



JOAN *and* RALPH LANE
CENTER *for*
CATHOLIC
STUDIES
and SOCIAL
THOUGHT
at the UNIVERSITY OF SAN FRANCISCO

**The Catholic Citizen:
Perennial Puzzle or Emergent Oxymoron**

JEROME P. BAGGETT
Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley

Catholic Social Concerns Lecture Series
Presented by the Lane Center for Catholic Studies and Social Thought
University of San Francisco
February 2, 2005



JOAN *and* RALPH LANE
CENTER *for*
CATHOLIC
STUDIES
and SOCIAL
THOUGHT
at the UNIVERSITY OF SAN FRANCISCO

THE CATHOLIC CITIZEN: PERENNIAL PUZZLE OR EMERGENT OXYMORON?

JEROME P. BAGGETT
JESUIT SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY AT BERKELEY

In my estimation, Catholic parishes are rife with research possibilities. How or under what conditions do they facilitate ethnic identity construction among “new immigrant” groups? In what ways does an emerging “de facto congregationalism” alter construals of community within parishes? To what extent do decreasing numbers of clergy and increasing numbers of lay ministers challenge traditional conceptions of authority? I could go on. However, reminiscent of Tocqueville’s oft-noted observation that local churches are the first of Americans’ specifically “*political* institutions,” a particularly salient and much-discussed question for today is whether or not parish participation makes Catholics better, more engaged citizens.

A first glance suggests reasons for optimism. Parishes are abuzz with community-building activities. Nearly nine-in-ten parishes have at least one choir, more than eight-in-ten of them sponsor various social events, about four-in-ten sponsor sports programs and about two-in-ten periodically put on some kind of cultural event. They also reach out beyond their own communities. For instance, the average parish sponsors four service programs and directly supports – through money, volunteers or both – about four more. Such activity, as we all now know, creates the social capital that is so precipitous of civic engagement. Thus, it’s hardly surprising that parish-affiliated Catholics are significantly more apt to belong to and participate within both religious and other civic groups than are the unaffiliated.

Yet, before we excessively laud parishes for honing the “habits of the heart” about which Tocqueville waxed so famously, I think we should address something of a puzzle. Why is it that Catholics are really no more civic than anyone else? Catholicism is widely perceived as promoting a distinctive communitarian ethic, the so-called “Catholic philanthropic tradition” is unrivaled in scope and, unlike other denominations, the Catholic Church is unique in having a unified body of social teachings that are disseminated through a single authority structure and presumed binding on all the faithful. That notwithstanding, Catholic parishioners, generally speaking, don’t volunteer more than Protestant congregants, and their attitudes concerning socio-political issues don’t much depart from those of the average American citizen. Compared to Protestants, they give a lower percentage of their income to charitable – including religious – groups, and they are less engaged in such explicitly political activities as giving money to candidates, attending political meetings and working on campaigns.

I think that partial solutions to this vexing puzzle fall into two distinct categories. The first is a set of organizational reasons. The Church's hierarchical organization has engendered an overall deference to priestly authority and, in the wake of clergy declines, a deficit in parish leadership. Moreover, even though parishes, which on average are about eight times larger than Protestant congregations, may seem to offer plenty of opportunities for lay involvement, there's a deficit here as well. When adjusting for congregational size, they actually sponsor about half the number of groups, classes and choirs than do both mainline and conservative Protestant churches. Consequently, as Sydney Verba and his colleagues contend, parishes lag behind other churches in equipping members with the portable civic skills that enable them to be more active within civil society.

A second category of reasons for this puzzle is principally cultural, and this is what I most want to focus on this morning. But I also want to avoid the all-too-common tendency to frame the issue in terms of cultural consumption. In other words, it is not the case that rank-and-file parishioners merely consume Catholic doctrine. If that were true, then the civic underachievement among Catholics could be explained by their disinterest in public life and, thus, their sub-optimal *demand* for the Church's social teachings. Or, given the reticence of many clergy to address contentious political issues from the pulpit, it could be cast as a mere glitch on the *supply side* of the doctrinal equation.

But this isn't entirely true. Rather, like anyone else, Catholics are free agents whose appropriation of culture – including religious doctrines and ideas – is mediated by their own individual experiences, social locations and life plans. Their interpretations of these doctrines and ideas, therefore, are inescapably productive of new meanings. In short, parishioners are actually *producers* of Catholic culture, and the site where this occurs most ubiquitously is within the parishes themselves.

I've come to understand this better during the past year because I've been studying active Catholics within five very different parishes scattered throughout the San Francisco Bay Area. To date, I've conducted more than one hundred two-hour interviews, and have discovered some things that probably wouldn't be too surprising to people in this room. However, there are some exceptions. One of these is my respondents' profound awareness of religious "others" and, thus, of the essential chosenness of their own religious identities. All of them have close friends, family members or even spouses adhering to different or no faiths; and about one-in-five had belonged to another denomination before converting to Catholicism. Rather than precipitating *weaker* religious identities, I'm seeing that this awareness of religious options is key to their producing a *different kind* of religious identity – one that is nonjudgmental, fluid and morally defined.

That active parishioners participate in producing a nonjudgmental ilk of Catholicism is perhaps best captured in their persistently uttered mantra, "for me." "The Catholic religion is what's valid for me," "this is where, for me at least, God is present," – it's seemingly everywhere. Like a newfound pottery shard offering clues to some forgotten civilization, it is a kind of discursive artifact reflecting parishioners' unwillingness to undermine the worth of other faiths. "Catholicism is the best religion for me," one long-time parishioner declares; and then clarifies:

If you have a relationship with God, it doesn't make any difference what you are. My feeling is that, based on what I know about the Tradition of the Church and its history, this is where I should be. But one of the things Isaiah says is that God's ways and man's ways are different. He makes that real clear. I don't know a lot about Hinduism and Buddhism but, as far as I can tell, they're synonymous with Christianity since they're about connecting to God and getting along with other people. And the same goes for Islam; it's about the same kind of basic principles.

If these parishioners were careful not to underestimate the validity of other people's truths, they were just as wary about overestimating that of their own. Representative here is the chairperson of a parish liturgy committee. "This is what I believe in," she says, "and, if somebody else doesn't believe in it, who am I to tell them otherwise? In my view, it's right; but I don't have all the answers. Besides, I think religion is more of a growing thing."

The production of a Catholic identity marked also by its fluidity occurs because of the near consensus among active parishioners that religion is indeed a "growing thing." Contrasting it with a "dwelling-orientated spirituality" focused on such firm religious moorings as ecclesial institutions and traditional beliefs, Robert Wuthnow describes this American emphasis on religious fluidity and personal growth as a "seeker-orientated spirituality." Journeying rather than steadfastness; privileging the authenticity of the self over the demands of the institution; questioning rather than abiding by the hackneyed expectation of Catholics to "pray, pay and obey": This spiritual style is in full-bloom at the parishes. Noting that questioning was a sign of weak faith for his parents' generation, one parishioner now sees it as a religious asset:

I think you should always doubt because that gives you the drive to mature religiously. Questioning things keeps you from becoming passive, becoming like some kind of sheep. "Baa, baaaa!" That's not the sound of a spiritually alive person. We have to question in order to grow and we have to grow if we want to be fully human.

As institutionally active and committed, these parishioners defy Wuthnow's "ideal types" somewhat. They are actually hybrids of sorts. Seeming more what could be labeled "indwelt seekers," they are active within and critically loyal to the institution but with the caveat that it, too, has an obligation to develop and better approximate its own founding vision. They don't hesitate to lambaste the church hierarchy for what they perceive to be its clericalism, dogmatism and sexism, and, quite tellingly, these offenses are usually construed as misguided forms of stasis, a resistance to fluidity and change. "The Church focuses too much on doctrinal trappings and maintaining itself as an institution and not enough on the Gospel," asserts the leader of a women's spirituality group. "It's going to have to change, and it has a perfect example in how to do this in Christ. He was a devout Jew but he didn't knuckle under the system."

Given their allergy to religious judgment and stasis, it might be expected that active parishioners would have little use for such "doctrinal trappings." Interestingly, though, they seem to have only a modest appreciation of doctrines of any kind. Believing in them doesn't constitute the primary "symbolic boundaries" that define them as Catholics. Doctrines, they consistently suggest, tend to be about making precisely the kinds of judgments they can't abide. They also

smack too much of stasis. Rare is the person who isn't quick to express disdain for doctrines that don't change in accordance with new circumstances and insights. Thus, when asked what defines them as Catholic, some refer to foundational beliefs like the existence of God and others mention such practices as Mass attendance and prayer. The clear majority, however, employ distinctly moral language. Being a good Catholic is essentially being a good person. As one parishioner summarily put it:

I would say that being a good Catholic in the traditional sense is going to Mass regularly, giving your time and money to the Church, praying regularly and embodying the beliefs of the Catholic religion in how you treat other people. I try to do that stuff. Overall, though, being a good Catholic is a goal that I'm trying to attain. And, since I don't know many of the fundamental doctrines of the religion, I mostly do this by trying to be a good person.

There's nothing wrong and, of course, much that's right about being and defining oneself as a good person. As Nancy Ammerman notes of "Golden Rule Christians" generally, it provides a rationale for becoming active members of churches and, thus, sustaining them as institutions. Being a good person is also construed vaguely enough to engender a non-sectarian, common-denominator religious sensibility well adapted to a pluralistic society. The problem is that, like nonjudgmentalism and fluidity, being a good person has a relatively weak political valence.

Moreover and somewhat unexpectedly, this problem is just as likely to be exacerbated as it is to be solved through people's involvement within parishes. Not only do the parishes I'm studying normalize parishioners' disagreement with the Church's teachings on various socio-political issues, but they also produced a culture in which considered discussion of those issues were typically very rare. Time and again, this was construed as an unadulterated virtue. "We don't get into a lot of political discussions here," says one parishioner, "but if you're interested in that, we have a group that's into community organizing and that kind of thing. And there are groups for other things too. That way, people's different perspectives don't come to the fore all the time and we don't get into disagreements." Another takes pride in what he sees as a prevailing "live and let live" attitude within the parish whereby community solidarity trumps political discourse. "I don't think the Church could get me to think or do anything I didn't already think or didn't want to do," he says. Elaborating, he continues:

I know the pope and bishops came out against the war [with Iraq], but that really didn't influence me. My mind was already made up. It's the same with other people. There are people who are for the war and who are incredibly conservative on other issues too; and then there are people who are on the completely opposite side of the political spectrum. But, in order to be in community together, we have to let that stuff go. One of the priests gets kind of political from time to time. Some people might agree and others don't, but that's fine. We don't focus on that stuff because the parish is a big tent of different people.

Whatever one might think of these and other sentiments, I think it's critical to avoid interpreting them in exclusively negative terms. They do not merely represent a lack of interest in discussing social and political issues. Instead, they reflect parish cultures that ongoingly produce the

inability to connect the religious with the civic. These parishes don't simply neglect to make people more civic; they are the sites where non-civiness is, in some ways, constructed. By giving pride of place to parishioners' affective connections to one another and by institutionalizing norms whereby parishioners are free – even somewhat expected – to disagree with the Church on socio-political issues but not engage with one another on these topics, these parishes inadvertently produce institutional cultures that make it more difficult for members to connect the religious with the political, the private with the public. As a result, even among the relatively few who are familiar with the Church's social teachings, parishioners generally lack the ability to understand them in anything but personalist terms. In its place is produced a proclivity to avoid bringing Church teaching to bear with respect to unjust social structures, public policy debates and more sophisticated understandings of community. In short, these parishes produce what Nina Eliasoph evocatively calls the “evaporation of politics.”

Thus, I suggest that one place look in attending the puzzle of why Catholics aren't more civically engaged is toward parish cultures in which the wider implications of Church teaching evaporate from view. I'm not convinced the term “Catholic citizen” is in danger of becoming an oxymoron. But I do think parishes now face the challenge – perhaps, in some ways, the unprecedented challenge – of more deliberately and discursively functioning as institutions able to produce a Catholic sense of self constituted by and obligated to the broader civic community.

Jerome P. Baggett is Associate Professor of Religion and Society at the Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley. He is also Visiting Professor of Sociology at UC Berkeley and a member of the Core Doctoral Faculty at the Graduate Theological Union. Dr. Baggett teaches in such areas as sociology of religion, religion and politics, social theory, social movements, and nonprofit organizations and voluntarism. He has just published his first book, *Habitat for Humanity: Building Private Homes, Building Public Religion* (Temple University Press) and is currently conducting research on Catholic identity and community within six very distinct parishes within the San Francisco Bay Area.