

A Little Knowledge of the Catholic Church

It is said that a little knowledge (hence much ignorance) is a dangerous thing. Perhaps what is most dangerous about it is that, by definition, one cannot fully know the extent of one's own ignorance. Like Philip Jenkins, I confess to a certain bemusement at the widespread expectation by the media that the latest spate of sex abuse allegations against priests might prompt the Catholic Church to end clergy celibacy or begin to ordain women. Some journalists have even gone so far as to wonder, seriously, if the Church can otherwise survive the crisis. Jenkins correctly notes that such thinking does not take cognizance of the American Catholic Church's lack of independence and minority status within the much larger reality of the worldwide Catholic Church. Rather than due simply to ignorance, however, as Jenkins remonstrates, this thinking represents a studied challenge to the Catholic Church's structures and governance, one which reflects the history and current tensions of a church struggling to be both fully American and fully Catholic. Indeed, in decrying the "staggering ignorance" of his interlocutors, Jenkins, while showing remarkable insight into the problem of clergy sex abuse, manifests a certain ignorance of his own about the Catholic Church.

As Jenkins points out in his article, and chronicles better than anyone else in his 1996 book *Pedophiles and Priests*, the "pedophile priest" problem is a social construction, one that is rooted in internal Catholic conflicts, not in the larger American society. Reporters who voice the expectation that the Church may change as a result are reflecting the rhetorical agendas of those—Catholic groups of the extreme left and right—constructing the problem. Jenkins, incidentally, seems to recognize the constructed character of the leftward agenda (define the problem as pedophilia and open the priesthood to married men and women) but not that from the right

(define the problem as homosexuality and exclude gay men from the priesthood). It is a common feature in the construction of any social problem for claims-makers to advance their rhetorical agenda by attempting to redefine the grounds, or facts, surrounding the problem (For an accessible introduction to the extensive literature on social construction, see Joel Best, "Rhetoric in Claims-Making", *Social Problems* 34:2, April 1987). Surely Jenkins, who has written extensively on moral panics of various kinds, knows this. The activist Catholics who promote the priest pedophile problem are well aware that the Holy See is the source of change in the Church and of the relatively dim prospects for achieving the changes they propose. According to Jenkins' own argument in "Priests and Pedophiles", the dimness of the prospects is exactly why they try to motivate change by promoting the definition and knowledge of a serious problem in the Church. Like most people motivated by strong ideals, they are also probably undeterred in pursuing their aims by the low chance of success in achieving them. While I agree with Jenkins that their hopes for change are not likely to be borne out, they are not as unreasonable as he seems to think, and are in fact encouraged by the recent history of the American Church.

Unlike Protestants, Catholics have had an ambivalent relationship with American political and social life from their earliest days on this continent. On the one hand, the democratic ideals of governance which are most natural for Americans to assume have often conflicted with the hierarchical structures of authority in the Catholic Church, putting the American Church at odds with Rome. John Carroll, America's first Catholic bishop, was elected to his post by the priests in America, but he was unable to convince Rome to allow such local autonomy to continue. He was forced by the Holy See to install foreign priests in preference to American ones. In the 1890s a group of leading American bishops reaped criticism and sanction for daring to assert the Church's

national identity by founding the Catholic University of America. Just over a hundred years ago the issue came to a head in the repudiation by the Pope of a series of propositions advocating more individual freedom and local autonomy in matters of church faith and governance, which philosophy was known as “Americanism.” On the other hand, Catholics were long denied full participation in American political and social life. In the colonial era, those who fled religious intolerance in other lands were in their turn intolerant of Catholics in this one. Even in relatively tolerant colonies such as Maryland, Catholics were ineligible to vote or hold political office. The revolution brought political but hardly social parity for Catholics, as witnessed by anti-Catholic and anti-immigrant riots and rhetoric well into the 20th century. The Ku Klux Klan burned crosses in the yards of Catholics as well as African Americans, and as late as the 1950s Paul Blanshard was convincing America that Catholics must be subversive to democracy. American Catholics were caught in a double bind: as Americans, they were suspected of not being fully Catholic; as Catholics, they were suspected of not being fully American.

But in the 1960s this began to change. The election of John Kennedy, the first Catholic president, signaled a certain political coming of age for American Catholics. The “Catholic vote” (another asserted social construction) was discovered and has been increasingly courted ever since. The Second Vatican Council, held from 1963-1965, laid out a less exclusive vision of the Church that prompted sweeping changes in accord with some of the impulses of Americanism. Catholic institutions, particularly universities, forsook their former goal of being “equal but separate” to embrace the prospect of being a fully accepted and engaged partner in American culture.

These changes were not as complete as some would like, but they were certainly far-reaching enough to make wholly inaccurate Jenkins’ characterization of the Church is essentially

intransigent (an “immovable object”) in the face of social change. A better case could be made that in the past 40 years the Church has changed too much, not too little. Numerous studies document that since the 1960s American Catholics have, for better or worse, become much more like Protestants in matters of religiosity and morals. Far from being immovable, Church leaders selectively encouraged this trend, even to point of imposing, at times, change upon the unwilling. For example, Vatican II mandated worship in English rather than Latin and taught that Protestants were no longer necessarily damned, thereby conceding, to the consternation of many faithful Catholics, Protestant positions going back to the 16th-century Reformation. In other areas, Church doctrine, though not changing, has come to exist in uneasy tension with its nearly-universal rejection by the vast majority of American Catholics, who in all such cases have adopted beliefs or behavior more like those of Protestants. Catholic Sunday church attendance rates, 50-60% higher in the 1950s, dropped by the 1990s to become indistinguishable from those of Protestants. Despite the strongest proscription in Church teaching and discipline, Catholic women in the past decade have procured abortions at about the same rate as Protestant women. In perhaps the most well-known example, only a handful of American Catholic couples today decline to use artificial contraception despite the Church’s ban on such use. In other areas Church doctrine has finessed social change, as in the elision of divorce by disallowing it altogether, thus maintaining Church teaching, while permitting large numbers of annulments to occur in practice. In the past 40 years the Catholic Church has reformed its canon law (1982), reformed the liturgy twice (1973 and 2002), updated the catechism for the first time in four hundred years (1994), and produced more official teaching documents on social questions than at any previous period in the history of the

Church, including new considerations of both ordaining married men (1978) and women (1994). To characterize Church teaching in general as an immovable object in the face of social change is simply to trade one false stereotype for another.

The Denomination called Catholic?

While Jenkins overstates its effect (doctrinal immovability), he contributes greatly to an understanding of the American Catholic Church by questioning the prevailing perception of it as a national denomination. Is the Catholic Church properly considered a religious denomination, alongside, say, the Presbyterians or Southern Baptists? From a common-sense perspective it is not unreasonable to think so. That's the way the groups are listed in the Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches. A drive through almost any community in America would show the local Catholic Church alongside those of the local Methodists, Presbyterians, Baptists, etc. Many Protestant churches have bishops and deacons, like Catholics, and sociologically the worship rituals of all the groups involved are far more similar than they are different.

Yet as Jenkins points out, to think of the Catholic Church as only like another denomination is to misstate the situation in important ways. This is point well taken, and in many more ways than just the "global connection" that he is concerned with. If the Catholic Church were a denomination it would be, by an order of magnitude, the largest and most pervasive in the country. Yet no American Catholic has the experience of being part of the dominant religious group in America. In matters of culture, civil institutions and public discourse, the Catholic Church is more likely to find itself over against Protestantism as a whole, or with a minority of Protestants over against the dominant traditions within Protestantism. Although the Catholic Church (with about 65 million

adherents) is much larger than any single Protestant group (Southern Baptists are the largest with 16 million adherents), it is much smaller than all Protestants put together (135-145 million). So in matters that distinguish Catholics from all or most Protestants, the Catholic Church operates as a relatively small minority. This has been particularly the case in the public schools and in the abortion controversy, but also applies to the issues of the ordination of married men and/or women. Moreover, certain behaviors that erode boundary-maintenance—the switching of religious affiliation, and to a lesser extent, intermarriage—are much less common across the Protestant-Catholic divide than among the denominations within Protestantism. In sum, while Catholic and Protestant parish life may be similar, in higher aggregates, i.e., denominationally, Catholics are very different from Protestants.

The institutional arrangements of the Catholic Church in America bear this out. Institutionally, the basic unit of the Catholic Church in America is not the nation but the diocese. Compared to most Protestant denominations the Roman Catholic Church has only an indifferent and belated national organization, particularly with regard to clergy. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, the official national organization of the Catholic Church, is in fact only four years old, an amalgam of two competing bishops' organizations that were formed primarily to coordinate welfare projects. Although there is a moderating bishop who serves as a spokesman, there is no chief national executive among the bishops, as is the case in almost all Protestant groups. The institution maintains no national statistics—a private company maintains and publishes an “Official Catholic Directory”—nor is there any central national authority responsible for clergy. In contrast to virtually all mainline Protestant denominations, there is no national deployment system, health insurance or retirement program for priests. Compared to Protestant denominations, there is

relatively little national movement of priests. Most priests function for their entire ministry within the same diocese (there are 187 in the U.S.) in which they were ordained.

These institutional differences from Protestants have affected the perception of the Church with regard to the clergy sex abuse scandals on more than just contested issues of doctrine. Consider, for example, the repeated disappointment in implementing an effective “national policy” on clergy sex offenders, or the frequent complaint that the Church is not forthcoming with national information on the scope of the problem. It is not necessarily the case that the Church is being obstructive in such matters, any more or less than with doctrine. The truth is, even with the best will and intent, the Catholic Church has a hard time coming up with a national policy or national statistics on anything.

Conservatively Considering Women and Husbands

The essence of Jenkins’ argument, however, concerns the relationship between doctrinal conservatism and Catholicism as a worldwide, not just national, institution. It is true that Catholic doctrine is essentially conservative, and that the Catholic Church is a global entity, but the relationship between these two facts is the opposite of that supposed by Jenkins. Jenkins claims that the Catholic hierarchy is conservative because it has seen the population projections that predict a more conservative worldwide membership. In his view, Catholic doctrine is conservative, not because the hierarchy does not respond to social pressure, but because, in their calculus of the various pressures they face, American liberalism is outvoted today by global conservatism. This view reflects the same, Protestant, misunderstanding of Catholic doctrinal development as the one he is criticizing; it’s just set in a larger context. Presumably, if the

population projections suggested growing liberalism among the laity worldwide, the magisterium would respond by liberalizing Church doctrine.

But Jenkins has it backwards. As an institution, the Catholic Church is not conservative because it is global; rather, it is global because it is conservative. To understand this it is first necessary to understand that the Church's doctrinal conservatism is rooted in its extent in time, not space. In a way unlike any Protestant church does, the Roman Catholic Church understands herself to be the carrier of a sacred tradition centered in the historical person of Jesus Christ. To say this is simply to recall that at the Reformation the churches that are now called Protestant specifically rejected both the authority of tradition in favor of "Scripture alone" (*sola scriptura*) and the authority of Church teaching in favor of individual interpretation or conscience. This difference persists to this day. If you were to ask a knowledgeable Episcopalian who founded her church, she would tell you it was Henry VIII. A Presbyterian might respond with John Calvin, a Quaker with George Fox, a Methodist with John Wesley. But any knowledgeable Catholic would tell you that her church was founded by Jesus Christ. This self-understanding is why Catholic doctrine has no choice but to be conservative:.. any religion that finds its central focus two millennia in the past is bound to be essentially conservative. This is not to say that Catholic doctrine cannot develop or views may not change—I noted a number of recent developments above—but such development is clearly circumscribed by the past.

Papal infallibility brings us to the issue of globalism. Early in the Church's development, by the 4th century on any account, it became clear that if apostolic doctrine was to be faithfully conserved and transmitted, there could only be one acknowledged doctrinal authority. Over time (in a doctrine that itself developed, in accord with the past) this authority came to be recognized

as centered in the bishop of Rome, that is, the Pope. Obviously, the centralization of authority in one place and office requires that there be only one global Church from that point forward. The standard or canon of doctrinal orthodoxy was expressed as “That which is believed everywhere, always, and by all”. Just 130 years ago the Church specified, in the doctrine of papal infallibility, that the Pope’s authority to teach was not answerable to the countervailing opinions of bishops, social values, or various national or international pressures. The independence of the magisterium from media pressure that we see today is due precisely and directly to this doctrine. It is an independence that operates just as strongly with respect to the growing "Southern" world as it does to the shrinking West (as bishops in Africa who feel converts should be allowed to retain multiple wives, a popular position rejected by Rome, can readily attest). Though independent from the world, however, the pope is bound strictly to the past: infallibility never extends to teaching a new doctrine, but only to clarifying and defining doctrines that have already been taught in the past, ultimately originating in Christ and the first-century apostles. The purpose of the Church’s centralization and concomitant globalism, then, is simply to assure that her ability to preserve the apostolic tradition is not corrupted by social or political pressures. She is forced to be global because she is conservative.

The Church’s consideration of the two proposals Jenkins mentions—ordaining women and ending clerical celibacy—serves as a good illustration of this doctrinal conservatism in action. Although neither change is likely anytime soon, the prospects for ultimate adoption by the Church, for precisely the reasons just outlined, are very different in the two cases.

The proscription on ordaining women in the Catholic Church is based explicitly and solely on the fact that Christ himself chose no women to serve among the Apostles. The Church does not, exactly, take issue with arguments supporting this change so much as it simply claims lack of jurisdiction to contravene Christ's example on the issue. The precise position is that "the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women" (Pope John Paul II, Apostolic Letter on Reserving Priestly Ordination to Men Alone, May 22, 1994). It is also important that the Church has never, in any time or place, ordained women. This position could not be more directly grounded in the Church's root conservatism, or sense of fidelity to Christ. To ordain women, presumably even on the basis of utterly convincing reasons, would be to leave the solid example of Christ to venture into unexplored territory on the uncertain ground of merely human reasoning. It would directly contravene the chief purpose of doctrine, which is to be faithful to Christ. The practice of reserving ordination only to men, therefore, is considered an essential principle of Church doctrine, and not open to debate.

On the other hand, Christ, while probably celibate himself, did choose married men among the apostles. For a time in the early Church, married priests were the rule rather than the exception; it took nearly 1,000 years before the rule of celibacy became normative for priests in the Latin Rite of the Catholic Church.. To ordain married men, therefore, would not violate the Church's conservatism in the way that ordaining women would. The Pope, in fact, has made dozens of exceptions to the rule of celibacy (while making it clear that these do not presage a general abrogation of the rule), and there are a handful of married Catholic priests currently serving in the United States. The church hierarchy, though not inclined to end or limit celibacy at this time, certainly sees the question as a legitimate subject for discussion.

In both cases it is not accurate to say that the Church has turned a “deaf ear” to the issue, or has simply ossified in an unmovable position. And the relative popularity, or lack thereof, of each proposal has not figured in any demonstrable way in the considerations of the magisterium. Rather than the supposition that the American Church does not have enough weight within global Catholicism, a better reason that the clergy sex abuse scandal has not prompted a reconsideration of the rule of celibacy is because, as Jenkins himself notes, “there is no solid evidence to suggest a greater frequency of abuse among Catholic clergy.”

Reading:

Thomas Bokenkotter, *A Concise History of the Catholic Church*, Image Books, 1990.

Joel Best, 1987, "Rhetoric in Claims-Making: Constructing the Missing Children Problem", *Social Problems* 34:2.

Jay Dolan, *The American Catholic Experience*, Doubleday, 1985.

Philip Jenkins, *Pedophiles and Priests*, Oxford, 1996.

Pope John Paul II. *Apostolic Letter Ordinatio Sacerdotalis: On Reserving Priestly Ordination to Men Alone*. May 22, 1994. Available online at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_letters/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_22051994_ordinatio-sacerdotalis_en.html