

GAUDIUM ET SPES AND CATHOLIC POLITICIANS—SOME AMERICAN CASE STUDIES

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Abstract

This paper initially summarizes the position of the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World regarding the role of those who pursue the political vocation. But it is not primarily an analysis as to the meaning of the document. Rather it is an exploration of its impact—or lack thereof—in the United States. It examines whether *Gaudium et Spes* penetrated to Catholics in American public life and, if so, to what effect. The paper looks at a number of significant figures among “Catholic politicians.” The list of those examined is neither representative nor exhaustive. [All considered are Democrats!] Nonetheless, I trust that exploring their experiences will further understanding of the impact of the pastoral constitution.

Introduction: At some point during the 2004 contest in Iowa for the Democratic Party’s presidential nomination I watched the then nine candidates participating in some kind of televised debate. Brief summaries were given on the screen about the backgrounds of each candidate (age, marital status, children, religious background etc). I noted that four of the nine listed their religion as “Catholic.” They were John Kerry, Wesley Clark, Carol Mosely-Braun, and Dennis Kucinich.¹ Perhaps one might have been pleased that four Catholics were seeking their party’s nomination for the highest office in the United States. Instead, I found myself disappointed that these individuals were the Catholics running for the presidency and wondered what, if anything, their religious affiliation meant for their practice of politics. On an initial examination it did not appear to mean much. Such thinking led to reflection of how this circumstance had come to pass? How had a situation arisen where Catholics running for public office seemed very detached from the social teachings of their Church? What had happened in the almost four decades since the passage of *Gaudium et Spes* at the Second Vatican Council—this pastoral constitution which set forth a comprehensive vision for the role which the Church and its members should play in the world. Would any of the four candidates have had the least familiarity with it?

***Gaudium et Spes* and the Role of the Politician:** As numerous commentators have noted *Gaudium et Spes* developed a theme of openness to the world. Its optimistic tone gave voice to a sense that there was much common ground among Christians and non-Christians as they sought to work for the common good. In its second chapter the document stated clearly that God “has willed that all men should constitute one family and treat one another in a spirit of brotherhood.” (para 24) Man’s vocation was communitarian in nature. The Council fathers emphasized the

interdependence of the person and the society, the importance of the common good and the innate dignity of every human person.

While the tone was optimistic the Council was clear that there was much work to be done. For example in fleshing out its position on the dignity of persons (in para 27) the Council deemed as “infamies” practices “opposed to life itself”—(among them: “any type of murder, genocide, abortion, euthanasia, or willful self-destruction”); practices that violate “the integrity of the human person;” and practices that insult “human dignity”—including “subhuman living conditions, arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, slavery, prostitution, the selling of women and children; as well as disgraceful working conditions.” The Council fathers made clear to believers that one could not be content “with a merely individualistic morality.” Each person was to contribute to the common good, “according to his own abilities and the needs of others.” (para 30) Every one was encouraged to step away from the individualistic ethic and to participate in common endeavors. Through such efforts Christians would participate in the Church’s mission to serve “as a leaven and as a kind of soul for human society as it is to be renewed in Christ and transformed into God’s family.” (para 40)

From such foundations *Gaudium et Spes* approached very positively the whole issue of political participation. “The Church regards as worthy of praise and consideration,” the document states, “the work of those who, as a service to others, dedicate themselves to the welfare of the state and undertake the burden of this task.” (para 75) With the political vocation so honored the Council encouraged all Christians in the political community to “give conspicuous example of devotion to the sense of duty and of service to the advancement of the common good.” (para 75)

In summary both the text and spirit of *Gaudium et Spes* conveyed clearly that Christian politicians were called upon to engage the modern world in ways that would promote the dignity of each person and the common good. They were to serve within their own domain as “leaven” if you will. They were not to see their political activities as separate from their religious commitments. The Council fathers made this clear in an oft-quoted passage which I include here:

This council exhorts Christians, as citizens of two cities, to strive to discharge their earthly duties conscientiously and in response to the gospel spirit. They are mistaken who, knowing that we have here no abiding city but seek one which is to come, think that they may therefore shirk their earthly responsibilities. For they are forgetting that by the faith itself they are more than ever obliged to measure up to these duties, each according to his proper vocation.

Nor, on the contrary, are they any less wide of the mark who think that religion consists in acts of worship alone and in the discharge of certain moral obligation, and who imagine they can plunge themselves into earthly affairs in such a way as to imply that these are altogether divorced from the religious life. This split between the faith which many profess and their daily lives deserves to be counted among the more serious errors of our age. (para 43)

The Council was very clear: “Therefore, let there be no false opposition between professional and social activities on the one part, and religious life on the other.” (para 43)

John F. Kennedy and Privatized Religion: In order to gauge the impact of *Gaudium et Spes* on Catholic politicians in the United States, it is necessary to set a context. The key part of that relates to John F. Kennedy's election to the American presidency in 1960 and the conditions to which he readily agreed so as to secure his election. The election of a Catholic to the presidency in 1960 was undoubtedly a milestone. John Kennedy's election seemed to shatter the last political barrier obstructing America's acceptance of Catholics. Kennedy's apparent idealism, his willingness to conquer new frontiers and then his tragic assassination locked him into a revered position in the American public mind. Certainly many Catholics accorded him such treatment. Fr. Andrew Greeley even asked in 1967 if JFK should not be canonized because he had "put to rest forever the fear that Catholicism was an alien religion and that Catholic political leaders would use their positions to interfere with American freedoms."² Yet in the perspective given by the last four decades it seems clear that the election of a Catholic to the presidency meant little in terms of the impact of religion on public policy.

The election of JFK meant only a conditional acceptance of Catholicism into the mainstream of American life. It was an acceptance made on conditions which Kennedy explicitly promised he would accept – that he would "relegate his religion to a purely private status" and that he would not act on public policy in any recognizably Catholic way.³ (As James Hitchcock rather sarcastically noted: "this promise was rendered immeasurably easier by the fact, revealed later by a number of people including his wife, that President Kennedy was neither very devout nor very knowledgeable about his religion."⁴) JFK does not appear to have been overly influenced by a religious worldview or by religiously-based convictions. Both critics like Garry Wills, who finds JFK "rootless," and court historians like Arthur Schlesinger who claims that JFK "took religion . . . with detachment" agree on this.⁵ Who knows what role faith plays in someone's inner life but the external evidence suggests that JFK was a "political Catholic" -- a public persona maintained because it was essential to his winning office in Massachusetts but then a problem to be dealt with when seeking higher national office in a nation still suspicious of Catholics.⁶

In narrow political terms JFK dealt with the issue effectively in the 1960 campaign. In his famous speech to the Protestant ministers in Houston in 1960 he advocated an extreme form of church-state separation and essentially the privatization of religion.⁷ His religion would not influence how he exercised his public office. He would compartmentalize his faith. By and large, he kept his promise. Certainly he did not seek to press specifically Catholic aims, such as including funding for parochial schools in his federal aid for education bill.⁸ (This, by the way, led Billy Graham to observe of Kennedy that he "turned out to be a Baptist president."⁹) But the absence of any effort to push for Catholic goals on this institutional level can be defended easily on the grounds of political realities. Protestant 'watchdogs' waited like circling vultures to accuse him of favoring his own faith. But more notable is the lack of values or foundational principles for the Kennedy administration. It was rooted (if that is the term) in what one writer has called "modern pragmatism."¹⁰ Matters of right and wrong were not important -- rather the issue was what would work; what would further the political success of the Kennedy administration; what would assure JFK's re-election in 1964. (His cautious stance on civil rights is evidence for this).

The impact of the election of a Catholic rather ironically meant a further triumph of the secular in the public sphere as Mark Massa has demonstrated so well in his *Catholics and American Culture*. Sadly, Kennedy blazed a trail which many subsequent politicians who are Catholics have followed. Documents from the Second Vatican Council would hardly have some privileged role in guiding Catholic politicians. Many would tend to look instead to the approach pursued by the most successful Catholic in American politics to that point.

Initial Response: Eugene McCarthy and Robert F. Kennedy: *Gaudium et Spes* received Pope Paul VI's signature on December 7, 1965. It's initial impact in the United States coincided with a period in which the optimistic mood which began the 1960s was considerably tempered. Nonetheless the efforts of the Johnson administration in civil rights and in its "war on poverty" seemed broadly in synch with the thrust of the pastoral constitution in regard to promoting the common good and enhancing the dignity of persons. Catholic liberals seemed supported in a general sense by the social teachings of the Council. While conservative Catholics like William F. Buckley expressed reservations about the work of Vatican II, Catholic liberals took heart from the pastoral constitution.¹¹ After 1966 two liberal Catholic senators increasingly moved towards the center stage of American politics—Eugene McCarthy and Robert F. Kennedy. In 1968 they emerged as top contenders for the Democratic presidential nomination.

Robert Kennedy was a more 'tribal' Catholic than McCarthy. He felt his religion much more deeply than his brother and it certainly influenced his values and approach to public policy. Especially after his political "conversion experience" following his brother's assassination, he emerged as a man deeply concerned for the common good, a man who could genuinely identify with suffering and who possessed an aptitude for empathy. His biographer Arthur Schlesinger would describe him as the "tribune of the underclass" deeply committed to social change, which was similar to the solidarity with others of which the Council fathers had spoken.¹² RFK displayed qualities of compassion and courage which appeared rooted in religious and moral conviction. His emphasis on strengthening community pursued from 1965 to 1968 certainly seemed in synch with the spirit of the Council.

Eugene McCarthy, more so than either Kennedy, "was very clearly a Catholic, a man whose public stance reflected an inner commitment and temperament characteristic of Christian Democracy."¹³ Born in rural Minnesota, McCarthy attended St. John's University in Collegeville where he developed a firm grasp of and commitment to the principles of Catholic social thought. McCarthy was a long-time contributor of articles to the liberal Catholic magazine, *Commonweal*, and as Rodger Van Allen commented, he was "a person to whom the tag 'Commonweal Catholic' might suitably be applied."¹⁴ He clearly saw politics as a vocation and rejected the privatizing of religion. In his book *Frontiers of American Democracy* published in 1960 McCarthy argued that a religious politician, if he were "whole," was necessarily driven by his faith. McCarthy explained that both his anti-communism and his liberalism emerged from his faith.¹⁵ He stood in stark contrast to the views that JFK put before the protestant ministers in Houston.

Both Robert Kennedy and Eugene McCarthy in their different ways gave hope of modeling for a new generation of Catholic politicians a way of relating religious convictions with political endeavors that would be in line with the call of the Second Vatican Council. Sadly, little came

of this hope. By 1968 when McCarthy and Kennedy campaigned for the Democratic nomination, U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War had come to dominate the American political agenda. Both McCarthy and Kennedy emerged as opponents of Lyndon Johnson's Vietnam War policies and their candidacies had an oppositional tone which precluded them putting forth a full and positive vision. And, of course, neither gained power and so neither was able to demonstrate through action the nature of his approach. Robert Kennedy was slain in Los Angeles in June of 1968 and Eugene McCarthy lost the nomination to Hubert Humphrey and with it, it seems, his bearings. He went into "a prolonged sulk" and left the senate and the world of serious politics behind.¹⁶ This was a tragic loss as he was a politician gifted with the intellectual powers to forge a public approach which combined concern for the dignity of the individual with concern for the common good.

1968 Revisited: Political, Cultural and Religious Upheaval: Not only did the year 1968 see the removal of RFK and McCarthy as potential exemplars for Catholic politicians, it (along with the years that surround it) also marked the occasion for an enormous upheaval in the U.S. *Gaudium et Spes* had referred rather optimistically to the Church's contributing to the social and cultural transformation of the world, but the late sixties saw unleashed a series of forces that changed significantly and deleteriously the arena in which Catholic politicians would be called upon to work. We can only allude to these forces here, although one gets a sense of the magnitude of them if one takes seriously the judgment of the [very sober] historian Philip Gleason that during the decade "the nation as a whole experienced its greatest upheaval—indeed, crisis—since the Civil War." At the very time the nation went through this upheaval the Church through the work of the Council set about a series of changes in its practices and institutions that left Catholics in what Gleason termed (with some understatement) a "state of 'confusion.'"¹⁷ It was hardly an easy combination.

In Gleason's view "the turmoil unleashed by the racial crisis, the Vietnam War and protests against it, the New Left, campus riots, the sexual revolution, the drug culture, and other manifestations of social, political and cultural radicalism greatly augmented the more specifically religious destabilization caused by Vatican II and the post-conciliar spirit."¹⁸ These years marked a challenge to traditional institutions and authorities including political, educational and religious.¹⁹ In this atmosphere of considerable dissent Pope Paul VI's encyclical *Humanae Vitae* (issued in July 1968) sparked a severe American reaction.²⁰ Many Catholics simply rejected the encyclical's ban on artificial birth control and encouraged by various theologians and opinion leaders they fell back on the argument of individual conscience to justify their stance. It seems that the new attitude to Church teaching in the area of sexuality and birth control flowed quickly into other areas. The emphasis came to be placed on the individual's consideration of the Church's teaching.

This emphasis was completely in line with what in hindsight we can now see as the driving forces of the 'sixties revolution'—namely "individualism and atomization." Emerging from the sixties came an "ethos of personal liberation, sexual freedom and self-fulfillment."²¹ And, rather strangely this 'ethos' found its political home in the Democratic Party, especially with the 'McGovernization' of the party during 1972. The party that had been the traditional home of Catholics from the mid-19th century onwards began to move in directions decidedly contrary to the social teachings of the Catholic Church. In particular the efforts to legalize abortion

intensified in the late 1960s put special stress on the liberal-Catholic alliance that had proved so successful in American politics from the time of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal.²²

Catholic Democrats in a New Party: Strangely, as this remarkable transformation of the Democratic Party took place most Catholic office holders largely stood by and acquiesced in the process. Edward Kennedy, the third prominent Kennedy brother in politics, quickly overcame any reservations about the new direction of the Democratic Party and became a vocal spokesperson for it. His brother –in-law Sargent Shriver, a deeply serious and committed Catholic, tried to hold to a more ‘pro-life’ stance but met only electoral defeat in Democratic primaries during 1976.²³ Without any great or significant debate the ‘social/cultural liberalism’ of the contemporary Democratic Party quickly took control with its emphasis on individual autonomy and ‘privacy.’ Catholic Democrats –even old-style New Deal Catholic liberals like House Speaker Thomas P. ‘Tip’ O’Neill—discovered that to get ahead one must go along with the now dominant wing of the party.²⁴ The new expression developed that while one was ‘personally opposed’ to something on moral grounds, one could not seek to impose one’s views on others. One must leave decisions to their individual choice. This approach was certainly evidenced by the Catholic Congresswoman Geraldine Ferraro in her run for the vice-presidency in 1984.²⁵

Ferraro’s position appeared to develop from the political requirements necessary to make her way in the Democratic Party. She gave no well-considered defense of it. This task fell to New York Governor Mario Cuomo who gave a much-publicized address at the University of Notre Dame in 1984. Cuomo announced that he accepted the teaching authority of his church and its doctrine on abortion. But he refused to concede that this should lead him to support either legislation or a constitutional amendment to limit or ban abortion. Instead, he appealed to “Catholic realism,” suggesting that any ban on abortion would be divisive and would not work anyway. Thus came his fundamental principle: “The values derived from religious belief will not—and should not—be accepted as part of the public morality unless they are shared by the pluralistic community at large, by consensus.”²⁶

Thoughtful commentators relentlessly dismantled Cuomo’s ‘Catholic realism’ principle, asking if it should be applied on other great moral questions such as racial discrimination. What became apparent was that Cuomo joined JFK in consigning his religious convictions to a private domain. And like JFK before him, he provided helpful cover for the battalions of “I’m-personally-opposed-but” Catholic politicians who lacked the courage to take a principled stand on the abortion issue. Cuomo’s refusal to do anything to build a political consensus in opposition to abortion confirmed the moral bankruptcy of his stance. If he had insisted that abortion was morally wrong, an evil which needed first to be contained and then placed “in the course of ultimate extinction” (as his hero Abraham Lincoln had said of slavery in 1858), his position might have proved more defensible. Instead, Cuomo insisted on campaigning for public funding for abortion to make it more readily available. He defended one of the most permissive abortion regimes in any democratic nation, even when it was apparent that the American public preferred some restraints on access to abortion.

The privatized religion model triumphed despite the efforts and appeal of those who pushed the ‘consistent ethic of life/seamless garment’ approach in the 1980s and the courageous witness of

the pro-life governor of Pennsylvania, Robert P. Casey, who was denied the opportunity to speak at the Democratic convention in 1992.²⁷ The increasingly blunt pronouncements from official Church teaching regarding the responsibilities of Catholic politicians in encyclicals like *Evangelium Vitae* (1995) and in the “Doctrinal Note on Some Questions Regarding the Participation of Catholics in Political Life” went largely unnoticed. Hence in 2004 John Kerry could describe himself as “a believing and practicing Catholic,” yet there was a sense that he was guided essentially by the same “modern pragmatism” that had guided his hero, John F. Kennedy.²⁸ Forty years on from Vatican II, Kerry wanted to make it clear, just as JFK had done, that he would be a president who happened to be Catholic, not a Catholic president. Perhaps not surprisingly he came across as a secular, ivy-league trained, Massachusetts-type liberal. Kerry had difficulty speaking in religious terms or conveying anything of his religious outlook beyond some unproblematic generalities. Harkening back to JFK he tried to suggest that one’s personal religious convictions should be kept out of politics and he claimed a New Englander’s reticence to discuss his faith in public. He indicated little familiarity with Catholic social teaching and on a range of controversial issues he adopted positions which placed him in explicit opposition to his Church’s formal teaching. He went to Mass regularly on Sunday and got ashes on his forehead on Ash Wednesday but didn’t seem able to convey that his religion shaped his public outlook—perhaps because it didn’t in any noticeable way.

A Task Ahead: Sadly the impact of *Gaudium et Spes* on Catholic politicians has been minimal at best. Catholic politicians have hid behind the notion that religion is a private matter and have blended in and refrained from utilizing their religion as an inspiration and guide for their actions. And this despite the fact that the fundamental problems of the American polity and society—the decline of family and community, unrestrained individualism at the expense of the common good, rampant relativism in values—presented a unique opportunity and challenge to Catholics in the public domain. The “private religion” excuse has spread far and is now well implanted among the increasing number of Catholics in the Republican Party—among them George Pataki, Rudy Giuliani, Tom Ridge and Arnold Schwarzenegger.

Prospects for any rapid change seem dim and yet we might conclude with a recognition that we are still receiving the teachings of the Council and still understanding its depths. The task ahead for those gathered here is to dedicate ourselves anew to seeking to convey that one’s religious convictions are not to be divorced from one’s political actions. Those of us involved in the work of education might take special heart from the call of *Gaudium et Spes* for the education of youth” so as to produce “those great-souled persons who are so desperately required by our times.” (para 31). We need them now more than ever.

¹ It was later revealed that although Wesley Clark still listed himself as Catholic he and his wife worshipped at a Presbyterian Church.

² Andrew M. Greeley, *the American Catholic Experience: An Interpretation of the History of American Catholicism* (Garden City, N.Y., 1967), pp. 274-92.

³ My analysis here draws on Mark Massa, *Catholics and American Culture: Fulton Sheen, Dorothy Day and the Notre Dame Football Team* (New York, 1990), pp. 128-47.

⁴ James Hitchcock, *On the present Position of Catholics in America* (New York, 1978), p. 4

⁵ See Gary Wills' chapter "Semi-Irish," in *the Kennedy Imprisonment: A Meditation on Power* (Boston, 1981), pp. 61-71. For Schlesinger's views see his comparison of the religious beliefs on John and Robert Kennedy in his *Robert Kennedy and his Times* (Boston, 1978), p. 17 & pp. 600-02.

⁶ On this see Owen Dudley Edwards, "Remembering the Kennedys," *Journal of American Studies* Vol. 18 (December, 1984), p. 418.

⁷ On Kennedy's 1960 campaign see James S. Wolfe, "Exclusion, Fusion or Dialogue: How Should Religion and Politics Relate?" *Journal of Church and State* Vol. 22 (Winter, 1980), pp. 90-94. Wolfe examines well the implications of Kennedy's famous campaign speech before the Protestant ministers in Houston. Also see Mark Massa's fine analysis in his *Catholics and American Culture*, p. 128-32.

⁸ See Arthur M. Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (Boston, 1965), pp. 662-63; and Mary T. Hanna, *Catholic and American Politics* (Cambridge, Mass., 1974), p. 211.

⁹ Marshall Frady, *Billy Graham: A Parable of American Righteousness* (Boston, 1979), p. 446.

¹⁰ Wolfe, "Exclusion, Fusion or Dialogue," p. 93-94.

¹¹ The ideas first presented in William F. Buckley, Jr., *God and Man at Yale* (published in 1951), namely a defense of individualism, capitalism and religion, ran at odds with the broad thrust of *Gaudium et Spes*. Buckley, however, seemed most troubled by the liturgical changes which the Council proposed. See his "The End of the Latin Mass," in William F. Buckley, Jr., *The Jeweler's Eye* (New York, 1968), pp. 319-24.

¹² On RFK I rely primarily on Schlesinger's *Robert F. Kennedy and His Times*. Also see Joseph A. Palermo, *In His Own Right: The Political Odyssey of Senator Robert F. Kennedy* (New York, 2001) which emphasizes Robert Kennedy's profound transformation.

¹³ David J. O'Brien, *the Renewal of American Catholicism* (New York, 1972), p. 178. McCarthy in 1960 had quipped: "I should run for president—I'm twice as Catholic as Kennedy and twice as liberal as Humphrey." For the quip and more details on McCarthy see Abigail McCarthy, *Private Faces: Public Places* (Garden City, N.Y., 1972) esp. p. 236.

¹⁴ Roger Van Allen, *The Commonweal and American Catholicism* (Philadelphia, 1974), pp. 161-62.

¹⁵ For details of the connection between McCarthy's religion and politics see Dominic Sandbrook, *Eugene McCarthy: The Rise and Fall of Postwar American Liberalism* (New York, 2004). The quotation from McCarthy's *Frontiers of American Democracy* is taken from Sandbrook, p. 80.

¹⁶ Irving Howe, who worked in the McCarthy's 1968 campaign, remarked that "he went into a prolonged sulk, abandoning his seat in the Senate as well as the thousands who had rallied behind him and who, had he persisted, might have formed the basis for a renewed liberalism. How speculated that "some disastrous streak of cultural snobism or intellectual perversity overtook this very intelligent man." Irving Howe, *A Margin of Hope: An Intellectual Autobiography* (New York, 1982), pp. 312-13.

¹⁷ Gleason's thinking is presented in summary fashion in "The Catholic Church in American Public Life in the Twentieth Century," *Logos* Vol. 3 (Fall, 2000), pp. 94-97.

¹⁸ Gleason, p. 96.

¹⁹ The literature on the 'sixties' on American Catholics is huge but note the thoughtful (and brief) essay by John Haas, "1968 Revisited," in *American Catholic Studies Newsletter* Vol. 25 (Fall, 1998), p. 1; pp. 7-10.

²⁰ On the American reaction to *Humanae Vitae* see Donald T. Critchlow, *Intended Consequences: Birth Control, Abortion, and the Federal Government in Modern America* (New York, 1999), pp. 130-132.

²¹ Lindsay Tanner, *Crowded Lives* (Melbourne, 2003), p. 32.

²² John McGreevy makes this point in his *Catholicism and American History: A History* (New York, 2003), pp. 259-61

²³ On Sargent Shriver see the fine biography by Scott Stossel, *Sarge: The Life and Times of Sargent Shriver* (Washington, D.C., 2004).

²⁴ See Thomas P. O'Neill with William Novak, *Man of the House: The Life and Political Memoirs of Tip O'Neill* (New York, 1987).

²⁵ On Ferraro in the 1984 election see George J. Marlin, *The American Catholic Voter: 200 Years of Political Impact* (South Bend, IN., 2004), pp. 300-03.

²⁶ This analysis of Cuomo is drawn from my own essay “The Tragedy of Mario Cuomo,” *Notre Dame Magazine* Vol 22 (Autumn, 1993), pp. 41-43.

²⁷ On Robert Casey see my essay “The Public Servant,” *Notre Dame Magazine* Vol. 24 (Summer, 1995), pp. 20-22.

²⁸ For Kerry’s self-description see John Kerry, *A Call to Service: My Vision for a Better America* (New York, 2003), p. 23.