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CHURCH HISTORY FROM THE BOTTOM UP

Frederick C. Luebke

Jay P. Dolan. *The Immigrant Church: New York's Irish and German Catholics, 1815-1865.* Baltimore, Md.: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975. xv + 221 pp. Essay on sources, notes, and index. \$10.00.

American church history, as practiced by its traditionalists, has recounted the intricacies of theological thought and debate, the mighty deeds of church fathers, and their positions on important social and political questions of the day. Despite the considerable influence of H. Richard Niebuhr's *Social Sources of Denominationalism* (1929), which illuminated the relationship between ethnicity and the growth of American churches, only rarely have professional historians focused their analytical skills on the foundational unit of American denominations, that is, the local congregation, parish, or synagogue. Similarly, immigration historians have described the contributions of this or that ethnic group to the composite American culture, and while they have long recognized the importance of the church for the newcomers, they have seldom identified the local congregation as the preeminent immigrant institution. The obscurity of the parish, moreover, was compounded by the fact that for years many historians refused to recognize either church history or immigration history as serious or important fields of study.

Oscar Handlin was a notable exception. Having absorbed the insights of many sociologists, Handlin described in *The Uprooted* (1951) how alienated immigrants seized upon the parish as the most familiar and stable institution in their crumbling house of culture. In his view the parish provided security and identity for uprooted immigrants as they endured the passage from European to American life. Although Handlin's book was widely applauded, few scholarly efforts were made to test his sweeping generalizations until Rudolph Vecoli asserted in 1964 that they had little applicability to the Italians.¹ Specifically attacking the assimilationist interpretation of the role of the parish, Vecoli argued that intense particularistic loyalties as well as superstition, anticlericalism, and religious indifference among Italian immigrants greatly limited the capacity of the Catholic church to absorb them.²

Meanwhile, church historians also began to reexamine religious institutions to find their places in American social history. The perspective shifted from the pulpit to the pew as traditional interpretations were weighed and as the functions of ethnic parishes and denominations were analyzed. Jay P. Dolan's study of the Irish and German Catholics in New York City from 1815 to 1865 is a major contribution to this new literature.

Dolan first charts the growth of New York Catholicism from two to thirty-two parishes. As ethnic enclaves developed in the city, the so-called national parish

emerged as a response to the needs of the immigrant population. Although the national parishes were normally organized on a territorial basis, their distinguishing characteristic was language rather than nationality. By 1865 twenty-three parishes were English-speaking, chiefly Irish, while eight used the German language; and one French parish has retained its ethnic character to the present day. A handful of Italian and Negro Catholics were essentially spiritual orphans without church homes of their own.

Next, Dolan examines the ethnic villages of New York that harbored the national parishes and relates them to the growth of the city. Both the Irish and German neighborhoods exhibited indiscriminate land usage, with tenements, stores, group shops, factories, and slaughterhouses mingled together. Poverty and destitution were common to both, imposing conditions of filth and crowding that are scarcely imaginable. Dolan also offers useful data on the horizontal mobility of the New York Catholics. By using baptismal registers and city directories, he calculates an average residence period of the Irish at four years and two months and of the Germans at four years and six months. Persistence rates for the decade of the 1850s are calculated at 41 percent and 57 percent, respectively. The data strongly suggest that the Germans, for whom the bond between language and faith was especially important, felt the influence of the ethnic village more keenly than the Irish.

The heart of Dolan's study, however, is his analysis of the ethnic parish. Two congregations, one Irish and one German, are examined in great detail. Concentrating on parishioners rather than on priests, Dolan pursues their social characteristics. Social stratification was present in both the Irish and German parishes, but both were dominated by members with lower-class occupations—skilled and semiskilled workers. Religious indifference on the part of the immigrants is also treated. Approximately 50 percent of the Irish, Dolan estimates, lived on the fringe of parish life—Catholics by birth and heritage, but not in practice. In Dolan's view the Irish Catholics on the periphery reflected the status of the church in Ireland, where ignorance and indifference were also common.

Fascinating comparisons between Irish and German Catholics emerge from Dolan's study. Because the Irish used the same language as the host society, their devotion to the ethnic parish as a solution to the problem of religion and nationality was less intense than among the Germans. Dolan describes distinctive styles of worship, observing that "among Germans the sense of pageantry and the pomp of ceremony were more evident" than among the Irish. Ethnoreligious organizations, such as mutual aid associations and militia societies, all of which reinforced the sense of community and separatism, seem to have had special prominence among the Germans. Differences also existed in the relationships of priests to people: while the Germans respected their pastors and maintained a social distance, the Irish developed warm personal and familial bonds.

Because of its multiethnic character, the American Catholic church was bound to suffer much conflict. But disagreements, according to Dolan, were rarely theological; instead they erupted over control of church property, the appointment of priests, and the recognition of ethnic traditions and usages. Traditionally,

historians have emphasized the efforts of the Germans to escape or counter the dominance of the Irish prelates. By contrast, Dolan's Archbishop John Hughes, customarily identified as the archtypical Irish hierarch, was somewhat indifferent to the problems of the Germans and seldom interfered in their parochial affairs.

More frequently, however, discord developed within the German community itself, with partisans of the local priest contending with the advocates of lay trusteeism and liberalism. Dolan also observes that other clashes emerged from differences between German Catholics and Lutherans, or between church Germans and club Germans.

Of the thirty-two parishes in New York in 1865, many were ethnically mixed. In order to illustrate the nature of conflict in such parishes, Dolan describes the experiences of St. Alphonsus, originally German but threatened by Irish invaders into its territory. Although the Irish proved to be better contributors to the parish treasury, language usage remained the crux of the issue. A compromise plan was eventually worked out in which each ethnic group worshipped at a different time, but after a dozen years the archbishop ended the German national character of the parish and opened it to full parochial rights to all Catholics in the area.

The development of parish schools, hospitals, and orphanages is also treated. Dolan observes that, again because of language, these institutions of cultural maintenance were generally more important to the Germans than to the Irish, who were motivated chiefly by religious concerns.

Finally, the author studies the ideas and sermons that bound the ethnoreligious communities together. The most conspicuous bond of unity among all ethnic groups, he insists, was an unquestioning commitment to Catholic doctrine. Yet the emergence of "boss rule"—each bishop a pope in his own diocese—insured the church against fractionalization along ethnic lines.

In general Dolan does not dissent from the standard interpretation that the Catholic church succeeded in retaining the loyalty of immigrants and that it served admirably as an institution to ease their transition into American life. In contrast to Rudolph Vecoli, who emphasized the half of the Italian immigrant population that rejected the church, and who therefore discounted the effectiveness of the parish both as an assimilating agent and as a means of social control, Dolan concentrates on the other half, those who were active in parish life and who were served by parish ministries. Hence, he comes to quite the opposite conclusion. Yet both historians are advocates of church history viewed from the bottom up; both have studied ethnic clash and accommodation within church structures, institutional responses to the social needs of immigrants, and conflicts between people and prelates.

Another student of the Catholic ethnic parish, Victor Greene, has challenged a different traditional interpretation of American Catholic church history. On evidence drawn from the experiences of Polish Catholics in Chicago early in the twentieth century Greene has argued that the control exercised by Irish prelates over other ethnic groups within the Catholic church was distant and not arbitrary or oppressive.³ Although Greene admits that programs of Americanization may have been real enough for the Irish and Germans, he insists that the American church

was an association that allowed for much cultural pluralism and that the Irish bishops could even be encouraging of ethnic autonomy for Slavic peoples. Greene has not found an Irish-Polish clash, but rather describes an intense conflict that emerged from within the Polish Catholic community, as supporters of priest and diocese battled with nationalists who demanded a more decentralized church and more ethnic autonomy. Dolan's findings, as we have seen, are similar to Greene's on all counts.

Not all historians of the Catholic church in America agree. Other times and other places produced different relationships. Vecoli, for example, found Irish dominance over Italians to be strong. Timothy Smith, in his study of Slovenian Catholics in the distant iron mining country of Minnesota in the first decades of the twentieth century, noted that, in contrast to Greene's urban Poles, the immigrants found a cohesive, centralized church ready to serve them.⁴ Irish and German settlers had provided the nuclei for parishes in this region, where the Catholic church was fully committed to a long-range program of Americanization on the Irish model. Subsequent desultory efforts were made to establish national parishes for Slavic and Italian groups, but their numbers were commonly too small to establish congregations as exclusive ethnic centers. When the melting-pot parishes failed to fire deep emotions of kinship and belonging, the immigrants created alternate voluntary associations to serve their needs. Ultimately, Smith found, religious institutions were left on the fringes of immigrant life, and identification with the dominant American culture became the hallmark of the region, as the second generation placed their hopes in education and economic ambition.

Still, in Smith's view, the congregation remains the primary institution in the history of American religion. "Its usefulness," he writes, "in fulfilling the need for belongingness, for personal identity, and for guidance in the adjustment of old customs to new conditions" was great indeed.⁵ Probably no one has stressed the importance of the ethnic parish more than Silvano Tomasi, author of the recently published *Piety and Power: The Role of the Italian Parishes in the New York Metropolitan Area, 1880-1930*. He asserts, *contra* Vecoli, that the ethnic parish was the "critically significant institution in linking the immigrants with the larger national society."⁶ Clearly the parish needs much fuller study if its role in American social history is to be understood. Other comparisons—for example, an Irish with an Italian parish—would reveal more diversity within the American Catholic church than does Dolan's book. Similarly, German Catholic parishes should be compared to German Lutheran, as well as Mennonite and Evangelical parishes, just as German Lutheran congregations should be measured against Scandinavian, Finnish, and Slovak counterparts. Moreover, as Smith has urged, the congregation and denomination should be studied as one of several alternate agencies around which immigrants could organize their lives in the search for ethnic identity.⁷

Although American immigrant denominations have received more attention than the parishes they guide and support, they also need to be analyzed as products of social necessity. A variety of conceptual models may be used. The parochial vision of the clergy, for example, may be compared to the more cosmopolitan

vision of the episcopate. Conflicts over Americanization also need further study, but within a comparative framework. Like the Catholics, Lutherans and other Protestants have also had their on-going struggles between Americanizers and anti-Americanizers.⁸

In sum, major contributions to our understanding of American social history remain to be made through the study of immigrant churches. Dolan has provided an excellent model and has set a high standard of scholarship for others to follow. He has not given us the entire story of the immigrant Catholic church in New York; one might wish, for example, that he had devoted more attention to the parish as an institutional weapon to fight the nativism of the Know-Nothing era. Yet, by comparing the experiences of the Irish and Germans, he shows how the church resolved some of its problems of unity and prepared itself to receive the enormous numbers of Italians, Poles, Slovenians, and others who came later.

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1. Rudolph J. Vecoli, "Contadini in Chicago: A Critique of *The Uprooted*," *Journal of American History* 51 (December 1864): 404-17.

2. Rudolph J. Vecoli, "Prelates and Peasants: Italian Immigrants and the Catholic Church," *Journal of Social History* 2 (Spring 1969): 217-68.

3. Victor R. Greene, "For God and Country: The Origins of Slavic Self-consciousness in America," *Church History* 35 (December 1966): 446-60.

4. Timothy L. Smith, "Religious Denominations as Ethnic Communities: A Regional Case Study," *Church History* 35 (June 1966): 207-26.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 217.

6. Silvano Tomasi, *Piety and Power: The Role of the Italian Parishes in the New York Metropolitan Area, 1880-1930* (New York: Center for Migration Studies, 1975), p. 180. See also his "The Ethnic Church and the Integration of Italian Immigrants in the United States" in *The Italian Experience in the United States*, ed. Silvano M. Tomasi and Madeline H. Engel (New York: Center for Migration Studies, 1970), pp. 163-93.

7. Smith, "Religious Denominations," p. 226.

8. Andrew M. Greeley has conceptualized the entire sweep of American Catholic church history in these terms. See his *The Catholic Experience* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1967).