

# The Faithful

A HISTORY OF CATHOLICS  
IN AMERICA

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## The Church of Vatican II

Patricia Caron Crowley was always called Patty, perhaps so as not to confuse her with her husband, whose name was Pat. The Crowleys, who married in 1937, raised five children of their own and, over the years, cared for nearly fifty foster children in their home outside Chicago. They founded the Christian Family Movement in 1949, and a little more than a decade later they, together with Catholics everywhere, were caught up in the sudden and profound changes of the Second Vatican Council. Pope John XXIII had surprised nearly everyone by calling bishops from around the world to an “ecumenical” council in Rome. This would be the first time in nearly a century that such a gathering had been held, and only the second council since the 1500s. Its work, the pope had said, would be *aggiornamento*, a conveniently vague Italian word usually translated as “updating.” The council initiated dramatic changes in Catholic religious practice, most of which were on display at Mass every Sunday morning. It also changed the formulation of some important Catholic doctrines, including the governing metaphor for the church itself. Once defined as the “Mystical Body of Christ,” an image many Catholics found difficult to visualize, the church was now better under-

stood as the “People of God.” The shift to this fundamentally democratic imagery was full of significance. Catholics like the Crowleys were told insistently that *they* were the church—not (or not only) the pope, the bishops, the priests, and the sisters, but they themselves. More to the point, the Crowleys and other American Catholics actually believed it.<sup>1</sup>

The implications of this new vision became intensely personal for Patty and Pat in 1964, when they were appointed to a special commission chosen by Pope John’s successor, Paul VI, to study the controversial subject of birth control and advise the pope on whether the church’s position should be changed. Official teaching maintained a distinction between so-called natural means of family planning (such as periodic abstinence), which were permissible for Catholics, and “artificial” means (chemical and physical methods of contraception), which were not. Pressure had been building to modify that view and to join other Christian churches in allowing married couples to decide whether and how to limit the size of their families. The newly available birth control pill only heightened the demand for change. The pope’s study group had initially consisted only of priests and theologians, but the Crowleys were made members so as to include the perspective of married couples. The commission met several times over the next two years, and a majority quickly came to favor a revision of the church’s stance.

During the deliberations, one incident encapsulated all the changes that had come to the church with the Second Vatican Council. Father Marcelino Zalba, a formidable Spanish Jesuit, was insisting one day that the church’s policy simply could not be changed. To do so would call into question the validity of the earlier teaching and thereby undermine all church authority. If the condemnation of artificial contraception had been wrong, he asked, “what, then, with the millions we have sent to hell” for disobeying it? Buoyed by confidence in the new understanding of

the church and her role in it, Patty Crowley blurted out: “Father Zalba, do you really believe God has carried out all your orders?”<sup>2</sup> It was apparent in that one moment how much had changed. Fifty years earlier—perhaps even five years earlier—a lay woman would not have dared to speak to a priest in that way. That Patty Crowley felt capable of doing so was a measure of what it was like to be an American Catholic in the church of Vatican II.

The Second Vatican Council had convened in October 1962, and by the time it adjourned in December 1965, the church in the United States, as elsewhere in the world, was a very different institution. At the start, officials of the Roman curia, the bureaucratic agencies of the modern papacy, hoped to limit its scope, but their resistance was overcome, and church leaders headed out in unexpected directions. In four separate sessions, each lasting for two months in the fall of the successive years, the council drafted, debated, and approved a flow of documents. There were statements on the church’s responsibility to address contemporary social and economic problems, on the role of the laity, on religious liberty, on relations with non-Catholics and non-Christians, and on a host of other topics. These documents of “Vatican II,” as the gathering was commonly called, were translated from their original Latin in the hope, the first American edition said, of prompting widespread discussion. Perhaps just as surprising, for the first time in nearly two thousand years, a church council had ended without condemning anything as heretical; that alone seemed to indicate that something new was happening.

For American Catholics, these changes signaled the opening of a distinct new age. Many lay people came to describe themselves as “Vatican II Catholics,” a designation that marked their movement beyond the religious world of their parents and grandparents. Some drew an analogy to growing up. The church of Catholic Action had been their adolescence, but they were adults now. One of the council’s documents had addressed what it called “the

church in the modern world.” That was a church in which American Catholics were ready to live.

When Giovanni Roncalli was elected pope in October 1958 following the death of Pius XII, who had reigned for twenty eventful years, little was expected of him. He was already seventy-seven years old, and most people thought that he would be just another of the many “caretaker” popes the centuries had seen, a man who would fill the office for a time but would leave little mark on it. After a career in the Vatican diplomatic corps, Roncalli had been made the patriarch of Venice as a prelude to retirement, and he was a compromise choice as pope. He had the uncomplicated faith of his peasant parents, and he was easy-going and engaging. Asked on one occasion how many people worked at the Vatican, he is said to have replied, “About half of them.” He was the twenty-third pope to take the name John, and he quickly showed that he would not sit quietly on the chair of Saint Peter. Less than three months after his election, he abruptly issued his order for the historic gathering of the world’s three thousand bishops. “This holy old boy doesn’t realize what a hornet’s nest he’s stirring up,” one cynical Vatican insider remarked. John’s reign would be brief. He died five years later in the summer of 1963, after only a single session of his council, but he set in motion some monumental changes.<sup>3</sup>

The council opened amid the splendor of Saint Peter’s Basilica on October 11, 1962, and one of its first topics was a remaking of the rituals of the church, particularly the Mass. “Restoration” of the liturgy was essential, the bishops declared, striking a theme that would recur in all their deliberations. Generations of customs had accumulated in worship, and these now obscured as much as they enlightened. The bishops understood the work of reform as a restoration of earlier, presumably purer ways, rather

than the invention of new ones. Their goal, in particular, was “full, conscious, and active” participation by lay people in church ceremonies, such as had been practiced in ancient times. The Mass as a spectacle that the laity merely watched was unsatisfactory; a reformed Mass, “distinguished by a noble simplicity . . . unencumbered by useless repetitions” of prayers, and well “within the powers of comprehension” of those in attendance, was to take its place. Latin would remain the universal language of the church, but the translation of some or all of the Mass would undoubtedly be “of great advantage to the people.” Other sacraments, too, were to be reformed and translated, so that those participating in them could have a clearer sense of the meaning of these ritual actions.<sup>4</sup>

Since the days of John Carroll and his unrealized hopes for a vernacular translation of the Mass, American Catholics had rarely faced these questions. Sunday worship had always been conducted in Latin and, as far as they knew, always would be. By the early twentieth century, however, a few American priests had been encouraging parishioners to take a more active role. Centered primarily in the Midwest, this liturgical movement promoted what members called a “dialogue Mass,” in which the entire congregation said aloud the Latin responses to the priest’s prayers. Ordinary Catholics had not been clamoring for such participation, and some lay people were hesitant. “I felt as though we were interfering with the altar boys,” said one man in Chicago, attending a dialogue Mass for the first time. “I felt I shouldn’t be doing this.” The clerical backers of the movement pressed on, however, and they experimented with other modifications as well. A lay commentator might join the priest in the sanctuary, for example, to explain to the congregation what was going on at various points in the service. Members of the liturgical movement also recommended that the people in the pews sing along with the choir, and new hymns, easier to sing than

complex Gregorian chants, were introduced. Although it was never very widespread and always remained an elite, “top-down” effort by a small core of committed priests, the liturgical movement nonetheless laid the groundwork for the broader changes mandated by the Vatican Council.<sup>5</sup>

What was widely known as “the new Mass” came to American Catholic parishes in several phases between 1964 and 1969. The most significant step was probably the first one, taken on November 29, 1964, the Sunday after Thanksgiving. Parishioners sitting in their places that morning knew something was different from the moment the Mass began. The week before, the priest and altar boys had entered in silence; now everyone was expected to sing at least two verses of a processional hymn. The scriptural passages for the day were read aloud in the vernacular, either by the priest or by a lay lector. The priest, standing behind a new altar set up in the middle of the sanctuary, still said some prayers in Latin, but the people were encouraged to recite others along with him, again in their own language. A few familiar parts of the service were eliminated altogether: the reading of a second gospel passage at the end of Mass, for example, was done away with. “The Mass is over,” one priest explained abruptly, “and the Gospel has already been proclaimed.” The prayers for the conversion of Russia also disappeared: “redundant and not very effective,” the same priest called them. The distribution of Communion was now different. In the past, the priest had repeated a prayer in Latin as he worked his way along the line of parishioners kneeling at the altar. He now paused in front of each parishioner, in many places standing rather than kneeling, held up the Communion host so they could look at it, and said, “Corpus Christi” (“the Body of Christ”), to which the communicant responded, “Amen.” In a few months this, too, would be said in English, and the altar rail itself would be gone.<sup>6</sup>

Other changes followed rapidly over the next several years—so



quickly, in fact, that many lay people wondered whether it was worth the effort of trying to keep up. "I would not invest very heavily in a missal at the present time," one priest advised a worried parishioner. In some parts of the service, the priest could choose among several possible prayers rather than saying the same one every week. A passage from the Old Testament was added to the usual New Testament epistle and gospel readings in 1969, "since the Church sees all the aspirations of the ancient Hebrews fulfilled in Christ." Priests were required always to give a short homily—not a traditional sermon (which might address any topic), but rather a reflection on the specific scriptural passages that the people had just heard. Moreover, participation of the laity also required parishioners to move about. An offertory procession was instituted, in which members of the congregation carried the bread and wine from the middle of the church up to the altar before the consecration of these "gifts" as the Eucharist. A "Kiss of Peace" was also introduced: just before Communion, parishioners were asked to turn to one another and exchange "a sign of peace and love, according to local custom." In most American parishes, this amounted to an awkward and sometimes perfunctory handshake. Taken together, all these modifications meant that lay people had more to do at Mass than formerly. "There is no time for idle dreaming," one priest concluded.<sup>7</sup>

When Catholics might go to Mass was also changing. Beyond the traditional Sunday-morning hours, some churches began to experiment with Masses later that afternoon or evening. A more dramatic change came when the church authorized Sunday Mass on Saturday. These "anticipation" or "vigil" masses had originally been approved for use in missionary countries, where a priest could not reliably predict when he might arrive in a given locality to say Mass. Amid the general enthusiasm for reform, the practice spread to the United States as well. The Mass for Sunday might be said as early as the late afternoon (usually defined as 4 P.M. or

after) of the preceding Saturday, and Catholics attending at that time fulfilled their weekly obligation. Drawing the parallel to the Jewish Sabbath, theologians explained that the “liturgical day” always began with sundown the day before. Few lay people had ever heard of the notion of a “liturgical day,” but they got used to the new schedule. Soon, it was a rare American Catholic parish that did not have at least one Saturday anticipation Mass. The fifty-six churches in Houston, for example, offered Mass about three hundred times every Sunday in 1969, a year before vigils were approved. A decade later, every parish (increased now to sixty-eight in number) had at least one Mass on Saturday as well—a handful had two—bringing the total number of Masses in the city every weekend closer to four hundred. In Pittsburgh, by 1990 fully one-quarter of all Sunday Masses were offered on Saturday.<sup>8</sup>

Not everyone thought this was a good idea. Extending the time when Catholics could go to Mass put too much emphasis on the negative consequences of their not going, one pastor thought, and this encouraged what he called a “get-it-over-with” mentality. Would it not be better for parishioners to attend the weekly liturgy because they wanted to, rather than because they hoped to get their spiritual ticket punched at a more convenient time? He also worried about a slippery slope of “permissiveness,” an attitude that said, in effect, “if you can’t get people to fulfill an obligation, change the obligation. Make it easier.” Some clergymen also worried that offering Mass a day early would lead to a general de-sacralizing of Sunday, reducing the traditional day of rest to just another day. Larger social forces were obviously at work here, but the impact on Catholics was particularly noticeable. “I have some doubts” about Saturday Mass, one bishop said in March 1969, “since it means a real change in the practice of worship among our people.” He gave in only two months later and approved the idea: parishes in towns bordering another state

where anticipating Sunday was permitted had been losing attendance. Within a short time, most priests were confirming the popularity of these services, especially among older parishioners.<sup>9</sup>

Whether on Saturday afternoon or Sunday morning, priests now said the Mass in a loud, clear voice, facing the congregation, and this practice raised questions that had never come up before. Seminary training had traditionally emphasized attention to the “rubrics” of the service, the gestures and movements of the priest, which had been prescribed in minute detail. When the priest held his hands in a prayerful position, one rubric had specified, “the fingers of each hand are extended against the fingers of the other hand. It is incorrect to interlock the fingers or to cup them together.” Suddenly, some gestures seemed curious. In drinking the Eucharistic wine, for example, the priest had held a small plate (called a paten) up to his throat. This was “not a very elegant gesture,” a priest from New Jersey pointed out—fine, perhaps, so long as his back was turned, but awkward now because the congregation could see him doing it. “Normally when drinking,” he went on, “we do not pick up a plate and hold it under our chin. To do so would be the height of bad manners.” There were other problems as well. The altar had always had a cross on it; no matter how small this cross was, it now blocked the people’s line of sight and thus “defeated the purpose” of saying Mass facing them. A seminary professor in Denver wondered what to tell his soon-to-be-ordained students about this and other things. What about the size and shape of altar cloths? Was it really all right to use one “which does not extend over the sides and does not reach the floor?” These seemed like “small points,” he acknowledged, but since they had once been so precisely regulated it was not immediately apparent how to make adjustments. No wonder some Catholics found the whole thing bewildering. “Will someone please explain the ‘why’ behind the liturgical

changes,” an exasperated parishioner asked a priest in Davenport, Iowa. “Why? Why? Why?”<sup>10</sup>

Frustration might have been expected, given that preparation for these changes had been uneven. Some places embraced them enthusiastically. Churches in Superior, Wisconsin, had begun using the new liturgy as early as June 1964, several months ahead of the official starting date. Other dioceses had held training programs for priests and laity alike. Almost seven hundred lay men from parishes surrounding New Ulm, in southwestern Minnesota, went through six training sessions to prepare them to be readers at Mass. In other places, however, the liturgical gears had shifted without much warning. A pastor in New Jersey was curt in letting his people know that a new experience of Mass was on the way. “As some of you are probably aware,” he announced from the pulpit, “there will begin next Sunday the implementation of a series of changes in the Mass . . . We realize that this will be difficult for many of you, but realize that this is the will of the Holy Father, the Vatican Council, and his Excellency [that is, the local bishop], and we know we can count on your fine cooperation just as we have so many times in the past.” That was that.

Some resistance to change came from the clergy themselves. “The introduction of the new rite is not a matter of choice,” the archbishop of Boston sternly reminded his priests; “it is ordered by the Holy See and must be carefully implemented in all the churches and chapels of the archdiocese.” The archbishop of St. Paul, Minnesota, sent a gentler letter to the priests in his jurisdiction, but he made it clear that he would not tolerate “endless procrastination and surely not . . . outright obstruction.”<sup>11</sup>

In general, Catholics favored the new Mass. “The Latin is prettier,” one woman conceded, but “I’d like to see more English used.” An eighth-grader agreed: “I wish the whole Mass could be in English.” Soon enough, it would be. The church discontinued all Latin by 1969, and for some Catholics that change could not

come too quickly. The transition was dragging, a man told an interviewer outside his parish church. "Why don't they do it and get it over with, instead of a little at a time?" he wanted to know. "I think we're intelligent enough to do it. Let's face the changes and make them." A parishioner in Massachusetts thought the new liturgy was "just great, but I do hope we can get together on the kneeling, sitting, Latin and English responses. It seems that all churches do it a little different from one another." He was right, but maybe that was not a bad thing. A guide for parish clergy spoke approvingly of "opening the way for each parish to take on its own character in liturgical expression": what had once been uniform practice could now vary from place to place. Even little things, however, assumed large importance. One man wrote a long letter to his diocesan newspaper, explaining why he found being told to say "ay-men" rather than "ah-men" objectionable. Some were shocked at the conclusion of the service to hear the priest say, in English now, "Go, the Mass is ended," to which they were expected to reply, "Thanks be to God," a statement that might be misinterpreted to imply that they had not been entirely happy about being there in the first place. A reluctant pastor in Minnesota alluded to the common story that John XXIII had described the Vatican Council's work as "opening up the windows" of the church, but, he said, "when a window is open, there is a danger of extremely valuable things being blown away."<sup>12</sup>

Only a few systematic studies of the new Mass were undertaken, and these showed broad support among American lay people. In 1966 *U.S. Catholic*, a magazine designed for a middle-class audience, found some regional variation but widespread approval. A parish in Durand, Wisconsin, reported having so many men volunteer as readers that each was needed only once every five weeks. The parishioners at a church in Chicago favored congregational hymn-singing by 54 to 14 percent, and seven out of eight of them preferred to have the priest face them during Mass.

Churchgoers in Sierra Madre, California, actually took a vote and confirmed their approval of priests who were “distinct and reasonably slow” in leading the service. Standing for Communion was taking hold a little more slowly, with just 21 percent of the nation’s parishes adopting the practice, but a priest in Nebraska made a virtue of necessity in this. His parishioners were reluctant to receive Communion standing, but after a broken leg reduced his mobility, they found that they liked the new format. To be sure, problems remained. For one thing, the English translations in use left much to be desired. Many people felt that these had been “done in a hurry,” while others criticized them for being either too stilted or too informal. Using eager high school students as lectors was problematic, notably on those occasions when the scriptural passage of the day spoke of lust and other graphic sins. Even so, a priest in Illinois concluded, “whatever the lay people are permitted to do, we not only allow them, but encourage, and they respond wonderfully.”<sup>13</sup>

In subtle but important ways, the new structure of weekly worship changed the dynamic in American Catholic parishes, especially that between lay people and their priests. “An exclusive identification of the Church with the clergy is misleading,” a priest in Chicago wrote in 1965, and the new Mass conveyed the “true image of the Church, priest and people working together.” The man who had insisted that the laity was “intelligent enough” to accept liturgical change was voicing a widely held sentiment, one that was often described as a passage from childhood to adulthood. Mary Perkins Ryan, a veteran of numerous Catholic Action causes, gave succinct expression to this view. In the past, she said, too many Catholics went to church either out of obligation or simply to “feel good.” These were essentially “childish motives, not those of mature persons.” Now, by contrast, adult Catholics could appreciate the “real reasons for going to Mass.” A lay man from New Hampshire expressed a similar sentiment

when he wrote to a national magazine in 1968 to say that he and “countless” other “thinking Catholics” approved of the changes already under way and hoped for more.<sup>14</sup>

Many priests reinforced this view that “mature” and “thinking” Catholics were being acknowledged by the church. After “a kind of collective adolescence,” one Jesuit said, lay people had to become comfortable with their new “maturity.” Like adolescence in general, this might be “a challenging, if not a frightening, experience,” but adulthood was preferable to an imagined “golden childhood or the cozy womb.” More generally, the mere fact that the Mass, celebrated in the same way for centuries, was now different suggested that other changes were possible or even likely. If traditional worship, formerly “viewed as heaven-sent and absolute,” was subject to such drastic remaking in so short a time, a sociologist wrote, what other aspects of belief and practice might be changed as well? That was a prospect to be faced by mature adults, not docile children.<sup>15</sup>

The effect of the changes on American Catholic women was particularly significant, and this impact was apparent from the earliest stages of Vatican II reforms. If lay men could serve as scripture readers at their parish Masses, why could women not assume the same roles? A skeptical pastor in Minnesota reported that the high school girls of his parish wanted to “get into the act.” He prohibited them from doing so, citing passages from the New Testament admonishing women not to speak in church. This biblical literalism was uncommon among Catholics, but the girls had to be satisfied with playing the organ and singing. Other questions arose, too. If young lads could act as altar boys, why exactly were their sisters banned from service? “Are we not capable?” one young woman demanded to know. Some priests, armed with common gender stereotypes, dismissed the possibility out of hand. The idea of “female altar-servers wearing surplices” was simply “comical,” one clergyman thought, without feeling the

need to explain what was so funny. Others, however, were open to the possibility. “Why not start a girls’ participators campaign?” a syndicated columnist suggested. Such a campaign would be a long one, with official approval of female altar servers not coming until 1994; many American Catholic parishes had already begun the practice much earlier on their own.<sup>16</sup>

The council coincided with the emergence of new forms of feminism in America—Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963, while Vatican II was in session—to permit an unprecedented discussion of women’s roles in church. “We believe the position of women in the church should reflect the developments in the condition of women in the modern world,” a national gathering of parish liturgy coordinators (male and female, clergy and laity) at Notre Dame University resolved in the summer of 1967. In particular, they thought, lay women, “in virtue of their baptism,” should be able to serve as readers and commentators at Mass. Formal sanction for such service was slow in coming. At first, Vatican officials conceded only that “well-known women of adequate years and moral way of life”—preferably nuns—could read when “a suitable male lector” was not available, so long as they did so from outside the church sanctuary. The earlier notion that any lay person entering that sacred space was “temporarily” regarded as a priest was thought to exclude women by definition. By the time full approval was finally given in 1975 for sisters and lay women alike to serve as lectors, most American parishes had been using them for years, thereby rendering the point moot.<sup>17</sup> Across the board, however, the scope and pace of changes proved difficult to confine. Some parishioners wanted to cry out, “Why?” Others asked, “Why not?”

In response to the requirements of the new Mass, alterations also had to be made in the physical space of parish churches. The priest would need a new altar to stand behind as he looked out at the congregation. The original altar remained against the back



wall, but this new one, generally smaller, was moved in and used in its place. Church supply houses began to offer these new “tables”—the term long used by many Protestant denominations but now adopted by American Catholics as well—but, one liturgical specialist noted later, “in the rush of things, the atmosphere for worship and the talent of the artist was [sic] not always carefully developed.” Only with time were “minimal makeshift modifications” replaced with more suitable altars. Newly constructed churches could take the changed Mass into account from the beginning, and several in and around the Twin Cities of Minnesota show a process that was under way nationwide. In 1963, Saint Joseph’s parish in the town of Red Wing built an oval-shaped church, with seats arrayed in a semi-circle around the altar. Saint Leo’s Church in St. Paul itself was an octagon, and special attention was paid to its acoustics, since it was newly important for the congregation to hear what was being said. In Cannon Falls, Saint Pius Church had a more conventional exterior shape, but it had pews on three sides of the altar. The new Saint George’s in Long Lake also had pews on three sides, and it even had a “mother’s room” behind the altar, to which parents with crying children could retreat. Some parishioners found these designs frankly “ugly,” and in many cases the criticism was undoubtedly justified. Others defended the new styles. After so many years of staring at baroque altarpieces whose design could be “distracting,” one commentator concluded, “the shock of a plain table with its rigid lines may be a good antidote for us.”<sup>18</sup>

Beyond aesthetics, sacramental practice also changed significantly in the wake of Vatican II, and standing for Communion was only one of the shifts in the relationship between American Catholics and the Eucharist. The new climate at Mass reinforced the long effort by priests to increase the frequency with which their parishioners came to Communion. On a practical level, the required fast before reception of the sacrament, which had been

reduced to three hours in 1957, was shortened again in 1964 to just one hour. This meant that virtually everyone—save perhaps those rare souls who were swallowing their morning coffee on the way in the church door—could satisfy its demands. More important, church officials acknowledged that the earlier emphasis on keeping the fast had often transformed reception of the Eucharist from a happy event into one filled with anxiety. Recalling his own childhood, one priest wrote that “my earliest Communion were concerned more with the integrity of the fast than with the joy of union with my savior.” Easing this impediment helped send rates of Communion steadily upward. One national study showed that, in 1963, barely 29 percent of those at any given Mass were going to Communion; by 1976, the rate was already more than 50 percent, and it continued to climb thereafter.<sup>19</sup> Earlier in the century, the overwhelming majority of Catholic churchgoers had stayed in their seats during Communion; by the end of the century, a similarly decisive majority came forward and would have thought it strange not to.

In addition to increased frequency, the manner in which lay people received the sacrament was changing in several distinct but parallel ways. Traditionally, the priest had administered Communion by placing the wafer of bread directly onto the recipient’s tongue. “When the priest who is distributing Holy Communion reaches him,” a guide to Catholic behavior had explained in the 1920s, “the communicant should slowly open his mouth and stretch out his tongue, so that it projects a little over the lower lip, keeping his eyes half closed. As soon as he feels the sacred Host on his tongue, one ought to draw it in and close his mouth.” As with some other liturgical gestures, this one now seemed unnatural. “I find myself hardly able to open my mouth and have the Host shoved in,” a woman from Ohio said. Theologically, the Eucharist was understood as a ritual meal, a reenactment of the last supper Jesus had shared with his follow-

ers. It was odd to think of a meal in which the participants were fed by someone else, and lay people's objections to this method were of a piece with their insistence that they not be treated like children. "We are adults and as such we feed ourselves," the parishioners of a church in Windsor, Connecticut, resolved; "we are not fed."<sup>20</sup>

Accordingly, many parishes began the practice of "Communion in the hand." As each person came forward, the priest placed the Communion host in the recipient's outstretched palm, cupped by the other hand to receive it; communicants then picked it up and placed it in their own mouths. The practice, which grew up spontaneously in many places, proved controversial, since it had not been officially authorized. A Vatican commission was appointed to study the matter. This change was, they admitted, "not a true innovation," since it had been the practice of the church for centuries in earlier times. Pressure for Communion in the hand, however, was "the work of a small number of priests and laity, who seek to impose their point of view on others and to force the hand of authority." Giving in to this kind of overt challenge might lead to worse: "To approve it would encourage these persons who are never satisfied with the laws of the Church." Deliberation continued, and in 1977 the hierarchy formally approved this option for receiving Communion; by then, it was already common practice in American parishes. The priests at the Connecticut church estimated that 97 percent of their parishioners took the sacrament in this way.<sup>21</sup>

The period of liturgical reform also brought demands that during Communion lay people receive not only the Eucharistic bread but also the sacramental wine. This practice had been strictly forbidden by the Council of Trent in the sixteenth century, but now a case was made for "restoring" it. The words of the Mass quoted Jesus as saying, "Take and eat," but they also repeated his injunction to "take and drink"; barring the laity from

the Communion cup seemed a direct disobedience of that command. The clergy generally supported a change, and it spread widely in American parishes. Official decrees were characteristically cautious, suggesting that “communion under both species” be limited to special occasions: the bride and groom at their wedding, for instance. But as one observer noted, the rules were vague enough “to have allowed liberal interpretation.” The archbishop of Cincinnati broadly encouraged churches in his jurisdiction to take up the practice, and by March 1968, when a national magazine ran a cover photo of Becky Ruby, a student at Indiana University, drinking from a chalice, few readers thought it unusual.<sup>22</sup>

One more change was in the offing. In 1973, parishes began appointing what were called “extraordinary ministers of the Eucharist.” In places where the number of priests was small or the demand for the sacrament was high, lay people were authorized to help with the distribution of Communion during Mass. They might also bring the Eucharist to fellow parishioners in the hospital. The church devised a simple ceremony commissioning parishioners for this task—parishes in Indianapolis did so every year on Holy Thursday, right before Easter—and lay people volunteered in impressive numbers. Some priests voiced concern about women wearing the clergy’s liturgical garments, and at least one priest, fearful of worldly distractions, wondered whether particularly attractive women should be enlisted. So many women volunteered, however, that it seemed foolish to turn them away. Once the exclusive province of the clergy, distribution of the Eucharist was now a task that the laity could share. “All those who are baptized are in some sense priests,” a theologian said, so there was no reason that lay people could not undertake this priestly duty.<sup>23</sup>

Communion had always been linked to confession, and Vatican II brought even more dramatic changes to the sacrament of

penance. Here, however, the effect ran in the opposite direction. Whereas reception of Communion rose steadily, the rate at which American Catholics went to confession plummeted. The monthly standard urged by priests had become common: in 1965, 38 percent of American Catholics were going that often. Almost immediately thereafter, however, the practice fell off precipitously. By 1975, less than half as many American Catholics (only 17 percent) were seeking God's forgiveness monthly in the confessional. Those who responded that they "never" or "practically never" confessed rose in the same period from 18 percent to 38 percent. Yet another decade after that, a survey of "core Catholics" (those most actively involved in parish activities) confirmed the collapse of confession: 26 percent of these Catholics said that they never went at all, 35 percent said that they went at most once a year, and only 6 percent said that they still confessed every month. The decline was evident in local churches everywhere. In 1962, Saint Thomas Aquinas parish in the Jamaica Plain section of Boston made priests available for confession for three and a half hours every Saturday afternoon and evening; in 1969 this was cut back to an hour and a half, and by 1990 it had been reduced again to just half an hour. Parishioners were simply not coming. One pastor told his congregation that he had been growing shrubs in the confessional boxes for months and that no one had yet noticed. He was joking, but he had his finger on the trend nonetheless.<sup>24</sup>

Most Catholics had never really liked going to confession, but in the aftermath of the Vatican Council they felt newly free to act on their dissatisfactions. The enumeration of relatively trivial offenses came to look like an empty ritual. "The priests I encountered seemed so much more concerned with how often I was late for Mass than with my relationships with my children, my husband, or my neighbors," a woman from New York said in 1978, explaining why she had stopped going to confession. Some

priests shared her unease about trifles. “The last time I went to confession,” a woman from Illinois reported, “I was made to feel I was wasting the priest’s time,” and still another woman from New Jersey noted that she would confess “sins that have bothered me,” only to have the priests “chuckle—like ‘you came to confession for this?’” The way the clergy spoke about the sacrament discouraged lay recourse to it. “If we have consciously chosen against the Lord in our life,” one guide, published in 1966, said, “we should promptly seek His mercy . . . If there is no question of turning away from God in this way, Confession is not necessary for us, regardless of how long it may be since our last Confession.” A year later, a mother in New Hampshire was amazed to hear her pastor tell the children of his First Communion class that they should stay away from confession unless they had committed a mortal sin, of which few of them were capable.<sup>25</sup> That kind of talk was all the added encouragement many lay people needed to abandon their earlier confessional habits.

Faced with this sharp decline, church officials sought ways to revive confession. They began referring to the sacrament as “reconciliation,” which had a softer (though probably more theologically accurate) sound than “penance,” the traditional name. In the early 1970s, they also instituted a so-called new rite for expressing sorrow for sins. Private confession remained possible, but the church also authorized two new options. One was face-to-face confession, in which priest and penitent sat together and talked, often without the usual ritual formulas. This could seem more like psychological counseling than confession of sins, and as such it was intended to be “more personal, more human.” Parish clergy consistently said that they preferred this method, but lay people were cooler to the idea. A survey conducted in 1977 showed that only 20 percent of those Catholics who were still going to confession opted to receive the sacrament face-to-face.

The other option was a wider use of what was called “general

absolution.” Parishioners could attend a liturgical service that included scripture readings, time for personal reflection, and (only if they wanted) the chance to confess to a priest; after this, the priest said a general prayer of forgiveness. Churches experimented with this approach, and at least one did so on a large scale. On a Sunday in December 1976, twelve thousand Catholics filled an arena in Memphis, Tennessee, for such a service, and a week later an equal number turned out seventy-five miles away in the city of Jackson. Although meaningful to the participants, these services proved controversial. If sinners could be forgiven en masse, why would they ever return to the confessional box? Accordingly, the Vatican chastised the bishop of Memphis for the program and severely restricted the use of this rite in the future. Doing so did not send Catholics back to the confessional: parish priests across the country reported that they were hearing at most about twenty confessions per week.<sup>26</sup> For all practical purposes, the regular confession of sins had ceased to be a part of American Catholic life.

While confession was disappearing, another sacrament was being revived and almost totally reimagined. This was the anointing of the sick and dying, a practice known as Extreme Unction—“unction” in that it involved anointing with blessed oils; “extreme” in that it was administered only at or near the point of death. “To receive the sacrament of Extreme Unction,” a child’s catechism had explained in the 1940s, “you must be in danger of death.” This “last act of the drama of human life,” another text said, was the one “on which the success or failure of the whole depends,” since Satan might use the attendant distress to tempt the dying into despair. So fully had American Catholics internalized the notion that this sacrament was only for the very end of life that they usually resisted calling a priest until it was unavoidable; to do so earlier, they feared, would alarm the patient by suggesting that the family had given up hope of recovery. Priests argued with little success against this reluctance, urging instead the bene-

fits of recourse to the sacrament in circumstances that were not extreme. "If we are going to die," a catechism from 1964 said more hopefully, it "helps us to die a holy death. But if it is better for us to get well, then [Jesus] makes us better."<sup>27</sup>

The church introduced a new rite of anointing in 1972 and revised it again in 1983. Those who experienced the sacrament this way often found it a powerful ritual. "When done by some priests it looks like magic," said a nurse at a hospital in Texas, who had been present at many anointings, "but when done properly it is very meaningful," particularly if the entire family was involved. Another nurse concurred: "Most patients look on anointing as very helpful to them in accepting the will of God," whatever that might be. Parishes also began to use this rite in communal services as well as individual cases. In some places, such services became a regular part of the parish calendar, with anyone suffering from infirmity, physical or spiritual, encouraged to attend. "A special annual Mass for the sick of the parish who can be brought to Church has been greatly appreciated," one priest observed. As awareness of the AIDS epidemic spread in the 1980s, many parishes instituted special anointing services for those afflicted with the disease.<sup>28</sup>

Taken together, the changes in American Catholic religious practice that came from the Second Vatican Council were remarkable for their scope and their speed. To some degree, the long years of Catholic Action had prepared believers for the innovations, but even so, the experience of going to church was plainly different in 1970 from what it had been in 1960. Many people had an understandably hard time breaking old habits. "The quiet Mass was nice," one parishioner in Chicago said. "I could concentrate on the things that happened to me during the week . . . and I could get the Rosary in." A friend had the same experience, though apparently without much spiritual benefit. "I'd say the rosary and look at somebody's hat and notice who



had a new dress and finally I would look at my watch and then I was out. I was through for another week.” That kind of inattention was now harder to sustain, and the clergy actively discouraged private prayer at Mass in favor of communal participation. Lay people were “not free to pray each in his own little way,” a priest in Minnesota said sharply; rather, collective liturgical prayer was designed to make them realize that “they belong to a people whom God has taught how to pray.”<sup>29</sup> The tension between the individual and communal dimensions of prayer remained, however, and just as the council promoted public participation in the church’s rites, it also encouraged individual, personalized approaches to spiritual matters. These found a ready audience among American Catholics in the late twentieth century.

The encouragement that lay people make worship and prayer their own always implied the possibility, of course, that some would instead choose to become inactive Catholics. In the past, the laity and clergy alike had strongly stigmatized “falling away.” It was the product, a priest wrote in the 1920s, of “an ungenerous and stingy spirit towards God” or, another said, of “bad homes” and “just plain laziness.” One lay man who fell away for a time even blamed himself: “My leaving the Church lay in my own weaknesses,” he said on returning in the 1950s. Catholics were advised to shun those who had abandoned the church. A woman in Ohio was told that it would be “disedifying or scandalous” to attend the wedding of a Protestant friend to a fallen-away Catholic. She could send a gift, provided that it was for the Protestant bride alone and not for the formerly Catholic groom.<sup>30</sup> Such attitudes meant that instances of Catholics’ leaving the church, though never precisely measured, had generally been rare. In the 1960s, however, some lay people not only stopped going to confession;

they stopped going to church altogether. For the first time since the churchifying process had begun a century before, there were many “lapsed” Catholics. Some joined other churches, but most simply enlisted in the ranks of the unchurched.

Because the Catholic population continued to grow in absolute numbers—Catholics held steady at just below one-quarter of the total population, which reached and then surpassed 200 million in these decades—the rate of regular Mass attendance was a better measure of changing practice. A Gallup poll taken in 1958 found that 74 percent of American Catholics said they had gone to church in the previous week. This number was most likely a little high; some people who had not gone to Mass probably thought they should have and so gave pollsters the “right” answer anyway. By 1970, however, just five years after Vatican II had ended, a decline was already apparent. At that time, 60 percent of Catholics attended weekly Mass. This was a sharp decrease, though weekly attendance by Protestants had fallen further, to less than 40 percent. The slide continued, and by the mid-1980s weekly Mass attendance was down to 53 percent, before finally settling in between 30 and 40 percent, where it remained until the end of the century. Reasons for non-attendance were as varied as the individuals in question, but there were now distinct groups within the Catholic populace, based on the regularity of practice. By the early 1990s, one study found, 21 percent of those who had once been Catholics could be considered entirely “dormant,” while 23 percent attended Mass weekly and another 56 percent at least monthly.<sup>31</sup> Lay Catholics had obviously made choices. Some gave up religious practice completely; others decided that they could still be Catholics even if they did not attend church quite as regularly as their parents or grandparents had.

At the same time, a number of traditional devotions disappeared from American Catholic practice. Vespers and Benediction, for example, staples in churches on Sunday afternoons since

the early nineteenth century, were abandoned nearly everywhere. Some liturgists thought that these services distracted from the Mass itself, and practical factors also steadily eroded their appeal. In largely urban parishes, most parishioners could easily walk the two or three blocks from home to church for a second time on Sundays. In suburban settings, where the church was a car ride away, making the extra effort was a little more complicated. “For better or worse,” one lay man noted as early as 1965, “many popular, so-called pious, devotions have been downgraded in recent years. The rosary, visits to the Blessed Sacrament, devotional confessions,” and other practices were deemphasized. Statuary and banks of votive lights were relegated to the church storerooms, on the theory that these, too, diverted the attention of worshipers. These changes led some Catholics, who had enjoyed the older forms and found meaning in them, to discern a “piety void.” Even those who supported the liturgical changes acknowledged the problem. “It is easy enough,” one priest said, to laugh at those who mourned the loss of these longstanding practices, “or to pity them,” but he thought that many Catholics, “not just the super pious,” were legitimately uneasy about the changes.<sup>32</sup> Whether newer expressions of devotion would ever fully replace the older ones remained uncertain.

The church of Vatican II tried to fill this piety void by urging Catholics to find new ways to pray. Merely going through the motions—like the woman who said a quick rosary, checked her watch, “and then I was out”—was not good enough. Just as she was now expected to participate in Sunday Mass, so she was expected to exert additional effort toward making prayer her own. In earlier ages of the church, the religious obligations of believers had been spelled out in clear and concise terms. The so-called Commandments of the Church, paralleling those of Sinai, neatly summarized every Catholic’s obligations. The widely used Baltimore Catechism itemized these six laws for generations of school

children: “to assist at Mass on all Sundays and holydays of obligation; to fast and to abstain on the days appointed; to confess our sins at least once a year; to receive Holy Communion during the Easter time; to contribute to the support of the Church; to observe the laws of the Church concerning marriage.”<sup>33</sup>

In the 1960s, Catholics began to think that these minimum demands were an insufficient expression of religious commitment, and some of the practices (such as annual confession) were becoming dead letters. Others ceased to have much meaning: the requirement that believers abstain from eating meat on Fridays, for example, was abolished in December 1966, thereby eliminating one of the most familiar public markers of Catholic identity. Instead, parishioners increasingly heard the call, first sounded in the church of Catholic Action, that they make religion personally meaningful. Many took it to heart. The number of lay people who said they prayed every day rose ten points (from 52 to 62 percent) between 1972 and 1984, one survey discovered; in the latter year, fully 31 percent said that they had had “at least one intense religious experience in their life.” By the end of the century, 80 percent of practicing Catholics still said that Mass attendance was essential to the faith. But 82 percent of them said that “learning more about Catholic teaching and spirituality” on their own was important, too, and fully 97 percent said that helping those in need was essential to continuing to think of oneself as a Catholic. “Being a devout Catholic was much easier,” one man said; “practicing full Christianity is much more difficult.”<sup>34</sup> The external demands of church membership had to be matched by a commitment to nurturing interior faith.

American Catholics thus developed some new devotional habits. Study of the Bible, for example, spread rapidly. In contrast to their Protestant neighbors, Catholics had traditionally been encouraged to study the catechism rather than the Bible itself. The faithful had to be guarded, the nation’s bishops had said in 1829,

“from Bibles spoiled by non-Catholics” (by which they usually meant the King James Version), and later Catholic Bibles included a warning that study of the scriptures should be done only with “the advice and permission of the Pastors and spiritual Guides whom God has appointed to govern his Church.” A physician in Philadelphia, who had been at countless bedsides during thirty years of medical practice, noted in 1952 that Catholics were more likely to have a rosary nearby than a Bible, which was “un-deviatingly a sign of Protestantism.” Now, however, Catholic lay people joined small parish groups to read the Bible and discuss its meaning; individual study was similarly encouraged. Between 1977 and 1986, one survey found, the number of Catholics who regularly read the Bible on their own grew from 23 to 32 percent, while another reported that around 13 percent of them did so with fellow parishioners. These numbers were tiny in comparison to American Protestants, and basic biblical literacy was often spotty: only about one-third of American Catholics could correctly name the four Gospels. Even so, since Catholics now heard passages of scripture read at every Mass, some explored the Bible themselves.<sup>35</sup>

The personalizing of faith was evident in other ways. Lay retreats still offered opportunities for individual reflection, but the popularity of traditional “weekends with God” fell off. In their place, specialized programs attracted those interested in deepening their spirituality. One of the most popular of these was the *cursillo*, which originated in Spain in the 1940s. Like a traditional retreat, this “little course” in Christianity began with a three-day withdrawal from normal activity in which selected parishioners, chosen by their pastors, reviewed doctrinal basics and were introduced to various methods of prayer. The goal, one description said, was to “help those attending discover their personal calling (or vocation) in order to accomplish it in and for the community.” The *cursillo* drew on the techniques of group dynamics to

enhance the experience. At some point in the weekend, for example, the participants were showered with letters, written by previous attendees whom they had never met, assuring them that these strangers were praying for them. The emotional impact could be a powerful one, and it gave the “cursillistas” (those making the retreat) an enthusiasm they were encouraged to spread after the weekend was over. Weekly or monthly gatherings of alumni were held in participants’ homes, “an aid to keeping alive in the cursillista the spirit of continuing Christian conversion.” Although open to anyone—originally only men, but almost immediately women, too—the cursillo was particularly popular among Hispanic Catholics, in part because all the specialized terminology of the movement was in Spanish. No reliable statistics tell how many lay people participated in the program, but an emerging cadre of lay parish leaders used the experience to shape a spirituality they could call their own.<sup>36</sup>

Retreats for married couples also multiplied, extending the work of the Christian Family Movement. A CFM national meeting in 1967 was the site of the first “Marriage Encounter,” a weekend getaway that combined religious and interpersonal exercises. A priest and two or three “previously Encountered couples” led the participants, some of them married for decades, through a re-examination of their lives together. After talks on a range of subjects, each husband and wife wrote a short reflection and then shared it with each other (but not with the larger group). Here again, the emotional power could be considerable. “Masks are put aside and walls are broken down,” one participant said. Psychological language, drawn from the wider culture and often reduced to buzzwords, was used overtly. “I’ve found out how to be more in touch with my feelings,” another woman said. Couples might complete an “emotional inventory,” rating themselves in such categories as feeling anxious, depressed, or lonely. More important, the goal for husbands and wives was to develop individ-

ual and mutual spirituality. "During the weekend I met Don's God and he met mine," one woman said of the experience, and her spouse felt the same way. "We are beginning to build," he said, "our own 'Little Church.'" Earlier generations of Catholics would have thought it peculiar, perhaps even blasphemous, to say that God was somehow "Don's" or that his God was different from anybody else's. Beyond that, though the notion of the family as a "little church" had a long pedigree, it still had a slightly presumptuous tone. By the 1970s, however, the marriage encounter movement had spread throughout the country, claiming to attract 100,000 couples each year; 30,000 people attended one annual convention.<sup>37</sup> Father Patrick Peyton had once insisted that the family that prays together stays together; enthusiasts of the marriage encounter saw themselves as elaborating a particular technique to accomplish that goal.

Even more widespread was the emergence of a distinct Catholic charismatic movement. The phenomenon of speaking in "tongues," thought to parallel the experience of the early church at the feast of Pentecost as described in the New Testament, had appeared among American Protestants at the beginning of the twentieth century, grounded on the conviction that the Holy Spirit touched Christians directly, prompting them to express themselves through various ecstatic "gifts." Beginning with a revival in a storefront on Azusa Street in Los Angeles in 1906, several denominations had institutionalized this experience, including the largely white Assemblies of God and the mostly African American Church of God in Christ. Worship services, described by one scholar as a form of "planned spontaneity," emphasized preaching and testimonials rather than formal sacramental liturgies. In this, they were about as far from even a remade, post-Vatican II Catholic Mass as one could imagine. Moreover, hostility toward the Roman Church was common. In the Protestant Pentecostal catalog, Catholics were responsible for everything

from socialism to corruption in Congress, and even to World War I.<sup>38</sup> Such a religious expression seemed unlikely to find a home among American Catholics.

And yet it did. Several cursillo alumni, meeting on the campus of Duquesne University in Pittsburgh in February 1967, gathered in the school's chapel and reported afterward that they had felt a powerful "movement of the Spirit." On returning home, they found they could recreate the experience with others. Assembling in schools and parish halls, usually on weeknights, participants intensified their own reflection and prayer. "From the moment I entered the meeting room," a woman in California said, recalling her first experience, "I was attracted by the spirit of the group. The atmosphere was one of tremendous warmth and friendliness . . . No polemics! No arguments! Just rejoicing in the Lord." Several "gifts of the Holy Spirit" were manifested regularly. Speaking in tongues was the most obvious, often followed by the gift of interpretation, in which another person translated the otherwise indecipherable sounds: "I found that sometimes I could tell what the words of a tongue meant," the Californian reported. A gift of prophecy might appear, "a solemn message in the form of a first-person communication," understood as a message directly from God, such as, "O my children, I love you. Do not fear for the future." Most controversial of all was a gift of healing. "Warmth would flow into my hands in response to the sick and needy," one participant reported. "I would be moved to lay hands on them and pray for them."<sup>39</sup> Such expressions had never been part of American Catholic practice, and many parishioners were wary of their potential for a kind of spiritual anarchy. If even Catholics were going to be encouraged to "do your own thing"—the phrase from pop psychology was just becoming familiar—where would it all end?

Church officials, too, were suspicious, and the nation's bishops combined halting approval of the potential for a deepened prayer



life with warnings about the possible abuses. On the local level, however, so many lay people were attracted to this kind of prayer, at least for a time, that pastors found it unwise to discourage it. One group reported in 1971 that between five and six hundred people were coming to its weekly meetings. By the 1980s, charismatics were claiming close to six thousand prayer groups nationwide, attended regularly by a quarter-million people. In at least two places, explicitly charismatic parishes were formed. In Geneva, Illinois, 250 members of a prayer group received permission to form their own parish, to which all nearby charismatics might come, regardless of where they lived. Members had to sign a "covenant agreement," and "baptism in the Holy Spirit is the normal expectation of members." In Rhode Island, another group received "a very, very strong prophecy about God's raising up a new Moses to lead his people in Providence," and a Word of God Community was given jurisdiction over a parish in the inner city, with the pastor its designated Moses.<sup>40</sup> Such intensity might burn brightly for a while and then flicker out, particularly as enthusiastic pastors or parishioners moved away. Still, there were enough Catholic charismatics that bishops established coordinating offices for local groups, and national meetings attracted varying, but still significant, attendance.

To many Catholic ears, the language of the charismatic movement had a distinctly Protestant sound. Those involved preferred the term "charismatic" precisely to distinguish themselves from non-Catholic Pentecostal churches, but they drew on deeper American Protestant impulses nonetheless. The idea that prospective members had to sign a covenant before joining a parish, for example, seemed more akin to the Puritan churches of early New England than to traditional Catholic parish organization. The hope that "lukewarm Catholics can be awakened to the way of the Lord" sounded more like something Jonathan Edwards might have said than a Catholic preacher. One of the original

Duquesne group insisted that “a personal relationship with God” was his goal, letting “Christ become fully the Lord of his life,” while another described feeling “God’s personal love for me in the depth of my soul.” This way of describing religious experience was more like that of a tent revival meeting, with its emphasis on accepting Jesus as “personal savior,” than the usual homily in a parish church. These denominational distinctions were less important to Catholic charismatics than was the quality of their “concrete religious experience.” True, a shift toward the “affective and emotional” in religion, a belief that “prayer has to be from the depth of the heart as well as from the head,” carried the risks of excess, but charismatics often felt a gentle condescension toward those who had not been awakened. The pastor of the Rhode Island parish prayed that God would “increase our compassion for those who simply wish for the ‘good old days’”: parishioners who were not charismatics deserved “compassion” and maybe pity.<sup>41</sup> Even without this temptation to religious superiority, the charismatic emphasis on personal spirituality shows just how widespread the idea had become in the church of Vatican II.

There were tamer ways of approaching the same goal, including individual spiritual direction. Traditionally, this practice had been undertaken by the clergy and members of religious orders. In regular one-on-one sessions, priests or nuns discussed their experiences of prayer, beyond the mere recitation of prescribed formulas. Jesuits, for example, were guided through the Spiritual Exercises of their founder, Ignatius Loyola, which encouraged such methods as visualizing themselves in conversation with Jesus. For the first time in the years after Vatican II, lay Catholics began to express an interest in adopting similar forms of self-conscious prayer. A Catholic college chaplain from Tennessee noted that “everywhere” he went he found “individuals asking for some plan of deep, longterm spiritual formation.” They wanted, he continued, not to turn themselves into pale imitations of clois-

tered nuns or monks, but rather to define a “secular spirituality, a spirituality lived, not in spite of, but *through* involvement in the secular world of business and politics, family and social life.” Lay people seeking direction needed “help with a relationship,” two experienced directors wrote; “they want to find a center that holds, a relationship to life and life’s mysterious center that will not buckle under the strain of modern conditions.” They wanted to be able to “speak about the most profound experiences they have, their experiences of ‘the mystery we call God.’” The spiritual director’s job was “helping another person to become more aware of God’s personal communication to him or her [and] to respond personally to God.”<sup>42</sup>

In the process of direction, the two individuals simply conversed, as in psychological counseling. Indeed, many directors drew consciously on the work of psychologists such as Erik Erikson and Carl Rogers, whose writings on human development were achieving wide currency. But “the talk will not be casual and aimless,” one director said; it was more than mere “advice-giving.” Rather, it was purposeful, since “the person who seeks direction is going somewhere.” Most often, people took up the practice because they found “the ways of prayer taught them as children and carried with them into adolescence and young adulthood are no longer satisfying.” They wanted something more. Here again was talk of the passage from religious childhood to adulthood. By committing themselves to a regimen of daily prayer and then analyzing their experiences in regular weekly meetings, the director and the directee gradually worked out a plan for spiritual progress. Finding and keeping to a consistent time of day for prayer was important, for example: “morning people” and “night people” were urged to keep an eye on their respective biological clocks. Even when prayer seemed a waste of time, a common problem for “pragmatic, production-oriented Americans,” directees were urged to press on, allowing themselves

“to waste time gracefully with God.” If they persevered, they usually found their self-awareness enhanced. “I’m amazed at how much I can say about what’s happened when I’ve prayed,” one person told a director. “When I come, I think I have practically nothing to say. But look how much I’ve said this morning.”<sup>43</sup> The number of people who committed to such sustained efforts at spiritual growth was small, and they were always self-selected. That American lay people sought to do it at all, however, was a sign that they were looking for what the *cursillo* participant had called “continuing Christian conversion.”

Among those most likely to try any of these methods was the core group of lay ministers who emerged in American Catholic parishes in the years after Vatican II. The personnel of the local church no longer consisted exclusively of the priests who lived in the rectory or the sisters in the convent next door. The documents of Vatican II had stressed lay people’s involvement in the work of the church and, without removing the theological wall between clergy and laity, had expressed a hope that the laity would be allowed “to exercise certain church functions for a spiritual purpose . . . according to their abilities and the needs of the times.” This meant something more than membership in a Catholic Action organization or service on the parish advisory councils that appeared in many places. Lay Eucharistic ministers and readers at Mass were only the beginning of the story. More significant indicators of change were those who undertook careers as lay ministers in the church, including directors of the parish religious instruction program, youth and elderly ministers, and directors of music and liturgy.<sup>44</sup>

At first, the appearance of such people as members of the paid parish staff went unnoticed. Soon, however, the numbers were hard to ignore, and they got steadily larger. By the late 1990s, American Catholic parishes employed almost 30,000 lay ministers who worked at least twenty hours per week. The trend was

evident nearly everywhere. In 1970, for example, the diocese of St. Cloud, consisting of 150 parishes spread across the rural stretches of central Minnesota, had only fifteen lay religious education directors and not a single youth minister or “pastoral associate,” the title often given to those who performed general duties. By 1990, St. Cloud had more than ninety education directors, seventeen youth ministers, and about twenty pastoral associates. The story in Pittsburgh was much the same. The seventy-five parishes there in 1990 were staffed by 112 active priests whose duties were exclusively those of the parish. But those parishes also had 144 lay ministers—166 if one counted the religious sisters (technically lay people in church law). By the end of the century, 20 percent of all Catholic parish personnel nationwide were lay people. These were overwhelmingly (about 80 percent) women, though there was some specialization by gender. Women were more likely to lead religious education programs, for example, while more men served as musicians or youth ministers. Whatever their job description, they did many things formerly associated with the clergy: 70 percent said that they regularly led members of the parish in prayer; 58 percent had a role in the preparation of Sunday Mass; and 41 percent visited sick parishioners, either at home or in the hospital.<sup>45</sup> On the ground, Catholic parish leadership was clearly becoming a matter of collaboration between clergy and laity.

Lay ministers generally described their work as a “vocation,” a familiar term in the Catholic lexicon. Serving their parish was not just a job; it was a response to a “call” from God. Salaries were low, and many lay ministers found that their income was merely supplemental to that of their spouse. One parish education director explained that she took the job out of “a sense of call and commitment” that came from a “deeper part” of her where God spoke. Priests had traditionally described their decision to enter the seminary in this way, and in practice there were many similar-

ities in what clerical and lay ministers actually did. One woman was hired to work with the elderly and sick in her parish. She visited local hospitals and nursing homes, brought Communion to those who could not get to church, and notified her pastor when patients were ill enough to warrant a visit from him for anointing. But she also oversaw scheduling of the lay Eucharistic ministers to ensure adequate coverage at each weekend Mass, trained them, and even led midweek prayer services when the pastor was not available. In another parish, a family life minister found “intense joy,” she said, “in helping children grieve when they need to, in helping single-again persons [that is, the separated, divorced, or widowed] find new life, in helping stepparents give the lie to the Cinderella story, in helping couples increase communication and freshen love.” Priests could and did perform all these tasks, but lay people added “a different set of perspectives.” Their participation “broadened the reach of ministry beyond the more institutional frameworks of yesterday’s ministry—the sacraments and schools—to meet the new needs of today’s parishioners.”<sup>46</sup>

In one sense, lay ministers were merely the logical extensions of an earlier corps of parish volunteers, but a genuinely new category of church worker appeared in the aftermath of Vatican II, and that was the deacon. Most Protestant churches had deacons of one kind or another, but the office had been more restricted among Catholics. Seminarians were made deacons shortly before their ordination to the priesthood, and it was seen as a transitional office. After years of studying theology, they spent a few months learning the practicalities of saying Mass and performing the other sacraments. At the prompting of some European churchmen, the council had “restored” the office of deacon as it was thought to have been practiced in the ancient church. Lay men could apply for ordination as deacons without any intention of ever becoming priests. They kept their regular jobs, but they also assumed liturgical and other functions in their parishes.

They could baptize and officiate at weddings, for example, and they could preach homilies, conduct adult education classes, and visit the sick; they could not say Mass, hear confessions, or anoint the dying, all of which were still reserved to priests. Moreover, a “permanent” deacon could be married, though if his wife died he could not remarry. Beginning in 1968, programs for the preparation of deacons multiplied around the country.<sup>47</sup>

Small but steady numbers of lay men signed up: from 7 the first year, their number grew by the end of the century to more than 12,000. At that time, one in three American Catholic parishes had at least 1 active deacon. The deacons in Boston were typical. In 1973, the first year of the program there, almost 180 men applied for training, which was conducted on weekends; 40 of them were accepted, and 37 were finally ordained in 1976. Their ranks included a policeman, a postal worker, an electrician, a lawyer, and several men who ran their own businesses. They were well into middle age, and most reported that they saw the diaconate as a way to broaden the work they were already doing for the church. Most deacons served in their own parishes and were made to feel a part of the “team,” though difficulties sometimes arose. A deacon from Cleveland noted that his pastor always scheduled him to help out at the Christmas and Easter Masses, though he tried not to complain: “While I am honored to share in this liturgical role, I wish that he would realize that my wife and I often want to visit our children and grandchildren around the holidays.” Such problems notwithstanding, parishioners generally accepted the deacons, and their role quickly came to seem normal. Saint James’s Church in Petaluma, California, for example, self-described as “a rather average American parish,” had 1 priest and 3 deacons serving 2,200 families. Beyond helping out with regular Sunday Mass, the deacons ran programs for couples preparing to marry, made visits to the sick, baptized infants, and presided at graveside burials when there was no funeral Mass.

“Not everyone is a theologian,” a Boston deacon (a firefighter by trade) said, “but together we make up the church community.”<sup>48</sup>

Given the emphasis that Vatican II had placed on the “People of God,” lay ministries would probably have expanded in any case, but the need for them was made more urgent by the rapidly declining number of priests. The cadre of priests in America reached its historic high at the time of the council and then fell off, in some years precipitously. At one time, becoming a priest had held many attractions. Foremost among these were the priesthood’s spiritual dimensions, but the office had something to offer in this world, too. Their brothers might still be working at physically demanding and dangerous jobs, but priests were professional men, white-collar workers who actually wore white collars. They were respected community leaders. To be sure, they made sacrifices, the most obvious of which was forgoing marriage and a family of their own, and they often spent long years of apprenticeship under older pastors. In Detroit, for example, a priest in the 1950s waited on average close to twenty years after his ordination before becoming a pastor himself. This meant that, well into middle age, these priests were still what their historian has called “dependent men, living for the most part under the direction and scrutiny of their elders.” Nevertheless, Catholic parents valued the priesthood and encouraged at least one son to heed the call. Even the mother of Studs Lonigan, the drinking, brawling, and not very pious youth in James T. Farrell’s novels of 1930s Chicago, had urged her son to think about such a career. The vision of the priesthood on the movie screen further underlined its appeal. A young man did not have to have the suave coolness of Bing Crosby (*Going My Way*, 1944), the kindly tough love of Spencer Tracy (*Boys’ Town*, 1938), the stoic adherence to principle of Montgomery Clift (*I Confess*, 1952), or the passion for justice of Karl Malden (*On the Waterfront*, 1954) to find the life of a priest, in its own way, romantic.<sup>49</sup>



In response to this combination of motives, the number of priests in the United States had risen steadily during the first two-thirds of the twentieth century. In 1965, the final year of the council, the church in America was served by 58,000 priests, with about 1,600 new ones ordained annually. This number was comfortably above the replacement rate for the 850 who died or left the ministry every year. The ratio of priests to Catholics was low: in 1960, it was 1:649 in New York, 1:881 in Cleveland, and 1:578 in Seattle. Trouble quickly became apparent, however, as large numbers of priests resigned their positions—some to marry, others simply to join the lay workforce—in the years after Vatican II. In 1971, for the first time those who left the priesthood almost equaled the newly ordained (667 and 692, respectively), and thereafter those leaving consistently outnumbered those coming in. The total number of priests in the country was down to 46,000 by the end of the century, and the situation was even worse than it appeared: fully one-quarter of the total were retired from active ministry by then.<sup>50</sup>

Those who remained were rapidly “graying.” In the year 2000, the average age of an American priest was fifty-nine and rising; only 19 percent of priests were younger than forty-five, and just 5 percent were under thirty-five. Enrollment in seminaries plummeted: there were more than 8,000 students in the 1967–68 academic year, and about half that number ten years later. These numbers eventually stabilized, but they remained well below the replacement rate. The two decades after the council brought 15,000 new priests in America but the departure, from one cause or another (including death), of 22,000. Not since its earliest years, two centuries before, had the American Catholic Church faced the prospect of widespread priestlessness. The number of parishes without a resident pastor rose to measurable proportions. By the century’s end, about one-third of the parishes in the Northern Plains states had no priest, and one-quarter of those in

the Pacific Northwest were similarly vacant. Areas of the country where matters were not quite so dire only underlined the more general trend.<sup>51</sup> A church that had long relied on its clergymen had fewer and fewer of them.

What to do about this “priest shortage” became the subject of considerable debate. Some people hoped to recreate the conditions that had produced large numbers of clerical vocations in the past. About one-third of American Catholics polled in the mid-1980s said that “we must first of all recruit many more priests.” More than half thought that promoting “new ways to structure parish leadership, to include more deacons, sisters, and lay persons” was the better approach. This debate continues today, but discussion of the problem in the years after Vatican II demonstrated two things. First, it highlighted the degree to which lay people had already assumed important roles in the life of their church; and second, it showed that there were issues on which they disagreed with the official positions of the church and its leaders. Fully two-thirds of American Catholics believed that priests should be allowed to marry, for example, and the percentage of those who thought that women should be eligible for the priesthood climbed steadily: by 1985, equal numbers (47 percent) of Catholics approved and disapproved the ordaining of women.<sup>52</sup> Both ideas were firmly rejected by church authorities. In that way, the relationship between American Catholics and the hierarchy—and particularly the pope—grew more complicated in the church of Vatican II.

On the face of things, Catholics retained their enthusiasm for the pope, and it was visibly on display in the fall of 1965, when, for the first time in history, a reigning pope visited the United States. Popes had seldom ventured forth into the world, but Pope Paul VI, who had succeeded John XXIII two years before, resolved to

change that. A skilled diplomat before his election to the papacy, Paul determined to visit every continent (save Antarctica) at least once as a way to bring the church's message to the modern world. On October 4, 1965, he came to New York to address a session of the General Assembly of the United Nations, concluding his remarks with an impassioned plea for peace: "No more war, war never again" ("Jamais plus la guerre," in the French in which he spoke). Over the course of a single whirlwind day, he also visited a local parish church, stopped to view Michelangelo's *Pietà* on display in the Vatican pavilion at the World's Fair site in Queens, and said an open-air Mass for 90,000 worshipers in Yankee Stadium. Even skeptical journalists were impressed. "It was an occasion that suspended the normal life of the city," gushed Homer Bigart in the *New York Times*, "and affected the emotions of millions of persons of all faiths."<sup>53</sup> Papal travel became more common under one of Paul's successors, John Paul II, but this first visit was genuinely a landmark event.

Just three years later, American Catholics were rethinking their exuberance for the pope, and the issue prompting the shift was contraception. At least since the 1930s, church teaching on the subject had been clear. One after another, mainline Protestant churches were abandoning their earlier condemnations, but the Catholic position held. Any attempt to prevent conception in the sexual act was inherently sinful because it frustrated God's plans for procreation and the family; only periodic abstinence was acceptable as a way for couples to space or limit the number of children they had. Development of the so-called rhythm method, with sexual activity confined to the woman's infertile periods, moderated the church's position slightly. Now, a distinction was made between "artificial" contraception (the use of various devices and, later, of the birth control pill), which remained sinful, and "natural" methods, which were not. Many lay people sincerely tried to observe this differentiation, but as contraception

became more acceptable in society as a whole, Catholics began to question the prohibition on the more effective means of birth control. "All of a sudden," one man from San Francisco told a nationally recognized theologian, "I see no sin involved in this practice." By the 1960s, American Catholic couples were questioning both the implications of the church's stance and the logic behind it. "Does it bring a pleasant picture to your mind," a woman from Michigan asked, "to think of a mother of four or more feeding an infant in arms while a year-old baby sits at her feet begging to be held?" Another mother expressed similar frustration. "I have had seven children within eight years," she said, "despite frantic and distressing efforts to follow rhythm . . . It seems unjust that we who have accepted the responsibilities of marriage should have to practice continence."<sup>54</sup>

Theologians, most of them priests, were often unmoved by such entreaties. A husband and wife might think they had legitimate economic or emotional reasons to use contraceptives, one seminary professor said coolly, but "it will be more advisable and more praiseworthy for a couple to continue to build a family, placing their trust in Divine Providence." Parish priests were more sympathetic, since they were the ones who actually encountered lay people, troubled by the whole question, in the confessional. Bishops sometimes urged the clergy to be strict—in the 1930s, the archbishop of Chicago had told his priests to question married penitents on the subject, even if they did not mention it themselves—and to deny forgiveness to those who were violating the church's precepts. Few parish priests had any taste for that sort of thing, and often they were openly sympathetic with their parishioners. "I have been told explicitly by a priest that it is permissible," one woman wrote to a Catholic magazine in 1960, "one year after the birth of a child to space children for reasons of a mother's health." A woman from the Bronx reported that she had "received permission from my confessor to use contraceptive

pills”; the year in which she had done so was, she said, “very relaxed and wonderful” for her marriage. Many priests told their people simply to follow their own “informed conscience.” It seems clear, a comprehensive history of the subject concludes, that a majority of American Catholic priests were “less than wholly committed” to the church’s official stance. Moreover, informal networks of women exchanged information on which priests in which parishes were sympathetic, and before the practice of confession declined, these networks allowed those who were practicing birth control to find an understanding ear.<sup>55</sup>

Pressure to review the church’s position could not be resisted in the face of this widespread dissatisfaction. In 1966, Pope Paul expanded the commission that John XXIII had appointed to study the matter, adding three married couples, including Patty and Pat Crowley from the United States. Two issues dominated the discussion. One was the morality specifically of the birth control pill, which had been approved for sale in 1960 and quickly became the most common form of contraception. Was this an “artificial” method of birth control? And even if it was, was it not acceptable anyway because it was a form of medicine? The other was the potentially thornier problem of changing church teaching so dramatically. This was the dilemma that troubled the commission’s Father Zalba: how could something that was sinful last week not be sinful this week?

The Crowleys argued for the change, and they were supported by many of the experts whom the commission consulted. These included another American, John Noonan, a distinguished law professor and historian who had published a book, *Contraception: A History of Its Treatment by the Catholic Theologians and Canonists*, demonstrating that the church’s position had already changed over the centuries. A majority report recommended modifying the church’s stance, relying in part on the experience of lay Catholics. Taking account of the “sense of the faithful,” it said, “con-

demnation of a couple to a long and often heroic abstinence as a means to regulate conception cannot be founded on the truth.” The pope seemed inclined toward this view, but a powerfully argued minority report urged restatement of the distinction between natural and artificial methods. The church “could not have so wrongly erred” in stating its position; if it had, the authority of its teaching on any topic was suspect.<sup>56</sup>

In the end, Paul VI was persuaded by this argument, and in July 1968 he issued an encyclical, *Humanae Vitae* (“Of Human Life”), reaffirming the condemnation of artificial contraception. The language of his letter was subtle, but reaction to it was swift and overwhelmingly negative among American lay people. “How can persons of integrity confess as a sin something which their consciences tell them is not an offense?” one couple asked in an open letter to the nation’s bishops. “Many Catholic married people,” a parish priest in Baltimore told his archbishop, “not just the lax and indifferent, but also the most conscientious and most enlightened, have time after time told me in confession that they find the approved methods of rhythm and periodic continence unworkable.” Polling data confirmed that Catholics were disregarding the papal statement. In 1970, a survey found that more than three-quarters of married Catholic women in their twenties were using a form of birth control that the encyclical had condemned. More tellingly, 62 percent of American Catholics told pollsters in the 1980s that individuals, rather than church leaders, should make the determination about the morality of contraception. The very undermining of authority that some church officials hoped to prevent had become a reality. Just 13 percent of those polled said that the teaching on birth control had reinforced their faith, while 35 percent said that it had weakened their faith; perhaps worst of all, 43 percent said that it had had no effect whatever.<sup>57</sup> Simply ignoring what the leaders of their church had to say was something new for American Catholics.

This easy disregard for clearly stated church teaching opened the door to other signs of independence among American lay people, and it helped solidify a growing polarization of factions, self-consciously identified as liberal or conservative. What was once thought a monolithic body of believers was now visibly divided. Some lay people, for instance, recoiled at changes in religious practice, and they responded with a Catholic Traditionalist Movement. Spearheaded by Father Gommar DePauw, originally from Belgium, this group decried what they saw as the “Protestantizing” of the church. About 150 of them picketed Saint Patrick’s Cathedral in New York City one Sunday in 1968, carrying placards that read, “Restore Our Latin Mass” and “Altar Yes, Table No.” Unease with the broader cultural changes of the 1960s fueled their passion. The new Mass had been forced on an unwilling church by “liturgical beatniks” and “hippies,” DePauw said. Another group, Catholics United for the Faith, was organized expressly to defend the papal position on contraception. They were a rallying point, their founding statement said, “for the multitude of Catholics who have felt bewildered and blown about by the 1,000 winds of false doctrine being constantly puffed out by . . . 1,000 counterfeit teachers.” Others saw conspiracy behind the changes in the church. Starting in 1970, Veronica Lueken, a housewife from Queens, New York, reported seeing visions of the Virgin Mary, and a few years later she announced that Mary had revealed to her the plot that was behind it all. The real Pope Paul VI had been drugged and kidnapped, she said, and a look-alike, the product of skillful plastic surgery, had taken his place. Only that could explain the ongoing triumph of “the forces of evil” in the church.<sup>58</sup>

At the opposite end of the spectrum, liberal groups coalesced around the notion that the reforms of Vatican II had not gone far enough, and some of these organizations were no less extreme than their conservative counterparts. Catholics held a “Call to

Action” meeting in Detroit in 1976 as an official vehicle for Catholic participation in that year’s observance of the bicentennial of the American Revolution. A splinter group subsequently adopted the Call to Action name and began holding annual conventions. Although the group endorsed some traditional Catholic positions (economic fairness in the workplace, for instance, and opposition to the death penalty), its larger agenda was increasingly at odds with the church. Call to Action issued resolutions supporting a change in the teaching on contraception and other sexual matters (including homosexuality) and an end to mandatory celibacy for priests. Liturgies at the meetings might kindly be described as free-form, and they were thus easy to caricature as the product of latter-day “beatniks.” Even more explicitly in opposition to the church were Catholics for a Free Choice (CFFC), a lobbying group founded in 1970 in support of the legalization of abortion. Although it was an organization largely without members—critics said it was nothing more than “a well-funded letterhead” and a fax machine churning out press releases—CFFC was skillful at gaining publicity. Since one of its first official acts had been to stage the mock coronation of a female pope, however, dispassionate observers had reason to think that the first word of the group’s title was being applied a bit loosely.<sup>59</sup>

Groups right and left generated a good deal of passion, but the majority of American Catholics refused to identify with either extreme. Most held a mixed collection of views on the issues that so enflamed the partisans of one side or the other. Press reports emphasized the divisions, however, and this led eventually to an effort at reconciliation. In the summer of 1996, Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, the archbishop of Chicago, took the lead in organizing a Common Ground Project. With the support of a number of prominent lay Catholics—Robert Casey, the former governor of Pennsylvania; John Sweeney, the head of the AFL-CIO; Mary Ann Glendon, a professor at Harvard Law School—the initiative



was intended to counter “an increasing polarization within the church and, at times, a mean-spiritedness” that “hindered the kind of dialogue that helps us to address our mission and concerns.” Not everyone was ready for dialogue. From the left, the head of CFFC denounced the effort, while from the right, four other American prelates complained that the program did not “place sufficient importance on the teachings of the church, through the pope and the bishops, as the basis for common ground.” Bernardin’s painful death from cancer a few months later undercut the effort, though the group continued to meet in hopes of drawing attention to the middle position on issues, which most Catholic lay people favored.<sup>60</sup>

One persistent point of disagreement between lay people and their church was the question of whether women could be priests. Most Protestant denominations had approved the ordination of women over the course of the twentieth century. The Episcopal Church was one of the last to do so, after the unauthorized ordination of several women in 1974 forced the issue. Some Jewish congregations were ordaining female rabbis: Reform Jews approved the practice in 1972, followed a decade later by Conservative Jews. When the question first came up among Catholics, the answer seemed unequivocal: women priests were simply out of the question. “Females are completely barred from the priestly office,” the Jesuits’ *America* magazine had said bluntly in 1960, a prohibition based on “divine positive law . . . If it were lawful to have female priests, Mary, Mother of God, would surely have been the first.” As new forms of feminism spread throughout American society, however, and as female lay ministers assumed visible positions in Catholic parishes, the law seemed less positive and possibly no longer divine. If women could be lectors and (perhaps especially) Eucharistic ministers, priesthood seemed merely the next logical step. By 1973, *America* had changed its mind. “The total embargo against an ordained female ministry,”

a writer in its pages said, “looks more and more like the preservation of an aging cultural tradition and the expression of sexist prejudice.” Why, even the Harvard Club was now admitting women, the writer pointed out, as if that were sufficient to clinch the case.<sup>61</sup>

The question had not been discussed during the Vatican Council, and a survey taken in 1965 showed that a clear majority of American Catholics opposed the idea. As early as 1970, however, opinion was shifting. About half of those polled said that they would accept women in priestly roles, while one-quarter said they would not, and another quarter were unsure. Competing biblical texts—on the one hand, Saint Paul’s insistence that women keep silent in church (I Corinthians 14:34); on the other, his assertion that in Christ there was no distinction between male and female (Galatians 3:28)—apparently argued the case to a draw. More important for lay people were the practicalities of women performing the many tasks in a priest’s job description. “How often it takes a woman’s heart, thinking, and understanding to solve a problem,” one woman from New Jersey said. “I have been disappointed more than once when I have gone to a priest with a problem, only to find that he didn’t understand my feelings or thinking and was at a loss to be of much help to me.” A man from California agreed. He had not been to confession in some time, he admitted, but “if we must continue having private confession, please, please, please let women be ordained so I could confess to a more sensitive, feeling person!” Those on the other side had equally pragmatic concerns. “A lady priest going on a sick call in the ‘evil houses,’” a woman from Michigan wondered, “is this safe?” A woman from Maine had other concerns: “I can’t honestly see a woman priest living peacefully in a rectory, now or ever.” But still another was prepared for the long haul. “I don’t believe this idea would find real acceptance in this generation,” she said. “However, I am confident that if women were ordained

now, the next generation would completely accept them," just as they had come to accept women doctors and judges.<sup>62</sup>

The debate went public in November 1975, when twelve hundred people, most of them women, gathered in Detroit to support the ordination of women as Catholic priests; another five hundred were turned away for lack of space. Those present represented forty-four states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and half a dozen foreign countries. Most did not want ordination for themselves, but they thought it should be possible. Speakers acknowledged that they were advocating a thoroughgoing "re-interpretation of the priesthood." Awareness of the declining numbers of priests was by then widespread, and ordaining women was seen as one way of addressing the problem. Participants had assessed the cultural and historical roots of the all-male, celibate priesthood and found them wanting. The argument that Jesus had chosen only men as disciples, for instance, while true, was unconvincing. By that logic, only Jews from Palestine could be ordained as Catholic priests, and in any case Jesus had never actually ordained anybody, as the term was now understood. Conference participants used language that had become common by then in discussions of gender, speaking of "liberation," "empowerment," and "sexism." Several women who did feel called to the priesthood described their experience. "We want to be ordained, not because we want to exercise power," said Rosalie Muschal-Reinhardt, a mother of four from Rochester, New York, "but because we are motivated by love and a concern for the church." Many like her were already filling ministerial roles in their parishes, she pointed out, but they were barred from presiding at the sacraments.<sup>63</sup>

Although they sought radical change, participants rejected the idea of disobeying church law and simply ordaining a few women. This method was working in the Episcopal Church, but it was not one that these Catholics would adopt. Indeed, speaker after

speaker stressed the importance of maintaining “fidelity to the tradition of the church.” Discussion and persuasion were the best approach, and to this end, a Women’s Ordination Conference opened an office soon afterward in Washington, D.C. Even so, fidelity rather than rebellion was the watchword. “We come together,” Sister Nadine Foley, a college chaplain, said, “not to confront the Church, not to act in defiance of the Church, but to be the Church.” A more insurgent gathering would have ended with the ad hoc ordination of several of the women present; this one ended with Sunday Mass, presided over by a male priest. The officiant began by apologizing for the “inadequacy” of his role in this context, and the Mass did bend church rules slightly in that a lay woman delivered the homily, something only a priest was supposed to do. But even her tone was moderate: waiting—to be sure, “*active*, not passive waiting . . . until the whole Church recognizes his [that is, Christ’s] priesthood in us”—was the way to address the issue.<sup>64</sup> By historical analogy, the meeting had been more like the First Continental Congress of 1774 than the Second Congress of 1776. The former had protested British infringement of the colonists’ “rights as Englishmen”; the latter had declared American independence. Two hundred years later, there were no Catholic declarations of independence in Detroit.

Official reaction was nevertheless swift. The nation’s bishops had already issued a preemptive statement, asserting that the reasons for barring women from ordination were serious theological ones and not grounded merely in sexist cultural tradition. The Vatican position was also clear, summarized later in a ruling from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the department charged with oversight of official teaching. After his election to the papacy in 1978, Pope John Paul II also rejected the idea several times. John Paul, the former Karol Wojtyła, archbishop of Krakow in Poland and the first non-Italian pope in four centuries, produced many statements on the equality of women, in

church and society, throughout his tenure. Even so, in the pope's view, there were still differences in what men and women could do in the church, and he felt strongly on the subject. One American bishop, lunching with the pope during a visit to Rome, reported that John Paul had "pounded on the table for emphasis" when the subject came up. The church was not "authorized" by God, the pope said, "to admit women to priestly ordination." Hoping to end discussion of the matter once and for all, he declared in 1994 that this view was to be "definitively held" by all Catholics. Any change was out of the question, now or ever; not even some future pope could alter the church's position.<sup>65</sup>

This was an entirely new category of papal teaching, an assertion of the powers of the papacy unmatched since the days of Pius IX a century before. John Paul's statement did not conform to the theological requirements for infallibility, but some lay people were prepared to accept it as such. To continue pressing for the ordination of women "after the pope has already made his statement" was wrong, a woman from Kentucky said. A woman from California concurred, noting that the "first and paramount task" of all Catholics "is to be obedient." Others felt that discussion should not end. "I do not believe that silence is appropriate if we recognize an injustice," another woman from California said. A woman from Pennsylvania thought about her children. "My daughters have to struggle enough in the real world for equality," she said. "The one place they should be welcomed and treated completely equal is in their church." Notwithstanding the pope's desire to end debate, by the close of the twentieth century, two-thirds of American Catholics supported the ordination of women, and Catholics under the age of thirty-five favored it by a margin of four to one. There the matter remains today. Most Catholics saw the "irregular" ordination of several women—including the wife of a former governor of Ohio—by a schismatic bishop in Germany in 2002 as a fringe activity; subsequent ad

hoc ordinations have similarly failed to gain much support.<sup>66</sup> American lay Catholics wanted women priests, but they were content to wait until the church authorized them.

Lay people disagreed with John Paul II on this and other questions—he firmly restated the ban on contraception, for example—thus tempering the ardent papalism of previous generations. Nonetheless, American Catholics found the pope a compelling personality. Even as they rejected or ignored some of his teachings, their enthusiasm for the leader of their church seemed to grow. The pope's several visits to America provided occasions to demonstrate this affection. If Paul VI had ventured cautiously outside the Vatican, John Paul made papal travel routine. He was an unquestionably impressive figure, a poet and philosopher, and his long resistance to the communist regime of his native Poland was legendary. Indeed, when he helped bring about the collapse of the Soviet empire in Eastern Europe in the late 1980s and early 1990s, he was apparently fulfilling his historic destiny. He remained physically vigorous well into his seventies, even after an assassination attempt in 1981. All these traits drew people to him as an individual, and newspapers regularly compared him to a rock star in his appeal. Movement on the world stage reinforced this public persona. In the course of his nearly twenty-seven-year papacy, he seemed to visit virtually every spot on the globe, including four separate trips to the United States. The first came in October 1979, barely a year after his election, when he stopped in Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Des Moines, and Chicago before landing in Washington, D.C., where he said Mass on the mall between the Lincoln Memorial and the Washington Monument. Huge crowds turned out to see him, some of them standing in drenching rain for hours just to have that chance.<sup>67</sup>

The pope's appearance at an event called World Youth Day, in a park outside Denver in August 1993, proved his appeal. John

Paul himself had created these biennial gatherings, held in locations around the world as occasions for young people to renew their ardor for the church. Frequently compared to the 1960s Woodstock music festival, they had a serious religious purpose, one that was enhanced by the adventure of being part of such a large crowd. The Denver event attracted more than 400,000 young people, most of them from the United States. Under a blazing summer sun, they prayed, chanted the pope's name, and participated in a Mass, many wearing t-shirts embossed with such slogans as "Life is Short, Pray Hard." The excitement was infectious. "Oh, man," said a fourteen-year-old girl from New Orleans, "this is overwhelming." A fifteen-year-old from Virginia thought so, too. "I'll be honest with you, I was really getting bored with church," she told a reporter. "I would like to see the energy and enthusiasm that was here spread around." The celebration, the pope said, "has been a stop along the way, a moment of prayer and refreshment, but our journey must lead us on." Later, when John Paul died in the spring of 2005, the expressions of grief from young American Catholics, most of whom had never known any other pope, further demonstrated the particular appeal he had had for them.<sup>68</sup>

These experiences were no doubt genuine, but Catholics young and old, while drawn to the pope personally, did not hesitate to disagree with him. They could be inspired by the pope, but they would not always do what he told them. The rate at which Catholics used the condemned forms of contraception, for example, was indistinguishable from that of the rest of the American population. Catholics had become comfortable with looking to their own experience as much as to church teaching in deciding questions of moral and religious behavior. The language of adulthood and the autonomy it implied had penetrated deeply. A man from New Hampshire had said as early as 1969 that he and his fellow Catholics needed "an answer we can believe in" on con-

trapection and other issues. Not just any answers would do. Church teachings had to make sense; if they did not, he could dissent from them and still be a Catholic. Critics censured this view, denouncing “cafeteria Catholics” who chose to take the church positions they liked and to pass up those they did not.<sup>69</sup> The criticism was not unfounded, but the Vatican Council’s description of the church as the “People of God” had seized the American Catholic imagination. The imagery meant that lay people were defining their identification with the church, sometimes on their own terms.

Catholics faced similar challenges in their identity as Americans in the years after Vatican II. These challenges came at a time when many of them had climbed to the top of the American ladder, and the election of a Catholic president two years before the council opened was only part of the story. Earlier social distinctions had lost their force in the suburban, generally prosperous United States of the late twentieth century. In education and income level, Catholics equaled or exceeded people in other churches: a survey in the mid-1980s showed that only Episcopalians and Presbyterians had a higher percentage of members in the upper income brackets. By the end of the century, nearly one-third of all adult Catholics in America had graduated from college, and another 13 percent had also attended graduate or professional school. Residential patterns confirmed how fully they had blended into the rest of society. Families along one side of the dog-leg street in the central Massachusetts city in which I grew up at the time of the council had the following religious affiliations: Congregationalist, Catholic, Episcopalian, Catholic, Jewish, Catholic (us), Jewish, Catholic; down the other side of the street, it was Greek Orthodox, unchurched, Episcopalian, Catholic, Episcopalian, unchurched, Unitarian, Unitarian, Catholic,



Jewish, Catholic. No single place is entirely representative, but the religious mixture of that neighborhood mirrored the integration that was happening elsewhere.<sup>70</sup>

At the same time, when Vatican II opened, churches were still more likely to emphasize the things that divided them than those they had in common. The legacy of the Reformation was a long one, and though outright hostility was now rare in America, interfaith efforts had made little headway in bridging the gaps. Persistent suspicion ran in both directions. Many Protestants thought Catholics incapable of thinking for themselves, and they considered Catholic worship, beginning with the Mass itself, essentially idolatrous. For their part, Catholics found Protestant services thin and meaningless. Some Protestant denominations haltingly explored common territory—a Federal Council of Churches was formed in 1908 and renamed the National Council of Churches in 1950—but Catholics kept their distance, joining neither one. Papal statements had set the tone. An encyclical of 1928 warned of “false Christianity” and insisted that the union of Christians could be accomplished only by “the return to the one true Church of Christ of those who are separated from it.”<sup>71</sup>

On the local level, there were clear lines that Catholics could not cross. Sometimes, one priest explained to a parishioner in North Carolina, a Catholic might find it necessary, for social reasons, to attend a Protestant church service, but such occasions were “fraught with religious danger.” Any participation must be done “passively”: a Catholic could not be the godparent at a non-Catholic christening, for example. Similarly, a priest told a young man in Chicago in 1955 that it was inadvisable for a Catholic to join the YMCA, even if he only wanted to use the gym or the swimming pool; the Y was not, the priest said, “nonsectarian or neutral.” For anyone who asked, there were clear answers about just what was wrong with Protestant churches. Episcopalians did not have valid ordinations, a Catholic priest told a woman from

Ohio; therefore, their Communion services, which looked more or less like those in a Catholic church, were entirely invalid. Non-Catholic translations of the Bible, “so garbled” as to be riddled with “thousands of serious errors,” were the product of “mutineers” like Luther. The Orthodox churches of Greece and Russia operated under a “misnomer,” a Catholic in Pennsylvania was told: “no one can be orthodox—that is, sound in doctrine—and at the same time persist in schism and heresy,” which the Orthodox did by rejecting the authority of the pope.<sup>72</sup> Cooperation among churches could go only so far in such an atmosphere.

One particularly contentious episode demonstrated how far apart American faiths were. Immediately after the Second World War, Father Leonard Feeney, a Jesuit priest, was the chaplain of an informal gathering spot in Cambridge, Massachusetts, for Catholic students attending Harvard and Radcliffe colleges. His dynamic personality attracted many converts to Catholicism, including Avery Dulles, son of the future secretary of state in the Eisenhower administration. By 1949, however, Feeney was giving a rigorist reading to an ancient church maxim, first articulated in the contest with paganism in the third century: “outside the church, there is no salvation” (in Latin, *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*). Feeney interpreted this literally to mean that all non-Catholics—Protestants, Jews, Muslims, and everybody else—were simply going to hell. Serious theologians had moved away from this absolutist view, but the Feeney group insisted on it, often in open-air rallies, at which they harangued (and frequently harassed) passers-by. Local church officials sought to silence Feeney and his followers; when they refused to recant, several of them were fired from teaching positions in Catholic schools. Feeney was dismissed from the Jesuit order and, together with some of his inner circle, even excommunicated: it was, at the least, ironic for those who preached damnation outside the Catholic Church to find themselves outside it. They withdrew to the far Boston

suburbs, where they established their own religious order on a farm commune. Their numbers were always very small, and some, including Feeney himself, eventually reconciled with the Catholic Church, but the vigor with which they insisted on an unbridgeable gulf between Catholics and Protestants showed how potent such divisions could still be.<sup>73</sup>

Barely a decade later, deliberations at the Vatican Council provided a basis for Catholics to begin reaching across these divides. "Without doubt," the council said in a decree of November 1964, discord among Christian churches "openly contradicts the will of Christ." Statements on the Orthodox churches and on non-Christians struck the same themes, and another specifically rejected the centuries-old accusation that Jews were responsible for the death of Jesus. Moreover, largely at the prompting of John Courtney Murray, another American Jesuit, the council endorsed the principle of religious freedom. Earlier popes and councils had rejected any such idea: "error has no rights," the saying went. Freedom to choose one's religion implied accepting the possibility that someone might make the "wrong" choice, and that led only to indifference. Now, the official position of the church was that the inherent dignity of all people gave them the right to choose their own faith: "in matters religious no one is to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his own beliefs."<sup>74</sup> Catholics had once defined the interreligious agenda as a matter of Protestants recognizing that they had been wrong for all those centuries and "returning" to Rome; now, there was a basis for discussion on more equal terms.

With this encouragement, American Catholics cautiously explored common religious ground with their neighbors. It was absurd, one lay group said in 1966, "to pretend that there are no serious differences between religions," but it was no less absurd "to assume that there are nothing *but* differences." Programs of "living room dialogues" began, with people from different churches

meeting to learn about one another's faith. "The principle behind the discussion," one guidebook said, "is to explore and express your own values, not to convince the other person." Joint prayer services were encouraged, provided that they stayed within limits. Catholics attending them did not thereby satisfy their Sunday Mass obligation, for instance, and the line was always drawn at common reception of the Eucharist, which remained a theologically thorny issue. The first steps in such dialogues were usually the hardest. Priests in Boston were urged to take the lead in approaching local Protestant clergy, perhaps by inviting them to lunch, but they nonetheless had to observe unspoken rules. "Protestants, at least in the New England area," the archbishop's office explained in 1965, almost like an anthropologist describing an exotic remote tribe, "do not expect a lavish spread; [they] may even misunderstand or resent 'all-out' hospitality." It was therefore a good idea to charge them for lunch—"usually \$1.00 or \$1.50"—as this made "reciprocal hospitality a lesser burden." Venturing into this uncertain territory, Catholics began to have religious contact with non-Catholics, and the experience could be powerful. It was "strange and marvelous," said a parishioner in Cleveland, New York, near Syracuse, after attending a prayer service in the local Episcopal church, "the first [event] of its kind since the founding of the village of Cleveland."<sup>75</sup>

Some lay men and women already had personal experience with a non-Catholic: those who had married one. The church had long discouraged "mixed marriages," and it did so, a college theology textbook explained as late as 1960, "for reasons only too fully justified by sad experience." Not only did such marriages "imply a communication in things divine with a heretic," but they also posed a "great danger to the faith of the Catholic party and often to that of the children as well." In an effort to check this "evil"—the section in the theology text discussing the subject was twenty-three lines long, and it used the word "evil" eight

times—the church had several ways of discouraging marriage across religious lines. Such marriages could not be celebrated in the parish church, for example: most often, they were conducted in the rectory parlor, and no Mass could be said. The non-Catholic party had to swear not to interfere with the Catholic's religious practice and to vow that any children born of the marriage would be raised as Catholics. Looking further down the road of life, non-Catholic spouses were also informed that they would have to be buried apart from their husband or wife, since "heretics" could not be admitted to the consecrated ground of a Catholic cemetery. We will never know how many interreligious courtships foundered on these rocks, but the rate of intermarriage was always low. In one large Boston parish in the 1860s and 1870s, for example, only 6 percent of the marriages united a Catholic with a member of another church.<sup>76</sup>

A century later, mixed marriages became more common. Like Boston, Detroit had had a low rate of intermarriage in the nineteenth century, but it rose steadily in the twentieth: about 22 percent in the 1930s, and 34 percent by the 1960s. As Catholics left their tightly bound urban neighborhoods and moved to the suburbs, they increased their likelihood of meeting and marrying someone of a different faith. External circumstances also threw people together as never before: the number of mixed marriages went up during the Second World War. The rate varied by region, depending on the ratio of Catholics to other religious groups: more than half the marriages in the Deep South united Catholics and non-Catholics during the 1940s and 1950s, while only one-quarter of those in the mid-Atlantic states did so. By the 1980s, however, nearly 40 percent of all Catholic marriages nationwide were "mixed," and the church faced this reality by moderating its earlier condemnations. Insisting on "rigid rules," one priest said, "just won't do." The mandatory promises by the non-Catholic were eliminated in 1971; the wedding ceremony could

be performed with a Mass in the church; and a clergyman from the non-Catholic tradition could participate. Just as important, the laity's attitude toward the subject had changed. More than three-quarters of Catholics, surveyed in 1958, agreed that, "as a general rule," it was better to marry someone of their own faith; by 1971, only a bare majority felt that way, and thereafter opinion on the subject gradually slipped into indifference.<sup>77</sup>

Cooperation between Catholics and non-Catholics was more publicly apparent when it was directed toward larger problems in American society. The years of Vatican II coincided with dramatic social change in the United States, including the civil rights movement, opposition to American participation in the war in Vietnam, and changing roles for women. Increasingly, Catholics made common cause with non-Catholic churches and church people in addressing these issues. After the somewhat hesitant start made by local Catholic Interracial Councils, for example, Catholics joined the campaign for civil rights, much of it organized by black Protestant ministers. Catholics even offered their own martyr to the cause. Viola Liuzzo, a convert from Michigan, was murdered by three members of the Alabama Ku Klux Klan in March 1965, as she was driving along a country road with fellow demonstrators from the galvanizing march from Selma to Montgomery. Civil rights leaders, including Martin Luther King, Jr., and Roy Wilkins of the NAACP, joined labor union officials Walter Reuther and Jimmy Hoffa—Liuzzo's husband was an officer of the Teamsters union—at her funeral Mass in Immaculate Heart of Mary Church in Detroit. The outpouring of interreligious grief on this occasion matched that shown just two weeks earlier, when forty thousand mourners (most of them Catholics) had crowded the Boston Common to express outrage over the death of James Reeb, a Unitarian minister from that city who had also been gunned down near Selma.<sup>78</sup>

Catholics' efforts to promote racial equality were complicated,

however, by the changing demographics of northern cities. In many places, an influx of African Americans into previously all-white Catholic neighborhoods created tensions and even sparked violence. The moral clarity of the civil rights movement blurred when focus shifted from the South onto problems closer to home. In many places, the clergy moved significantly ahead of their parishioners in calling for an end to discrimination in housing and employment. In 1964, priests in Cleveland's Murray Hill neighborhood, trying to reason with a crowd protesting school integration, were greeted with shouts from their own people of "Mind your own business, Father." A year later, Father James Groppi, a white priest in Milwaukee, led an integrated march into one of the city's Polish neighborhoods. He was met by five thousand residents chanting, "Eee-yi-eee-yi-ee-yi oh, Father Groppi's got to go." In cities across the North, many white Catholics, heedless of sermons urging acceptance of integration, fled their traditional ethnic enclaves. Saint Agnes parish in Flint, Michigan, was only one example among many. In a single year (1970–1971), the parish lost two hundred of its twelve hundred families as African Americans bought houses on the city's northwest side, aided by a new open housing law. The decline continued thereafter; by 1980, there were only about two hundred families left in the parish. "They try and force integration on us and we'll rebel," an Italian-American parishioner in Cicero, Illinois, had said in similar circumstances in 1967. He spoke for many.<sup>79</sup>

Lay Catholics' opposition to social activism on the part of their priests ironically drew some of its energy from the changed relationship between clergy and laity that had come with Vatican II. The priests in Cleveland were not the only ones to be told by their parishioners to "mind your own business." Lay people who felt this way could justify their stance in part by all the talk they had heard about how they themselves were the church. When Chicago's Cardinal John Cody expressed his support for integra-

tion in the Cicero case, the same angry parishioner abruptly responded, "Cody wasn't elected by us." Ten years earlier, few Catholic laymen would have expressed such sentiments aloud, even if they had thought them. During one demonstration by a largely Irish-American Catholic crowd opposing school busing in Boston in 1974, a parade of women marched past their local parish church. They were loudly praying the rosary, imploring the Virgin Mary's help to reverse a court order that the city's public schools be desegregated. When one of the priests, gathered on the church steps, told them they should not be praying for such a thing, they taunted him. "See," they shouted back, "we don't need you anymore. We deal with God directly."<sup>80</sup> This was not the kind of "dealing with God directly" that the bishops of the council had had in mind, but the door once opened proved hard to shut.

Catholic opinion about the war in Vietnam generally mirrored that of the rest of the population. Several priests were known for opposing the war, including the Berrigan brothers, Daniel and Philip, who broke into a draft board outside Baltimore, took some of the files, and set them ablaze with homemade napalm. Lay Catholics, too, joined the antiwar cause. At a rally in New York in October 1965, David Miller, a twenty-two-year-old from the Catholic Worker house in Manhattan, became one of the first young men to burn his draft card, and four more Catholic Workers did the same two weeks later. Yet another Catholic Worker tore his card in half and mailed it to the attorney general, while still another went so far as to set himself on fire in front of the United Nations building, imitating the Buddhist monks who protested in that way in Saigon. Congress had only recently increased the penalties for draft-card burning, and Miller and the others were picked up by the police, tried, and convicted. Miller's sentence was suspended, provided that he get a new draft card and carry it at all times; this was something, he told the judge, he would not do, and so he was arrested again.



Not all Catholics thought this form of activism was wise. Although *America* magazine called it “stupid” for the courts to send him to jail for his victimless crime, the Catholic periodical thought it was “equally stupid” for Miller to expend so much energy in trying to get the government to do exactly that. Others protested the protests. Egged on by a local state legislator, a crowd of seventy-five high school boys in the Irish Catholic neighborhood of South Boston, Massachusetts, “pinned down and pummeled” seven draft-card burners.<sup>81</sup> The war divided all Americans, and Catholics felt those divisions no less than their fellow citizens.

The far more fractious issue complicating Catholics’ relationship to American public life came with the ruling of the U.S. Supreme Court in January 1973 in the case of *Roe v. Wade*. The court’s action, invalidating most restrictions on abortion, surprised nearly everyone and short-circuited legislative debates then under way in New York, New Jersey, and elsewhere that were progressively modifying restrictive statutes. Catholics were quick to denounce the decision. Within a week of *Roe*, Lawrence Hogan, a Catholic congressman from Maryland, introduced a constitutional amendment to overturn the ruling, and Senator James Buckley from New York, another Catholic, announced that he would push a similar measure. Senator Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts, head of what was probably the nation’s most prominent Catholic political family, decried abortion as “not in accordance with the value which our civilization places on human life.” As late as 1979, he was still proudly pointing to his votes against abortion, “whether it is to be paid for by private or public funds—whether the woman is rich or poor.” Support for the court’s decision grew, however, especially among Democrats such as Kennedy, who came to describe his position as “evolving.” By the time of his 1994 reelection campaign, he was proclaiming, “I am pro-choice,” while, in a swipe at his rival (who had a fundamentally similar position), “my opponent is multiple choice.”<sup>82</sup> It

was a clever line, but it showed just how tricky the political terrain of abortion could be.

The nation's Catholic bishops hoped to lead a "pro-life" charge, but their position had been weakened by the opposition of lay people to the church's teaching on birth control, spelled out in *Humanae Vitae* just five years before. John Deedy, an editor of *Commonweal* magazine, noted the "wide and in some quarters deeply felt" Catholic desire to protect the unborn, but he predicted that "quiet disregard for the bishops' moral counsel" on the one issue would spread to the other. He was right on both counts. Catholics remained uneasy about unrestricted access to abortion. A Gallup poll taken immediately after the *Roe* decision showed that only 36 percent of Catholics agreed with it, as opposed to 45 percent of Protestants. At the same time, however, 56 percent of Catholics were willing to leave the decision about abortion to the woman in question and her doctor. A decade later, two-thirds of American Catholics still declared their opposition to abortion on demand, but by then an even wider majority of them had come to think that the procedure should be legal in at least some circumstances. A September 2000 poll indicated that 46 percent of Catholics defined themselves as basically pro-life, with a slightly higher number (49 percent) describing themselves as pro-choice. Many insisted that they were personally opposed to abortion but thought it should nonetheless remain legal; at the same time, Catholics were more likely than other Americans to be uncomfortable with resort to abortion simply because a child was declared "unwanted."<sup>83</sup>

The debate on abortion continues today, but its impact for Catholics was most evident at the polls. The two major political parties moved toward contrasting positions on the issue, with Democrats more supportive of access to abortion and Republicans more likely to support restrictions or even an outright ban. This division helped put Catholic voters in play as they had not

been for some time. Catholics had long been overwhelmingly Democratic, but many now found themselves more comfortable in the Republican ranks. In the 1980s, Ronald Reagan was particularly successful at tapping this fluidity, attracting large numbers of formerly Democratic voters with his strong pro-life stance as well as his economic and social policies. On the other side of the aisle, Mario Cuomo, the Catholic governor of New York who was perennially on the list of possible Democratic presidential candidates (though he never ran), tried to articulate a stance on abortion that could be summarized as “personally opposed, but legal.” In a widely reported speech at Notre Dame University in 1984, Cuomo advanced this view. Although it mirrored the opinion of many Catholics, they still voted for the other party. Reagan was reelected in a landslide that year, swamping a Democratic ticket that included Geraldine Ferraro, a Catholic congresswoman whose pro-choice stance had been denounced by several bishops. Thereafter, Catholics shifted back and forth between the parties, making them, at least for a time, the quintessential “swing voters.”<sup>84</sup>

The abortion debate attracted the most public notice, but it was only one of many issues affecting Catholic Americans in the 1960s and after. For them, the upheaval of those decades seemed more comprehensive than it was for other Americans, for it touched not just politics but their religious identity as well. They had originally been surprised by the “People of God” theology of Vatican II, but they embraced it, in part because it reinforced their new understanding of themselves as thinking adults who engaged with the world on their terms. They quickly became accustomed to active participation in the Mass and the sacraments because that was what autonomous, “thinking” adults did. No more passive watching of a ritual they did not understand. They made the effort at personalizing their faith, too: if they were going to stay in the church, it would mean something to them. Increasingly, American Catholics accepted the responsi-

bility to think about their faith and to act on it, not just to go through the motions.

This new attitude changed the relationship between lay people and their church, as loyalty and dissent, adherence and disaffection, now coexisted. The faithful remained faithful, but they had also, to some degree, “lapsed.” On the one hand, there were many signs of continued loyalty. The rapidity with which they accepted the near-total overhaul of weekly Mass showed that they wanted to make more of an effort to understand their religion. The skyrocketing rate at which they went to Communion showed that they were eager for the most intimate connection to the mysteries of their faith. The impulse to find a personal spiritual director or to express their beliefs in the charismatic movement evinced a desire to be a part of the church as they explored new expressions of it. Even their unorthodox position on the ordination of women demonstrated their loyalty. Most American Catholics wanted women to be ordained, and they remained unpersuaded by the church’s arguments against the idea. But they were unwilling to take matters into their own hands by ordaining women in defiance of church regulations. They would wait for some future day when that could happen within the rules of their own church.

On the other hand, the links between Catholics and the institutional church were weakened. A sense of religious self-confidence opened the possibility that lay people might not follow the church’s lead if such a course made no sense to them. They would point out that they had not elected their archbishop if he was telling them to do something they did not want to do. Dissent from the church’s position on contraception offered the clearest case. The man who rejected the teaching on birth control because, “all of a sudden,” it made no sense to him was not the only one to have such an epiphany. The collapse of the practice of confession was the religious expression of that seismic shift.

Confession was no longer meaningful, and so Catholics simply stopped going, even as the church tried—unsuccessfully, it was clear—to breathe new life into the sacrament. Catholics flocked in large numbers to cheer the pope, but they did not always think or do what he commanded once they went back home. Lay people who could say to their priests, “We don’t need you anymore” had doubtless misinterpreted the theologians who asserted that people were, in a way, priests too. Still, they had reason to think that they had absorbed a broader spirit of council.

Thus the clarity of the American Catholic world in the years before Vatican II was replaced with both a new vitality and a new volatility. Some people succeeded at forging a new relationship to their faith, while others did not. Some found ways to challenge the positions of the church while still thinking of themselves as Catholics. Sometimes they agreed with their leaders, acting and voting accordingly; sometimes they disagreed, acting and voting accordingly. The sense of autonomy, of “Catholic adulthood,” was pervasive, and once the centrality of the laity in the church had been endorsed, there was no predicting where it might lead. Only those on the fringes hoped for a simple return to the world before the council, to the silent Mass in which most participants spent their time looking around and checking their watches. Given the extent of cultural change in American society in the second half of the twentieth century, that well-ordered world probably could not have survived in any case. Once it was gone, there was no bringing it back. These were, without doubt, exciting times to be a Catholic, but they were also times of uncertainty. The institution of the church was challenged, and the consequences of its weakened position became only too apparent as a new century opened.