

Would A More Catholic United States Better Cope With the Impending Geopolitical Shift of Power?

By Manlio Graziano*

For an international relations scholar following the American election from abroad, the most glaring characteristic of the presidential campaign has been the paucity of any serious and deep debate regarding the United States' shifting position in the newly emerging international order.

In truth, a shift in the world's relative power dynamics was already well underway in 2008. Indeed, in terms of declining American power, this transition has been in progress since at least the end of the 1960s, when, as Henry Kissinger later famously remarked, "the age of America's nearly total dominance of the world stage was drawing to a close."¹

Today, the ongoing global crisis has greatly accelerated this historic trend and, according to the projections of many leading economists, the date when China's GDP will surpass that of the U.S. is approaching much more rapidly than had previously been anticipated just a few years ago. For example, *The Economist* recently predicted that this event would take place in 2019.² Conversely, during the 2008 presidential campaign, the most pessimistic predictions (from an American point of view) were that this event would not occur before 2025. While this difference may seem rather minor in broader historic terms, the immediate psychological impact on American society will be enormous. Measured in units of American presidential terms, 2019 is the day after tomorrow. Nevertheless, outside of vague cliché-filled rhetoric about another "American Century," the candidates have barely been audible about America's changing geopolitical position, an issue of fundamental national and, indeed, international importance.

There is another subject that has received very little attention during this presidential campaign: the mounting influence of Catholics and Catholicism in the American political landscape. While certainly not of the same magnitude as the foregoing subject, it remains an important trend and is a phenomenon which is closely linked to the United States' geopolitical status. Furthermore, with its potential to help shape international relations in the coming years, this trend is growing in strength and is increasingly relevant to American politics.

As it pertains to the 2012 election, commentators have, by and large, focused on two aspects of the Catholic Church's influence: the first, a "novelty" and the second, a constant theme in every election. The novelty: for the first time in American history, both vice presidential candidates are practicing Catholics. The constant: as in elections past, pundits and campaign strategists dissect the battle for the "Catholic vote" and its hypothetical impact on the election's outcome (an unusually prolonged process this election because of the dispute between the Department of Health and Human Services and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.)

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¹ Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1995, p. 703.

² "Dating Game." *The Economist*, December 16, 2011 (in terms of real GDP). According to this article, in 2003, Goldman Sachs estimated that China's GDP would overtake America's in 2041; today, Goldman Sachs predicts that this event will take place in 2027. In November 2011, Standard Chartered Bank projected that the year 2020 will be the fateful date.

It is beneficial to observe these developments from afar: in fact, analysis from a distance allows one to more clearly place these two short-term electoral aspects in their long-term historical context: something that has been facilitated by the recent evolution in the relationship between Catholicism and American political life.

This article will touch on three main points: 1) a brief historical outline of the recent relationship between Catholics and America's political life; 2) the reasons for the new state of grace of the Catholic Church on the world stage and, in specific, on the American stage; 3) some postulations about the causes behind the rising influence of Catholicism in the U.S. and its potential geopolitical ramifications, particularly in the context of the current international realignment in the power dynamics between the great powers. This article will not address the usual questions and topics that generally dominate the mainstream media's coverage of Catholicism in America, such as the repeated pedophilia scandals or the "rebel nuns." This is partially due to constraints on the length of the article but also because these topics have been sufficiently explored by other sources.

I. The Catholic Vote

It is not entirely true that this election marks the first time in American history that both vice presidential candidates have been Catholics. In a 2008 interview, Sarah Palin noted that she "was baptized Catholic as a newborn." However, since this time, she "started going to non-denominational churches" with her family³; still, from the point of view of the Catholic Church, "once a Catholic, always a Catholic." This is neither a simple dictum nor a secondary question: just as the United States uses its own methods to take census of its citizens' religious affiliations, so does the Catholic Church. What is of major significance when comparing the Vatican and American methods of identifying Catholics is that the Church's method is applied worldwide, which allows for consistent demographics comparisons between countries with Catholic populations.

Therefore, according to the Vatican's census, Sarah Palin will always be among its flock because, "the sacramental bond of belonging to the Body of Christ that is the Church, conferred by the baptismal character, is an ontological and permanent bond which is not lost by reason of any act or fact of defection."⁴

Joe Biden is the first Catholic to ever hold the office of vice president. After the election of John F. Kennedy, four Catholics unsuccessfully ran for the vice presidency: William Miller (R) in 1964, Edmund Muskie (D) in 1968, Sargent Shriver (D) in 1972, and Geraldine Ferraro (D) in 1984. Kennedy's victory appears to have unleashed a sort of repetition compulsion, to the point that, in 1972, George McGovern reflexively searched for a Catholic running mate ready to sink with him. McGovern courted several high-profile Catholic Democrats, most notably Ted Kennedy, Edmund Muskie, Kevin White, and Gaylord Nelson, before choosing Thomas Eagleton, a Catholic, and then eventually switching his choice to the extremely devote Sargent Shriver (married to one of the Kennedy sisters). The presence of a Catholic on the Democratic ticket did little sway the Catholic vote as Richard Nixon took the Catholic vote by roughly the same margin as he carried the popular vote (nearly 63%).⁵ Since the 1972 election, Catholics voting patterns have, more or less, mirrored those of the general electorate (the 1988 contest is the only debatable exception to this tendency). In the opinion of many

³ "Time's Interview with Sarah Palin", by Jay Newton-Small, *Time Magazine*, August 29, 2008.

⁴ *Actus formalis defectionis ab Ecclesia catholica*, § 7, March 13, 2006.

⁵ George J. Marlin, Michael Barone, *American Catholic Voter: Two Hundred Years of Political Impact*, St. Augustine Press, South Bend, IN, 2004.

electoral analysts, there's no such thing as a 'Catholic vote'.⁶ Alternatively, other prominent electoral analysts, while sharing the same observation – “Catholics are the bellwether voters: as go Catholics, so goes the nation,”⁷ – come to very different conclusions: “the Catholic vote is now the most important swing vote in American politics.”⁸ Therefore, all efforts should be made to court these voters. Both the Republican and Democratic parties have special teams specifically devoted to the task of wooing Catholic voters. The formation of these teams can be traced directly to the “religious political machine”⁹ that Karl Rove and Deal Hudson established prior to George W. Bush's reelection campaign. In 2004, Rove and Hudson forged a grand pro-Bush alliance between conservative Catholic groups and the Evangelical movement: in the 2004 presidential election, Bush won a greater share of the Catholic vote (52%) than the popular vote (51%).

Actually, Karl Rove had already begun strategizing on how best to animate a “Catholics for Bush” voting bloc since 1998. During the 2004 campaign, the “machine” was certainly working much better, thanks to the efforts of Deal Hudson, the Republican National Committee's Catholic Outreach Director since 2001.

However, there was another significant difference between the 2000 and 2004 presidential campaigns: the overtly hostile stance of the Catholic Church's hierarchy towards John Kerry. Not only did dozens of bishops make statements reasoning that pro-choice politicians should be denied the Eucharist (of particular note was the Archbishop of Boston – Kerry's hometown – outspokenness); but an official instruction from Josef Ratzinger, then serving as the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, commanded bishops to behave in this manner. Ratzinger's orders were transmitted through Theodore McCarrick, the archbishop of Washington and the man responsible for the “domestic affairs” of the Conference of American bishops (USCCB).¹⁰

In a note issued on June 21, 2004, entitled *Catholics in Political Life*, a majority of the USCCB refused to take a position constraining the circumstances under which the Eucharist ought to be given. Yet, the note was firm with regards to the question of the “unequivocal commitment to the legal protection of human life from the moment of conception until natural death.” On the other hand, the text contained *no references at all* to the Iraq War, the more sensitive point of disagreement with George W. Bush. The text was quite clear: Catholics “need to *act* in support of these principles and policies in public life... [and] should *not honor* those who act in defiance of our fundamental moral principles.”¹¹

Numerous commentators were surprised that the bishops' attitudes in 2004 were so divergent from what they had been when Kennedy was elected. Many of these same commenters have observed that, “for decades, Democratic politicians have found ways to win Catholic swing voters despite taking positions that are at odds with the Catholic Church's views on abortion, same-sex marriage, and yes, contraception.”¹²

⁶ See, among others, Michael O'Brien, “Decision 2012 and the myth of the 'Catholic vote'”, *NBC Politics*, May 21, 2012.

⁷ Patrick Basham, “How Many Votes Has the Pope? John Paul II, George W. Bush and the Changing Catholic Voter”, *Reason.com*, April 15, 2005.

⁸ *Ibidem*. The assertion that “the Catholic vote is the most important swing vote” is repeated consistently in many articles devoted to this subject.

⁹ Peter J. Boyer, “Party Faithful. Can the Democrats Get a Foothold on the Religious Vote?”, *The New Yorker*, September 8, 2008.

¹⁰ Joseph Ratzinger, “Worthiness to Receive Holy Communion: General Principles”, June 2004 (in <http://www.priestsforlife.org/magisterium/bishops/04-07ratzingerommunion.htm>).

¹¹ <http://old.usccb.org/bishops/catholicsinpoliticallife.shtml>

¹² Ross Douthat, “Obama vs. Catholics, Catholics vs. Obama”, *The New York Times*, 22 May, 2012.

In the 1960s, bishops were not used to making public pronouncements in the media on issues that were considered to be eminently political. Besides, some of the issues that are critical today have yet to materialize: for example, the Supreme Court did not rule on *Roe v. Wade* until 1973. Additionally, Kennedy's victory in many ways represented the successes of the American Church – especially during WWII – in elevating the status of Catholic Americans to that of full-fledged loyal citizens; therefore, the Church was obligated to observe the most scrupulous prudence in order to prevent any harm to a candidate who was accused by conservative WASP circles of being obedient to the Vatican and not the Constitution. It is a charge that no one has ever leveled against John Kerry.

The attitude of the Bishops vis-à-vis a Catholic candidate, or president, could not be – and never will be – the same as it is towards a non-Catholic. This reality is as true today as it was during Kennedy's era. When the Church confronted him on his project to improve the financing of public schools, President Kennedy was shocked and distraught: “Why do they pick on me? – he asked rhetorically – They never picked on Ike!”¹³ Every American president (or aspirant) is a window to the world. Consequently, it is more than comprehensible that, if he/she is a Catholic, the Church wants him/her to represent their personal religious beliefs as being in lockstep with those of the Vatican (in addition to expecting that Catholics politicians back certain interests on behalf of the Church). In this regard, being a Catholic president is “as much a burden as a blessing.”¹⁴

A final observation, as banal as it may be, is that things have changed considerably since the 1960s. At that time, the U.S. had just emerged from the most successful period in its national history. Conversely, the Church was about to experience one of the toughest periods in its history. In addition, in the decades following WWII, religion was widely regarded as being of increasingly marginal importance, to such an extent that, in 1966, *Time Magazine's* cover notoriously asked the question: “Is God Dead?” In this context, the post-war presidents “didn't trumpet their faith,”¹⁵ and it wasn't until the latter half of the 1970s that a presidential candidate (Jimmy Carter, a born again Christian) made his religious beliefs a central feature of his campaign.

Today, this situation is in the process of being turned upside down: the U.S. is afraid that its relative decline may become an absolute decline; inversely, the Church has recovered much of its lost strength and appears to be on an upward trajectory. It is unsurprising, in circumstances such as these, that American Bishops have become increasingly vocal and politically engaged. They realize that “civil society today is undergoing a complex cultural process as the end of an era brings with it a time of uncertainty in the face of something new;”¹⁶ and they are positioning themselves as the champions of certitude that “civil society” so desperately craves. Upon reflecting on the contemporary successes of the more traditionalist religious communities, and the growing marginalization of liberal ones, Peter Berger observes that “uncertainty is a condition that many people find very hard to bear; therefore, any movement (not only a religious one) that promises to provide or to renew certainty has a ready market.”¹⁷

¹³ Lawrence J. McAndrews, “The Avoidable Conflict: Kennedy, the Bishops, and Federal Aid to Education”, *The Catholic Historical Review*, Vol. 76, No. 2 (Apr., 1990), p. 278.

¹⁴ Jonathan Beale, “Pope may find US on his wavelength”, *BBC News*, April 15, 2008.

¹⁵ Patrick J. Reardon, “JFK and the Cafeteria Bishops. 50 Years After Kennedy Asserted Independence from the Pope, the Tide has Turned”, *National Catholic Reporter*, August 10, 2010.

¹⁶ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Doctrinal Note on Some Questions Regarding the Participation of Catholics in Political Life”, ch. II, § 2, November 24, 2002.

¹⁷ P. Berger, *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, MI, 1999, p. 7.

II. The Church is Back

In 1979, President Carter's mother was sent to the funeral of Pope Paul VI as the United States' official representative. In 2005, the sitting president and two of his predecessors attended Pope John-Paul II's funeral.

A great many commentators believe that this change in America's approach to the Church can be basically attributed to its influential engagement in contemporary geopolitical factors and considerations. The presence of three presidents, the commentators said, was a deliberate tribute of gratitude to a man who, along with Ronald Regan, is regarded as being the central figure in the defeat of the "evil empire" (a moniker that both men believed was accurate).

In any event, before the Papacy to be able to play any geopolitical role whatsoever, there were at least two factors that required convergence: the return of religion as a political and moral force at the international level (the "desecularization of the world"), and the determination of Karol Wojtyła and Joseph Ratzinger to end, within the Church, what Deal Hudson called "the detritus of the post-Vatican confusion."¹⁸ In freeing itself from encrustations of secular ideologies, the Church recovered its autonomy, credibility, and organizational solidity. The most distinctive feature of John-Paul II's papacy has been the reaffirmation and reinforcement of the Catholic *identity*, in both senses of the word: the restoration of a sense of belonging to the same community; and the assurance that the Church will always remain identical to itself, i.e. inflexibly true to its principles (in opposition to "cafeteria Catholicism:" the idea that each member of the flock is allowed to selectively chose which Church teachings to follow).

The effects of this reorientation have been profound and tangible: the number of seminarians in the world almost doubled between 1978 and 2010 (63 882 to 118 990); in 1980, there were no more than 403 600 priests, compared to 412 236 in 2010; and the number of permanent deacons has gone from 7 654 to 39 564 over the same period. Naturally, these global figures do not reflect stark regional disparities (which, as a general rule, has been a pattern of growth in Asia, Africa, and Oceania; quasi-stagnation in the Americas; and notable decline in Europe). Critics of the Wojtyła-Ratzinger rebranding tend to accentuate the aspects of the perceived decline of Catholicism in the United States: less Catholic schools and smaller enrollment, decreasing mass attendance, fewer baptisms and traditional weddings, and a declining number of priests and nuns. Furthermore, these critics highlight the fact that only 68% of baptized American adults still identify themselves as Catholics. American Catholics, it is said, are the quintessential "cafeteria Catholic."¹⁹ If one adds the various high-profile pedophile scandals to this tableau, the perception of disaster seems complete.

However, there is a flip side to this coin. As in every other developed country, the forces of secularization have profoundly impacted the United States. Yet, the processes of secularization and desecularization can advance simultaneously: not only because they are linked to social transformations that are intrinsically contradictory (overall rising levels of social wealth are, for example, usually accompanied by rising levels of income inequality,) but also because – according to José Casanova –

¹⁸ "Party Faithful", art. cit.

¹⁹ According to a recent survey of the Catholic University, only 40% of American Catholics consider the Church's teaching on abortion to be "very important." 35% feel similarly about the Church's position on same-sex marriage. Besides, only 30% of respondents said that the authority of the Vatican should always be accepted (William D'Antonio et alii, *Catholics in America: Persistence and Change in the Catholic Landscape*, Washington DC, October 2011). The same survey revealed that the percentage of the faithful attending mass at least once a week switched from 44% in 1987 to 31% in 2011.

secularization is composed of at least three “very different, uneven and unintegrated” facets: 1) the separation between church norms and state legislation; 2) a decline in religious observance and practices; 3) the demotion of religion to the private sphere.²⁰

Presently, there is a broad consensus that religion is less confined with each passing day to the private sphere and that the distinction between civil and religious norms is becoming more and more muddled. These are the two principal characteristics of the unfolding desecularization process. On the other hand, the decline in religious observance does not appear to know trend reversal: quite the opposite, one can surmise that this decline will proceed, not only in the developed countries but also in emerging economies that have attained a certain standard of living, but also, at the domestic level, in the sectors of society that are in the process of attaining greater standards of living.²¹

Furthermore, it is indisputable that the leaders of the various confessions have very divergent stances concerning the diminution of religious observance and practices.

To simplify matters, one could say that for religions that are rooted in the belief of a direct link between the believer and God (most notably Protestantism and Sunni Islam), the declining number of faithful corresponds directly to an all-encompassing decline for the religion itself; on the other hand, for religions that have an institutional structure that serves as the link between the believer and God (most notably Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy) this is less true, because it is the institution itself that is paramount; therefore, if the institution is reinforced and acquires greater social influence, the religion is preserved.

Since the Second Vatican Council, the Church has come to acknowledge that the era of majoritarian religious observance in Western society is definitively over. Joseph Ratzinger has gone even further, by trying to transform what is regarded as a weakness into a source of strength. In 1997, after having stated, “statistics are not one of God’s measurements,” he added that the future will witness “a minority Church [which] will live in small, vital circles of really convinced believers.”²² A few years later, while placing this perspective in a theoretical tradition that is eminently historical-political, Ratzinger articulated a clear task: “We must agree with Toynbee that the fate of a society always depends on its creative minorities. Christian believers should look upon themselves as just such a creative minority.”²³

If the institution – the Church – is paramount, it is evident that the diminution of priests and nuns in the U.S. is very worrying in the eyes of the Catholic hierarchy. Nevertheless, in this case again, one must go beyond the rudimentary evidence. There are three crucial observations that, in a way, “relativize” this problem.

The first, if the post-Council Church acknowledges that, at the societal level, “a universal Christian atmosphere no longer exists,”²⁴ this holds true for what is called “vocations” as well. In this instance as

²⁰ José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, University Of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1994, p. 211

²¹ Of course there is no absolute ‘standard of living’ threshold beyond which this disaffection appears. But the – empirically proven – linkage between social wealth increase and the decrease in religious belief essentially happens when the urbanized former peasants begin to find, in the industrial society, the answers to their vital needs elsewhere than in religion.

²² Joseph Ratzinger, *Salt of the Earth: The Church at the End of the Millennium*, conversation with Peter Seewald, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 1997, pp. 18 and 222.

²³ Joseph Ratzinger, Marcello Pera, *Without Roots: The West, Relativism, Christianity, Islam*, Basic Books, San Francisco, 2006, p. 80. In the book, the phrase « creative minority(ies) » appears nine times.

²⁴ *Salt of the Earth*, cit. Literally translated from the Italian text (Ed. S.Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo, 1997, p. 299), because the English translation (“we can no longer take for granted a universal Christian atmosphere”, p. 265) is formally slightly different but, substantially, considerably different.

well, Ratzinger is trying to turn a weakness into an asset: in fact, he has made clear that the priesthood should not be viewed as a vehicle for social promotion – as was the case in the past when “a universal Christian atmosphere” existed –but as result of a choice that is all the more sincere and mature given the position’s increasing difficulty. This is what he clearly said, for example, to African bishops at the fall 2009 Synod; and repeated his position in his exhortation *Africae munus*²⁵.

Even if the Church does everything within its powers to stop the marginalization of “religious fact,” it intends, nevertheless, to take this opportunity to enhance the sense of belonging amongst the faithful and to train its pastors to be more aware and assertive. “Better fewer, but better,” an adage Benedict XVI himself could have coined, in dismissing, once again, the simplicity of those who believe that “numbers are power” in every case and instance.

The second observation concerns the permanent deacons, these lay ministers of worship instituted by the Council. As previously noted, the number of deacons has increased fivefold during the papacies of Jean Paul II and Benedict XVI; of interest to this article is the fact that approximately half of all permanent deacons work in the United States, where recruitment levels have augmented consistently even in spite of the many pedophile scandals (between 1995 and 2005, the number of permanent deacons increased by 50%). Additionally, those that choose to become deacons tend to be fairly educated (54% had a bachelor or college degree, 28% a graduate degree) and with a long tradition rooted in American history (81% self-identified as “White, Non-Hispanic.”)²⁶ These statistics allow one to suppose that their choice to become a deacon was particularly motivated and disinterested.

The third observation concerns the priesthood; from this point of view, the United States continues to represent a privileged situation. Only Italy has more priests than America: roughly 51 300 vs. 46 500. The U.S. is home to 6.8% of all Catholics and 12.5% of all priests. A cross-regional comparison of the priest to population ratio is even more revealing: 1 for every 51 200 in Asia, 27 700 in Africa, 7 400 in the Americas, 6 350 in the United States, and 3 600 in Europe.²⁷ Asia and Africa, the regions where Catholicism has been experiencing the most growth, are also the most underserved. Moreover, the high ratio of priests to citizens in the United States and Europe indicates that the risk of “desertification” of the parishes is still remote.

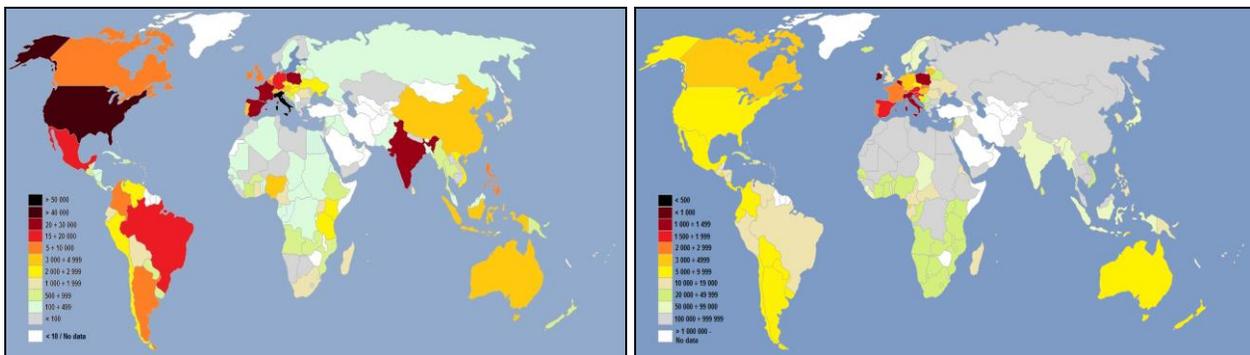


Fig. 1: Diocesan priests by country. Fig. 2: Priests/population ratio by country (http://www.nationmaster.com, catholic-hierarchy.org. Pour la population ONU-WorldPopulationProspects:The2010Revision).

²⁵ The African clergymen are invited to live “in truth and joy [their] priestly commitments, celibacy in chastity and detachment from material possessions...Following Christ on the path of the priesthood entails making decisions. It is not always easy to live up to these...Christ...demands a radical decision (cf. *Mt* 7:13-14) which we sometimes find difficult to understand and live out” (Apostolic exhortation *Africae munus*, November 19, 2011, §§ 119, 120).

²⁶ *A Portrait of the Permanent Diaconate: A Study for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops 2009-2010*, Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate Georgetown University, Washington, DC, 2009, pp. 12, 13.

²⁷ Data http://www.nationmaster.com and catholic-hierarchy.org (drawn from incomplete data from dioceses, 2005-2006).

If one considers that the first signs of a trend reversal are beginning to appear, the threat of “desertification” seems even more remote. Worldwide, the “crisis of vocations” began to dissipate around the end of the 20th century, and the increasing number of seminarians bodes well for the future prospects of the Church. In the United States, the reversal of this trend has occurred more recently; it is too early to say if it will stabilize, but the numbers speak volumes: the number of seminarians went from 3 308 (2005) to 3 608 (2010) and then to 3 723 (2012). The number of ordinations rose from 442 (2000) to 454 (2005) and then to 480 (2012). Despite these figures, there has been a decrease in the aggregate number of priests (which fell below the 40 000 in 2012, mainly due to natural causes); however, the picture remains bright for Catholic leaders and they can look to the future with a sense of optimism.²⁸

This optimism could be further reinforced by several demo-religious studies, according to which the combined effects of fertility, immigration, and conversions could result in America’s Catholics population exceeding its Protestant population in the second half of the 21st century.²⁹

III. Strategic Relevance of Catholicism in the United States

The projects and prospects of the Catholic Church cannot be measured in the timeframe of an election cycle nor, often, an individual’s lifetime; in reality, it usually requires several generations. The Church’s concept of time has nothing to do with that to which we have grown accustomed, and this is one of the reasons why its policies are so difficult to understand. If its struggle against “cafeteria Catholicism” is in its early stages; the project to once again invest in the public sphere has already begun to bear fruit.

There again, the subjective factor (the recovered force of the Church) works hand in hand with the objective factors (the superior religious propensity of Americans when compared to other Western countries, and the material and moral distress resulting from its economic and geopolitical crises). During his presidential campaign, Kennedy wanted voters to know that he believed “in an America where the separation of church and state is absolute.”³⁰ Almost fifty years later, Obama stated, “secularists are wrong when they ask believers to leave their religion at the door before entering into the public square.”³¹

Therefore, the atmosphere is particularly propitious for advancing pawns, like the one Benedict XVI proposed in his last encyclical: “The Christian religion and other religions can offer their contribution to development *only if God has a place in the public realm*, specifically in regard to its cultural, social, economic, and particularly its political dimensions.”³² The Pope speaks on behalf of the whole of Christianity and “other religions” not because he is animated by an annexationist spirit but because 1) he knows with certainty that the leaders of other religions – with the exception of a few liberal fringes – agree with him, and 2) the Catholic Church is unrivaled when it comes to organizational depth and the social/political authority needed to represent this claim.

²⁸ Data <http://cara.georgetown.edu/CARAServices/requestedchurchstats.html>.

²⁹ Anne Goujon, Éric Caron Malenfant, Vegard Skirbekk, “Towards a Catholic North America? Projections of Religious Denominations in Canada and the U.S. up to 2060”, Vienna Institute of Demography, April 21, 2011.

³⁰ Address to the Greater Houston Ministerial Association, September 12, 1960, Houston, TX.

³¹ Speech at the Call to Renewal’s Building a Covenant for a New America, Washington DC, June 28, 2006.

³² Encyclical letter *Caritas in veritate*, June 29, 2009, § 56. Italic in the original text.

In the United States, there are 217 denominational and some 35 000 nondenominational groups and churches.³³ On the one hand, there are 35 216 Protestant or Orthodox churches (along with other Christian minority groups); on the other, there is the Catholic Church. The latter represents 1/35217th of all American churches, but is the largest single grouping of Christians (about 1/3). Considering this allocation of forces from an exclusively political point of view, it is clear that, thanks to its centralization, the Catholic Church has an impact than any other confession – Christian or not – can never have.

Europeans are haunted by the ‘Christian Right,’ which is often referred to as the primary (and sometimes secretive) religio-political driving force in the United States. But, despite its many determined and boisterous efforts, the Christian Right has never been able to produce a single presidential candidate, only being able to support those who appeared to be sympathetic to their views, be it Jimmy Carter in 1976 or George W. Bush more recently. Also, the Christian Right has been unable to accomplish any of its key objectives (especially the banning of abortion), regardless of whom is occupying the White House. Its political limits are of course its excesses, but also, and perhaps above all, its fragmentation and its localism, limits that are unquestionably unknown to Catholics.

In the United States, the Catholic Church has an army of 40 000 priests, 54 000 nuns, and 17 000 permanent deacons, deployed over a territorial base of 195 dioceses and more than 17 500 parishes. They have hundreds of publications and newsletters at their disposal (with combined circulation in the tens of millions). Additionally, the Church controls, directly or indirectly, more than 5 600 elementary schools, 1 200 high schools, and 244 universities and colleges, with a total of approximately 3.5 million students and more than 200 000 teachers and professors. In the health care system, the Church has a network of more than 600 hospitals, along with scores of nursing homes, retreat centers, and other charitable healthcare facilities.

After the government, this is the second largest social network in the country, which is all the more significant in an era of over-indebtedness and budgetary restrictions. From a strategic perspective, this force’s influence on America’s political class is far greater than what their simple electoral potential.³⁴

The ‘mass’ of the Catholic Church exerts a force of attraction proportional to its density. In its pro-life battle, an American evangelical will feel better represented by the Pope than by the ‘liberal’ Obama, but also possibly more than by the indecisive Christian Right as well. Many evangelicals explicitly state that Benedict XVI “speaks their moral language.”³⁵

This force mainly attracts conservatives but it is not indifferent to the Democrats. Within these two camps, the conversions have recently multiplied: from Jeb Bush to Newt Gingrich to governors of Louisiana Bobby Jindal and Kansas Sam Brownback; from the mayor of Nashville Karl Dean to Representative Hansen H. Clarke (Michigan) to General Wesley Clark (who is said to be positioning

³³ Hartford Institute for Religion Research. The first data is relative to the year 2006, the second, to 2010.

³⁴ This does not mean in any way that the electoral potential is neglected. Everyone knows that the greater the number of American Catholics – in absolute *and* relative terms – the more the Church possesses a political lever of primary importance: with minimal effort, it could work to increase the turnout of its flock, whenever it wants (which could be presented as a manifestation of civic spirit, and not as a form of intrusion into the partisan political battle).

³⁵ Adelle M. Banks, “Conservative Evangelicals Say New Pope Speaks Their Moral Language”, *Christianity Today*, April 20, 2005. Richard J. Mouw, considered one of the nation’s leading evangelicals, wrote that “in many ways and on many subjects, [the pope] speaks for me” (Richard J. Mouw, “Why the Pope Speaks for Evangelicals, Too”, *The New York Times*, April 18, 2008). Mouw is president of the Fuller Theological Seminary.

himself for a run at the 2016 Democratic nomination). For a while, a rumor had circulated that George W. Bush was tempted to follow in the footsteps of his brother and his former ally Tony Blair; but perhaps this is not even necessary because, for some, the former president is already a “closet Catholic”; in the eyes of Rick Santorum, he was “the first Catholic president, much more Catholic than Kennedy.”³⁶

The ascension of Catholics in the U.S. political landscape was already evident under George W. Bush. Five justices of the Supreme Court were Catholic (*all appointed by Republican presidents*). During his presidency, George W. Bush “surrounded himself with Catholic intellectuals, speechwriters, professors, priests, bishops and politicians.”³⁷ Three of the most prominent cabinet members that Bush appointed (Paul O’Neill, Alberto Gonzales and Tom Ridge) are Catholic.

However, it is under the Obama administration that there has been a marked turning point. From 2009 to 2011, Catholics Joe Biden and Nancy Pelosi chaired both houses of Congress (in 2011, Pelosi was replaced by John Boehner, himself a Catholic). Almost half of those that have served in Obama’s cabinet since his inauguration (8 out of 18) are Catholic. Not to mention, until the 2010 mid-term election, four Senate Committees Chairmen (including Foreign Affairs and Education) and five in the House (counting Education and Social Security) were Catholics. And, finally, Obama’s first Supreme Court appointee, Sonia Sotomayor, is a Catholic. This appointment led to an original religious configuration on the Supreme Court’s bench, presently, six Catholics and three Jews. An absolute nightmare for old traditionalist WASPs; yet, today, many traditionalist WASPs have themselves become Catholics, or have come to look on Catholicism with sympathy.

If all the other cases went more or less unnoticed, the presence of six Catholics on the Supreme Court bench has stirred debate. For some, it is a real problem. For others, “the preponderance of Catholics on the high court today still leaves Catholics underrepresented... There have been 11 Catholic justices out of 108 in U.S. history, just 10 percent of the total.”³⁸ For others still, including Justice Antonin Scalia himself, “there is no such thing as a ‘Catholic judge... just as there is no ‘Catholic’ way to cook a hamburger.”³⁹ Those who have closely studied the reciprocal influences between mores, religion, and politics know that Justice Scalia’s analogy left something to be desired (there is, in fact, a *halal* way – or a *kosher* way – to cook a hamburger!): this detail aside, Justice Scalia may be right; and he is resolute when he says that none of his decisions “would have come out differently if I were not Catholic”.

The fact that out of the eleven Catholic justices in American history, six (54.5%) sit *concurrently* and that this is happening in a historic era when the two candidates for the Vice Presidency are Catholic, half of the Cabinet is made up of Catholics, the most recent Democratic and Republican conventions were opened by two Catholics (Marco Rubio and Julian Castro) and closed by the prayer of Timothy Dolan, cardinal Archbishop of New York and president of the USCCB, (the first high prelate ever invited to either convention): may well be just a series of coincidences. But, in this instance, it is very difficult to forget the words of Agatha Christie, for whom “one coincidence is just a coincidence; two coincidences are a clue; three coincidences are a proof”.

³⁶ “Pope May Find US on His Wavelength”, *art. cit.* See also Daniel Burke, “A Catholic Wind in the White House”, *Washington Post*, April 13, 2008.

³⁷ *Ibidem*.

³⁸ David Gibson, “A Catholic Court? Let the Arguments Begin”, *Politics Daily*, October 4, 2009.

³⁹ Address at Villanova Law School’s second annual Scarpa Conference on Catholic Legal Studies, October 16, 2007.

But, proof of what? Is it that, in “a time of uncertainty in the face of something new,” the American ruling class is trying to rely on the oldest, broadest, and the most centralized of human institutions, one that simultaneously represents a solid moral and psychological benchmark, a wide social foundation, and a relationship network that has intimate connections to the ruling classes of most of the world’s states.

If the United States owes something to the Church, (and will probably owe always more in the future), the opposite is also true. Faced with the widespread implementation of “separation of church and state” policies, growing flock disaffection, and the arrival of believers from other religions to traditionally Catholic lands, the Vatican has come to accept what might be called the entrepreneurial mindset of the “American model”: the competition with different denominations, in order to ensure favors – and offerings – from believers. This ‘free market of faith’ is often considered to be one of the main factors behind the exceptional religiosity of Americans (in contrast to the religious monopolies of Catholics in Southern Europe, Protestants in the North, and Orthodox in the East, which is said to have greatly contributed to the decline of religion in the Old Continent). And, in addition to having already proven its worth, the “American model” offers the Catholic Church another perspective advantage moving forward: in any system based on free and open competition, in theory, it is the best-equipped competitor that has the greatest odds of success.⁴⁰

The Church owes a lot to American Catholics and, also, to the United States as a country. The 18 American Cardinals (of which 10 are potential voters in the next conclave) are proof of this.⁴¹ These Cardinals represent not only the second largest national contingent (after the Italians), but also the largest American contingent ever within the College of Cardinals, which is a sign of a still closer relationship. Furthermore, in the Vatican diplomatic network, the American prelates are, there also, the second largest national group after the Italians. There are at least two good reasons for this intimacy: one is immediately material and the other, is political. The first, American Catholics are the biggest donors to the universal Church; the second – whatever happens in 2019 – the United States will presumably retain its position as the backbone of international politics, and, therefore, the greater one’s strength in the United States, the greater one’s importance in the world.

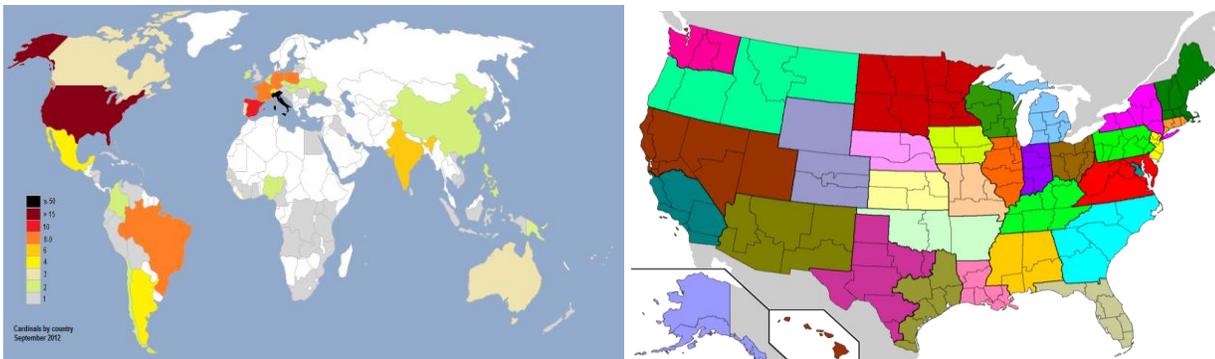


Fig. 3: Cardinals by country (September 2012). Fig. 4: Catholic provinces and dioceses in the United States.

However, it is very important to never lose sight of the fact that the Church *does not* rely on the United States, or on any other political or economic power, to strengthen and advance its status on the global stage. The Church does not refuse any – material or political – help so long as its total and unconditional freedom of action is guaranteed. As we are talking about humanity’s oldest enduring

⁴⁰ On the “American model”, let me refer to 13th chapter of my book (pp. 105-112) *Il secolo cattolico. La strategia geopolitica della Chiesa* (Laterza, Roma, 2010).

⁴¹ Update September 21, 2012.

institution, we can well imagine that its leaders know, and practice, the virtues of pragmatism and compromise to the highest degree of refinement. But, it is the Church's *autonomy* that is the key factor behind its successes and credibility. In fact, the more the Catholic Church criticizes hyper-consumerism, the American way of life, the death penalty, anti-immigration legislation, abortion, "moral relativism," and the Iraq War, the more popular and coveted it is in the United States. The Catholic Church has its own politico-spiritual agenda, which does not match the agenda of any other power: its purpose is "the normative guidance of human social life," as Carl Schmitt wrote in 1923.⁴² Transposed to the international level, the goal becomes – in the words of Benedict XVI – the realization of "*a true world political authority*, as my predecessor Blessed John XXIII indicated some years ago"⁴³: i.e., an authority that is "a postulate of the moral order and derives from God."⁴⁴

It goes without saying that the growing "catholicization of the United States" does not mean that America will be less determined in the pursuit of its interests on the international stage. On the contrary, this means that the U.S. could hope, in the near-term, for greater support from the Church in the promotion of its interests. Or, at the very least, in terms of managing its relations with the other world powers, as well as with non-governmental or supranational institutions and agencies, whose role is growing; or else, with the other great religious currents – particularly, Islam.

The global shift of power is currently in its infancy, and world politics could evolve in many different directions. Yet, signs point to an increasing difficulty on the part of the United States to keep and manage its own traditional balance of power; the "Arab spring" and the Senkaku-Diaoyu East China Sea crisis are evidence of this. Relations with allies, friends, "strategic competitors," enemies, and others are becoming more and more blurred, and roles can change quite rapidly. In such a perplexing environment, even the hypothesis of emerging geopolitical fault lines along civilization bases, imagined by Samuel Huntington at the end of the 20th century, while not grounded in reality, at least has the advantage of providing an otherwise unattainable clarity.

The clearest geopolitical consequence resulting from the shifting power dynamics has been the deep social and political changes this has triggered in all the so-called "developed" countries; and that these changes have manifested themselves in a very empirically tangible form: a widespread worsening in the living conditions of the concerned populations. As Ernest Gellner reminds us, "industrial society is the only society ever to live by and rely on sustained and perpetual growth, on year expected and continuous improvement. [...] Its greatest weakness is its inability to weather the loss of legitimacy which befalls it if the cornucopia becomes temporarily jammed and the flow falters."⁴⁵

The risk of social – and therefore political, and therefore, in succession, geopolitical – turmoil is serious in every old industrialized country. Of even greater seriousness for the United States, whose brief history is the only one that specifically matches Gellner's theoretical abstraction on "sustained and perpetual growth" and the "expected and continuous improvement" (with the exception of the Great Depression, after which Americans enjoyed the most prosperous years in their nation's history, drawing the – mistaken – belief that any crisis, even the deepest, can't be but momentary).

⁴² Carl Schmitt, *Roman Catholicism and Political Form*, Greenwood Press, Westport CT, 1996 [1923], p. 12. More recently, Eric Hanson coined the phrase "primary ethical broker", that is "an institution which is traditionally recognized by the majority of a national society to have the responsibility to articulate the primary ethical consensus of that society." (E. Hanson, *The Catholic Church in World Politics*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1987, pp. 257, 258).

⁴³ *Caritas in veritate*, cit., § 67.

⁴⁴ John XXIII, encyclical letter *Pacem in Terris*, April 11, 1963, § 51.

⁴⁵ Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1983, p. 22.

At the beginning of his book, Schmitt said that, in every manifestation of political anti-Catholicism – from Gladstone to Bismarck to Dostoyevsky – there is “always the lingering fear of the incomprehensible political power of Roman Catholicism.”⁴⁶ Today, for leaders of many countries, it is the admiration – and need – of the political power of Roman Catholicism that is “lingering.”

(Translated into English by Cullen Stewart)

⁴⁶ *Roman Catholicism and Political Form*, cit., p. 3.