

THE AMERICAN CATHOLIC REVOLUTION: How the Sixties Changed the Church Forever

Mark S. Massa, SJ, Oxford University Press, 2010, \$28

Summary by Dan Brent

The sixties was a decade of revolution. There emerged phenomena like the war protests and the women's liberation movement. For Catholics, it was the decade of Vatican II and *aggiornamento*. Massa's book reflects on the profound changes this brought to faith, especially for American Catholics.

John O'Malley, he says, has highlighted the "unintended consequences" of the Council. The more than 2000 bishops who gathered in Rome in October, 1962, had no intention of undoing the centuries-old image of the Church as solid, stolid, changeless, right. Yet, once the genie was out of the bottle, it took on a life of its own that, in retrospect, has astounded church historians.

The Council's first decree was on the liturgy. It permitted – mandated – changes from Latin to the vernacular for mass and the sacraments. The birth of the Catholic sixties "began on the parish level with the implementation of the new Mass." An American priest, Father Frederick McMahon, who was a canon lawyer, helped the pastors to gracefully explain the rationale for the changes. ("The outward form of the rite was changed precisely to remain true to an action Jesus had commanded at the Last Supper.")

Catholics for the most part rapidly and enthusiastically embraced the changes. They found themselves facing the priest across turned-around altars, standing and touching the eucharist to receive communion, drinking the consecrated wine, and singing in church like Protestants. And they liked it!

The later decree on the nature of the Church saw it no longer in hierarchical terms of power but fundamentally as the people of God joined as faulted pilgrims sharing a journey of faith. While the decree is seen as more important than the one on liturgy, its impact was not as sudden and dramatic as the liturgical changes. But its effects were nevertheless profound and relatively rapid. There appeared over a brief period parish councils and finance committees, Catholic school boards, married deacons, and a new openness to non-Catholics.

More subtly, there emerged a startling new mind-set that invited Catholics to see the Church's moral teachings as a guide and not necessarily the final word! The 1968 encyclical *Humanae Vitae* in which Pope Paul VI renewed the Church's condemnation of birth control was widely rejected by lay Catholics and their clergy. Its reliance on the "natural law" supposedly self-evident in the nature of creation suggested that the Church leadership had completely lost track of the progress that science had made in probing the realities of "creation". "Human moral acts could not be judged as good or bad by simply studying physical acts."

Massa now takes some care to outline the arguments raised by American theologians to challenge Paul VI's position on birth control. Theologians were left in an awkward position. If the teaching is only as good as the reasoning supporting it, then the pope is reduced to the position of just another theologian. On the other hand, if no rational support can be offered for a papal teaching, then the pope is put in the position of an arbitrary czar regarding morality. So theologians like America's Joseph Komonchak could ask, "How did you arrive at this conclusion?" And "How is this teaching related to the central truths of the gospel?"

Pope John Paul II later defended the teaching based on a more personalist approach but this only subtly conceded that the original rationale was weak.

The debate came to center on Rochester's Father Charles Curran and, at its foundations, related not so much to contraception as to how centralized-in-the-pope the post-Vatican II Church was to be. Curran and his theologian colleagues knew too much Church history to worry that change in "official teaching" was unthinkable. The book continues with a long and detailed (and fascinating) account of the slugfest between the board of Catholic University and the pro-Curran theology faculty and students. Curran was fired. Rehired, and ultimately fired again. He's now teaching theology at Southern Methodist University.

"In an age of rapid scientific progress, appeals to static immutable truths no longer made much sense." So, in the end, as sociologist Father Andrew Greeley documented, a substantially large majority of married practicing Catholics had already decided that birth control was acceptable and were not persuaded otherwise by the encyclical.

Turning next to the sisters, Massa tells about the 1977 decision of the Religious Congregation, the Immaculate Heart of Mary in Los Angeles to explore habit changes, prayer options, and even services other than teaching in the Catholic schools of the archdiocese. The move was in response to the explicit encouragement of Vatican II to religious communities to rethink their practices in the spirit of their founders. But the move was unexpected by Cardinal McIntyre, many of whose Catholic schools they staffed. He, the sisters, and Rome got into a public slugfest. In the end, 150 sisters left religious life. Those that remained split into two groups: one traditional group continued teaching, and the other (larger) group radically modified their rules and missions.

The book moves now to a third case-study, the anti-Vietnam War protests of the late 1960's. Father Phil Berrigan led a Baltimore raid in which blood was poured on federal draft records. Jesuit Father Dan Berrigan led a later raid in which draft files were burned. Catholics up to now had prided themselves in being loyal and law-abiding Americans. Now the clergy were leading law-defying demonstrations to attack – in the name of religion – their country's bloody war. So now for Catholics in America, the place of the faithful Catholic may not be always the obedient and loyal citizen but sometimes the challenger of government policies on principles.

On the theological side, Jesuit Avery Dulles, eventually Cardinal Dulles, was inviting a broad conceptualization of "Church". He saw in a variety of "models" of Church some

helpful insights but no final or definitive single resolution about the nature of Church. From the time of the Council of Trent (1545-1563), the Church had seen itself as unchanging, unchangeable, and the guardian of unchanging dogma as well as the unchanging moral standards obvious in “natural law”. Dulles boldly judged the “institutional model” (hierarchy) as the least helpful to the understanding of Church!

In the secular thinking of the 19th century, people like Ludwig Feuerbach were replacing “enlightenment” thinking with “historicism”. Historicism saw *change* as the basic reality. Everything was evolving and our understanding – morality included – must move with it. “Natural law”, as they saw it, was an obsolete concept. It was this wave of thinking that created Darwin, and not the other way around.

Pope Pius X saw the threat that this thinking represented to Trent’s view of Church. In 1907, he condemned it as “modernism”. But it wouldn’t go away. It impacted scripture study; the gospels were now being studied as reflections rather than as narratives, “poetry not prose, symbolic and not descriptive.” And the Vatican fathers, aware of the impact of history in shaping Christianity, have conceded that some change is appropriate. Indeed they indicated that a return to the sources was a value to embrace. So now this thinking has created the new Catholic Church.

A few have declared that Vatican II was an anti-Council, wrong on nearly everything and surely not the work of the Spirit. A larger group (which seems to include Benedict XVI) says that Vatican II is actually in continuity with past councils and traditional Catholic thought.

But most Catholics and their theologians and historians will concede now that Vatican II is a testament to the reality that truth lies on the side of historicism. Even the Church does change.

The Sixties and Vatican II are coming up on 50 years old! Younger Catholics have grown up in the Vatican II Church. But for older Catholics who wonder where – and why – the days of “pray, pay, and obey” have gone, this is an interesting read.