here is how O'Malley explained his decision in his blog:

As a young bishop in the West Indies I once celebrated a memorial Mass for a local "madame" who ran a brothel near my Cathedral. It was said she smuggled women in from other islands in oil barrels for her business. Some women suffocated in the crossing. She herself was murdered by her lover. At the Mass I met the woman's daughter, a lovely little girl. I asked her what grade she was in. She replied that she didn't go to school. I sent a stern glance to her grandmother, who said: "Her name is the same as that of the brothel. The other children were so cruel to her, she left the public school." I told her grandmother, "Take her to the Catholic school tomorrow."

Catholic schools exist for the good of the children and our admission standards must reflect that. We have never had categories of people who were excluded. We have often given preference to children from a parish where a school is located, siblings of children already enrolled at the school or Catholic children from nearby parishes. Sometimes we might not be able to accept children, because of behavioral problems or other circumstances that would be disruptive to a school community. While there are legitimate reasons that might lead to a decision not to admit a child, I believe all would agree that the good of the child must always be our primary concern.<sup>11</sup>

The difference in tone is obvious, but the difference is more than one of tone. Cardinal O'Malley, by avoiding an opportunity to win a skirmish in the culture war instead provided his flock with a parable worthy of the Gospels. He did not just do right by the child, he called everyone involved — and everyone reading his blog — to holiness which, for a Christian, must include reaching out to and embracing those whom society marginalizes. The problem with the culture war approach is that it loses the Gospel in its defensive moralism. So busy wagging a finger at the culture (certainly never at oneself or at the Church) the culture warrior never engages the culture in a way that makes evangelization possible. As Cardinal Francis George has written: "We have to form people with a genuine love of today's city and love our culture itself. Even with its demonic elements, the culture must be loved, because you cannot evangelize what you do not love."

---

11. <http://www.cardinalseansblog.org/2010/05/19/on-the-hingham-school-situation/>.

Another example of how the culture warrior model distorts traditional teaching is the way the term “intrinsic evil” has been deployed in political discourse. The concept is precise in our Catholic tradition. To say that a given act is intrinsically evil is to say that, no matter the consequences or circumstances, the act harms the person doing it. To know that an act is intrinsically evil is not necessarily to know whether it is fit for legal adjudication. The culture warrior bishops, however, use the concept to highlight a few issues they think are critical — abortion, same-sex marriage, contraception — and say that no Catholic can ever vote for a candidate whose policies endorse these intrinsically evil acts. Conveniently, these three issues also define a key political divide within the U.S. with most Republicans opposing them and most Democrats endorsing them.

But, lying is an intrinsic evil too, yet our law only criminalizes lying when it negates a contract by making it fraudulent, or when the lie obstructs the administration of justice, when it becomes perjury. If a man’s wife comes home wearing a truly ugly dress and asks her husband whether he likes the new dress, he is well advised to say that he does. That is a lie. It is intrinsically evil. But, I cannot imagine any legislature in the world thinking it is a good thing to make it illegal for a husband to compliment his wife’s new dress even if he thinks it horribly ugly.<sup>12</sup>

There is a place in American politics for clergy who stand up and denounce certain trends in the culture. But, it is difficult not to notice that the things the culture warrior bishops condemn all align with a certain partisan agenda. Rarely do you hear a culture warrior bishop denounce the evil effects of market capitalism. In his World Day of Peace Message for 2013, Pope Benedict listed “unrestricted financial capitalism” as one of the principal threats to world peace, along with terrorism and international crime. If President Barack Obama had said such a thing, he would have been denounced as a socialist. But, Catholic conservatives simply ignored the pope’s words, as they ignored Pope John Paul II’s repeated calls for a transformation of Western lifestyles. Recently, professor Brad Gregory of Notre Dame said this about the state of the U.S. Church :

Another enormous problem, one American Catholics share with many other American Christians, is the extent to which consumerist affluence and its pursuit is perceived as a non-problem, rather than as an ethos antithetical to the Gospel and Catholic teaching. Those Catholics concerned with secularization, assimilation, and capitulation to the wider culture should start to ask hard questions about the limitless acquisitiveness on which the “American dream” is premised.<sup>13</sup>

Yet, we rarely hear any of the culture warriors challenge this acquisitive facet of U.S. culture, despite the fact that the market, and the mentality it requires, is the principal agent of secularization in the culture. Most Americans are unfamiliar with some of the silly, materialist, hyper-secular writings of university professors, but we Americans all grow up with the experience of going to a supermarket and encounter-

---

12. J. BENNETT, “Voting Against Intrinsically Evil Acts : A Working List,” *CatholicMoralTheology.com*, August 27, 2012.

13. Brad GREGORY, “Change Has Got to Come,” *The Tablet* (2 March 2013), p. 6.

ing a thirty-foot long aisle with nothing but hair care products. We grow up assuming we get to choose everything in life. So, why should it surprise that Americans have created a “hook-up” culture when it comes to sexual partners ? Pick the one you want and, if it doesn’t work out, choose another. Why would a young Catholic raised amidst the material plenty of contemporary culture with all its choices think that certain choices are forbidden by his or her religious tradition ? And how could some raised amidst such affluence hear the Gospel which is good news to the poor not the rich. I joked once that when Cardinal Dolan went to the Republican National Convention to offer the Benediction, he should have led the assembled in the Magnificat. One thing we know about today’s Republican Party : the rich will not be sent away empty.

### III. THE PROPHET AND THE PILGRIM

If the bishops are to raise a prophetic voice against the culture, it must be more even-handed and comprehensive if it is to be persuasive. Otherwise it will be dismissed as mere partisanship and it will blend in to the cacophony of voices in the political arena. The principle that could form the foundation for a sustained critique of American politics is a determined opposition to libertarianism, the idea that the most important value in political, economic and social life is individual freedom. There are libertarians on the left, who highlight the need for a woman to be able to choose to have an abortion and the right of gay people to marry. There is a libertarianism on the right that believes taxes are evil because they entail government taking money from the people who earned it. Indeed, conservative Republicans talk about their income in exactly the same way as liberal Democratic women talk about their bodies : “It’s mine. You can’t tell me what to do with it.” If the bishops are to present a prophetic face to the culture, let it be in service of a more communitarian sensibility that calls all people to solidarity.

That said, I think the bishops would be well advised to shun the taking of an overtly prophetic stance and return to their methods of earlier times. In professor Kaveny’s book, which I have already mentioned, she contrasts two styles of episcopal involvement in the public square, a prophetic style and a pilgrim style. She writes :

Prophets emphasize the importance of clear, unambiguous witness to the transformative power of the inbreaking Kingdom of God. They believe that the purity of their witness to those values will be compromised if Catholics, and especially Catholic institutions, appear resigned to the great systemic evils of our time [...]. In contrast, pilgrims are acutely aware of just how far human society still remains from the kingdom of God and how difficult the journey continues to be. The consequences of sin and the sting of death are still all around us. The only way to ameliorate those consequences is by doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with God. It is not enough to avoid sin ; we have to love and serve our neighbors.<sup>14</sup>

---

14. Cathleen KAVENY, *Law’s Virtues*, p. 264.

The prophet who lives in a pluralistic culture like the U.S. will advocate keeping a distance from others so as not to be contaminated. The prophet is especially contemptuous of fellow Catholics who are, in his estimation, insufficiently rigorous. The pilgrim engages the culture and is not so afraid of contamination. The pilgrim is not naïve, his awareness of the work to be done flows from an Augustinian sense of how far we have to go. In the U.S. Catholic Church today, we need more pilgrims and fewer prophets.

It is critical that the U.S. hierarchy re-calibrate its public witness and become more deft, more engaged, less hectoring and belligerent. The U.S. desperately needs the voice of the Catholic Church. I say this for a number of reasons. Some time ago, I met a scholar at a secular think tank in New York. He said something that startled me and still startles me. He said : “70 % of our economy is based on consumption and that cannot be sustained economically, environmentally or morally. I believe the Catholic Church is the only intellectual tradition that will even know how to frame the right questions when the system starts to collapse.” If my secular friend is right, the bishops need to be at the top of their game before the system starts to come apart.

I have mentioned earlier that I thought the American bishops and President Obama have both mishandled the issue of religious liberty, and indeed they have. Another reason the bishops must become less prophetic and more pilgrim-like in the public square is that the issue of religious liberty is a very real issue. There are groups in U.S. culture that would like to marginalize the role of the Church in civil society precisely when a vibrant civil society is needed to ameliorate those social ills that have proven themselves resistant to government intervention or individual initiative, such as poverty and crime. There are strands of legal theory that support a libertarian view of law. And, as we all have seen too tragically, the issue of religious liberty in many foreign countries is real and dangerous. Christians are being killed. Religious liberty, and dare I say it, a healthy dose of secularization, might be just fine in Pakistan.

But, there is a deeper reason, and a more ecclesial reason, for the U.S. bishops to re-calibrate their public witness. If they continue to engage in the culture wars, they will fail to be witnesses to God’s love. So busy wagging their finger at other people’s wrong-doings, they will fail to be effective and believable preachers on the parable of the Prodigal Son. You cannot welcome the lost sheep back to the fold if you are yelling at them. Indeed, many of today’s bishops appear to me like the second son, the one who stayed and resents his brother’s return. The rebuke of the father is so gentle it is easy to miss. Speaking to his father, the loyal son says of the prodigal “Your son” and the father gently corrects him by saying “your brother.” A pastor must be gentle as the father in that parable is gentle. And it is impossible to be gentle when one is engaged in a culture war.

\*

Finally, I believe that the New Evangelization can only succeed if the Church again becomes a pilgrim Church, a Church of the poor, walking with the lost and the

lonely. I have already quoted Brad Gregory, from Notre Dame. His recent book, *The Unintended Reformation. How A religious Revolution Secularized Society*, traces the historical roots of what we now know as secularization to the Reformation era. For all of its accomplishments, we must reckon with the fact that the “acids of modernity” as Walter Lippmann called them, eat away not only at particular beliefs but at the disposition to believe itself. Our cultures in the West have become forgetful of God. I suspect this forgetfulness has a great deal to do with the affluence of Western culture. Pope Francis seems to grasp this. He did not only call the Church to care for the poor but to become poor itself. The credibility of our Christian witness requires such poverty, not only a simplicity of style, but a genuine conversion of lifestyles, and not only lifestyles but perhaps a bit more humility in approaching the world and telling the world what we think they should be doing. Pope Francis seemed to evidence this kind of poverty, too, when he spoke to the assembled journalists and said that, mindful of the fact that many of them were not Catholics or even believers, instead of giving a traditional blessing, respecting their consciences, he would offer his blessing in silence. That showed, I believe, both an enormous generosity of spirit as well as the humility proper to the Vicar of Him who was once a carpenter in Nazareth.

The credibility of our Christian witness demands, also, that we stand with those whom society marginalizes. I like to say that we must stand with the “uns” — the undocumented immigrant, the unemployed worker, the undereducated young person, the unborn child. If someone is an “un,” somebody our society does not care about, somebody who is deemed a loser, the Church must stand with that person. All of the Church’s social and ethical teachings stand together and are summed up in the singular expression that every person counts.

The New Evangelization is widely misunderstood. In the U.S., at least, even some bishops seem to think it is about using Twitter, or trying harder, or some other form of human management technique. The New Evangelization must go deeper. It must instead get to the heart of the matter, a radical discipleship of Jesus Christ. The Church must not place itself in the same position as the young man in the Gospels who walked away sad, unwilling to sell all he had to follow the Master. If our bishops are truly to engage the public square with the hope of evangelizing it, they must become more humble, more like pilgrims, and only then can they credibly serve as prophets, telling our culture what it has forgotten, that the most important event in our lives happened on a hillside in Jerusalem two thousand years ago.