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The Catholic Model for a Post-Protestant America

Early 20th-century Catholics built a thriving parallel world of parishes, schools, and charities to survive a hostile culture



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In my book [Life in the Negative World](#), I noted that unlike minority groups in America, white Protestants had not found it necessary to create their own social institutions to sustain their religion and way of life because the mainstream institutions of society were de facto already designed around that.

As America has secularized, and these institutions have become explicitly Christianized or otherwise reoriented to other ends, it becomes incumbent on evangelicals to build their own infrastructure.

I suggested that one potential source of inspiration could be early 20th-century Catholicism. America was basically an anti-Catholic country prior to World War II. Catholics of that era were also large in number and

heterogeneous in origin. This makes them a better fit than looking at niche minority groups.

I've been reading a new book called [*Crabgrass Catholicism*](#) by Stephen Koeth, which is about the suburbanization of Catholics in New York. I'm writing a full review of the book, but one thing it provides is a picture of urban Catholic life looked like in early 20th century America. There's nothing groundbreaking here, as it's included mostly to provide the backstory to the author's primary focus, but it can help us get a sense of what that was like.

Koeth writes:

It was European immigration from the 1820s to the 1850s that first made the US Catholic Church a highly urban and ethnic institution. In an era of rapid urbanization Catholic immigrants built American city life by fusing the neighborhood with the ethnic parish which was dominated by its priests and religious sisters, centered on the church and school, and together by its communal worship and devotions. At the same time, immigrants built an entire parallel Catholic world - what John McGrath has labeled as Catholic "milieu" - of educational, social, and service institutions to rival Protestant and secular peers....More than any other element of this parallel world, it was the parish school that became the "hallmark of American Catholicism."

Here we see the creation of parallel institutions. These were fused with particular ethnicities. Catholicism was thus one factor that distinguished these communities as ethnic groups. While there were geographic parishes, there were also many "national" parishes designated for particular ethnic groups.

groups. Even within a geographic parish, practices might be heavily influenced by particular ethnic practices. For example, the Irish and Italians approached Catholicism very differently. Different ethnic groups might prefer to venerate their own saints. And so on.

The highly ethnicized nature of these Catholic parishes suggests that evangelical groups could not replicate them precisely. White evangelicals aren't and do not think of themselves as an ethnic group, and despite what you might hear, evangelical churches are rarely monolithically white, even in the suburbs. Urban evangelical churches are often very diverse.

The parish-centric nature of Catholicism also assisted in this. Catholic immigrants who attended their parish church, they did not choose from a range of churches available to them, except perhaps a "national" parish.

Even so, we see parallel institutions, especially schools. I think it's notable that the one institution evangelicals have been most aggressive in creating is religious schooling, both in actual schools and via homeschooling.

The ethno-centricity of these Catholic parishes started to decline after World War II, with national parishes starting to fade. (This would lead to a postwar period of assimilation and a new Catholic identity in the suburbs that superseded the previous ethnic-based ones, with the Irish manner of church coming to dominate). This was the central point of Catholic parish life:

The eve of the Second World War was a kind of golden age for the parallel Catholic world built by successive waves of European immigrants and their children was largely preserved within urban parish boundaries. The parish remained a fortress that delimited assimilation.

perpetuated Catholic difference, defended against anti-Catholic big and successfully passed the faith to younger generations.

In other words, this parallel infrastructure largely worked, until the major geographic and social changes of the postwar era. This makes it relevant study, even if the particulars cannot be directly copied.

The downside of this is that it created what was in effect a Catholic ghetto that kept Catholics somewhat marginal in society. This is something to be aware of. Going into alternative institutions goes a long way to taking part of the game in the mainstream ones, particularly at the top levels of society. It can't be a universal strategy for everyone, but may be appealing to some.

One other passage caught my eye.

While Catholics were suspicious of, and largely uninvolved in, major movements such as abolition, women's rights, prison reform, and public education, they did participate in and support charitable efforts to help for the poor, homeless, and orphans of their own community.

The first thing to note is how American history has been de-ethnicized. Movements like abolition are rarely viewed as Protestant specific today, but merely American or Christian. The only parts of history that remain ethnicized as Protestant are the ones that are viewed as negative, such as anything decried as "Puritan."

But the more important is how these Catholic communities decided to opt out of mainstream social movements in favor of focusing on the needs of their own communities. That's definitely something to learn from. It's simply

necessary to participate in every social movement or trend that comes the pike. It's completely legitimate to prioritize the needs and well being of our own communities. ("Do good to all men, but especially to the household of faith.")

History never repeats itself. There are limits to what we can apply today to things that were done many decades ago. And the contemporary condition of American evangelicals are different from those of early 20th century Catholicism. Still, given the success of American Catholics in that era, that model is definitely worth looking at.

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