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# How Suburbia Reshaped American Catholic Life

STEPHEN G. ADUBATO | DECEMBER 2, 2025



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**STEPHEN G.  
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BY STEPHEN M. KOETH

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**I**n the third grade, my teacher asked if we knew the difference between Democrats and Republicans. I immediately shot my hand up and recited what my parents had taught me: “Democrats care about poor people and Republicans don’t.” Growing up in a moderately liberal, upper-middle-class suburban family, I took certain simplistic platitudes about the “benevolent” Democrats and “curmudgeonly” Republicans for granted. After having a religious awakening in college, I briefly toyed with the prospect of “switching sides.” Republicans were known for defending the role of religion in public life from the secularist Democrats. But thanks to my classmates who introduced me to the social thought of Dorothy Day, G. K.

contact Claire Giuntini,  
Director of the Editor's  
Circle, at  
cgiuntini@firstthings.co  
m or 212-627-1985.

Chesterton, and Leo XIII, I began to realize that my Catholic faith required me to think—and live—beyond the simplistic left vs. right paradigm.

The more I delved into Catholic social teaching and the history of Catholic grassroots political action, I began to see the contradictions of self-proclaimed “anti-capitalist” leftists who advocated for the right to “love whoever you want”—and of neoconservatives who defended libertarian economic policies on one hand and traditional moral values on the other. The cognitive dissonance that plagues American political discourse stems from its being painfully divorced from reality: We struggle to develop coherent, commonsensical responses to political issues in part because our point of reference has shifted from concrete “material” issues to abstract ideological ones.

Plenty of voices on the fringes of both the **left** and **right** have decried the extent to

which culture war issues have displaced more immediate material ones. The sociologist Musa al-Gharbi **attributes** this to the predominance of “symbolic capitalism,” a term he borrows from Pierre Bourdieu, which refers to a form of discourse that traffics primarily in “symbols and rhetoric, images and narratives, data and analysis, ideas and abstraction.”

The abstracting energy of culture warring has infiltrated many religious communities, to the point that some seem to identify more strongly with their current political affiliations than their religious ones. Of course, there will always be progressives and conservatives, and impulses of reform and counter-reform, within any given religious group. But to an alarming extent ideological convictions now take precedence over—and even replace—actual religious experience and convictions. A recent book by the Notre Dame-based Fr. Stephen Koeth sheds further light on the

minute details of how this paradigm shift took place within the Catholic Church in the United States.

*Crabgrass Catholicism* maps out the history of how Catholics who once lived in America's strongly-ethnic urban enclaves moved en masse to the suburbs, and simultaneously lost their cultural heritage and their faith. Koeth's painstaking historical research demonstrates the shifting modes of political engagement among Catholics during the move from the cities to the suburbs. Politicking in the urban ethnic Catholic ghetto was marked by its focus on direct action and grassroots coalition building. Priests often took their cues from the "observe, judge, act" model popularized by the Catholic Action movement in Europe and Latin America. Lay people looked for ways to build coalitions with their neighbors—including those from different ethnic backgrounds and political persuasions—to resolve

various issues that directly impacted the neighborhood.

Yet as the move to the suburbs smoothed out the frictions posed by urban life and sharpened the division between public and private life, Catholics channeled their political energy into more abstract “moral” issues, outsourcing their concerns to politicians and other distant entities in power. Instead of focusing on material issues like housing, Catholics became more preoccupied by “symbolic” causes. Koeth cites the numerous legal battles in the 1950s and ’60s over the role of religion in public schools, with conservative Catholics arguing in favor of reciting Christian prayers in order to protect students from the “godlessness” of secularism and communism, and liberal Catholics—joining their voices with other progressives—arguing against it for fear of bringing about theocracy or fascism. It wasn’t long until the ideologically bifurcated camps into which

people organized themselves infiltrated the American church.

Koeth makes the case that mass suburbanization both marred the spirit of neighborliness and collaboration and removed the structural and institutional avenues that once made it possible for people to band together to solve problems. This is not to say that the moral issues that fuel the culture wars are unimportant. Surely, the pro-life movement and efforts to defend the right for religion to exist in the public square have had a concretely positive impact on the lives of many. The problem, however, is when ideological issues take center stage, and when we reduce politicking to culture warring—ignoring the need to address more immediate material issues. The culture warrior, blinded by ideological zeal, forgets to engage in concrete gestures—things like labor organizing, block associations, and even more basic things like talking to one's literal

next-door neighbors—to enact substantial changes in society.

Reality—with whose complex contours one is constantly confronted in cities and the country—forces you to band together to resolve, even with your so-called enemies. Should we fail to use our common sense and get the job done, the consequences are harder to avoid. In suburbia, it's easier to outsource the job.

My **paternal grandfather** once warned that “there is no program that the government can ever set up that can duplicate a neighborhood, with its responsibilities, its communication, the feeling of belonging that it imparts.” He was known as the last of a dying breed of New Jersey Italian community organizers; a protégé of **Msgr. Geno Baroni**, who Koeth cites as one of the few Catholics committed to halting the move to the suburbs in the name of promoting **urban multiethnic coalition-building**. And he understood that “if you



put buildings and people together, it's still not a real neighborhood. It will not be right because there is no common interest or responsibility."

Alas, the frictionless, atomized "spirit of suburbia"—which is no longer limited to suburbia—forms people whose point of departure is not the concreteness of reality. This mentality makes it so that reality itself becomes daunting, so much so that it's better to retreat into our cozy abstractions and leave it to impersonal bureaucratic entities to deal with reality, with all its messiness and unpredictability. There is something sinister—and quite literally "diabolical"—about ideological divisions that become so tribalistic that they block us from building grassroots-style coalitions around addressing immediate material issues.

When we renounce our agency to solve problems with our neighbors and instead turn to "benevolent" bureaucracies, the end

result is rarely conducive to flourishing or social cohesion. Indeed, there is hardly anything benevolent about the forms of power that swoop in to fill the vacuum created by the division of ourselves from our neighbor, from God, and from reality itself.

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