Seasons of Grace

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EPILOGUE: FROM 1958 TO THE PRESENT

To both its adherents and its detractors, the American Catholic Church in the late 1950s looked to be an institution peculiarly exempt from the logic of contemporary history. Apparently uniform and disciplined, very nearly monarchical in its governing ethos, wedded to an utterly traditional theology, that Church was widely regarded, as Garry Wills has phrased it, as “the least changeable part of our religious landscape.” There was truth to this perception. The contours of its own history, coupled with a highly centralized teaching authority, had indeed protected the American Church from the more corrosive effects of the century’s intellectual revolutions. Still, this particular view of the Church was clearly an exaggerated one, and one that obscured some important realities.¹

The realities to which I allude have been at the center of this book. Like the American Church more generally, the Church in the Archdiocese of Detroit has historically been a more complex and varied institution than it looked to outsiders, or even to many of its own adherents. It has accommodated a greater diversity in its ranks—diversity not only of ethnicity but also of race and social class—than any other denomination. This made for powerful centrifugal tendencies within the institution, and led to a Church that was far more democratic in its practice than its formal teaching would seem to have allowed. It is true that this democratic practice was eroded over time, for it depended mainly on a constant influx of immigrants. But even in the 1950s, the American Church was not so centralized or so rigidly governed that it was immune to the destabilizing pressures of diversity. That seemingly monolithic Church would be seriously divided in the 1960s, principally along class and generational lines.

If the Church in the Archdiocese was never so disciplined and uniform as observers sometimes imagined, neither was it the changeless institution so dear to conservative Catholic hearts. In many areas of its life, ranging from religious practice to the roles played by women, the Church in the Archdiocese experienced notable, even dramatic, change in the course of its first 120 years. And although the Church did move slowly in these same years towards a greater administrative centralization and an increasingly insulated clerical subculture, the cumulative effects of change were probably emancipatory, at least for the laity.

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Lay persons were increasingly engaged in the liturgy in a deeply individual way; the more devout were increasingly likely to pattern their religious behavior on that of the clergy—an essential first step, it might be argued, in claiming their own rights to "priesthood." Women were able to secure for themselves a progressively broadened sphere of competence and responsibility in Church life. Lay activity generally was marked in successive generations by a larger vision of the Church and a greater sophistication in terms of goals and organization. The post-conciliar years were not, then, as abruptly discontinuous with the past as it has sometimes seemed. For that past encompassed substantial change, much of it in a direction consistent with post-conciliar developments.

It would, however, be disingenuous to argue that the pace of change in the Church has not greatly accelerated since the early 1960s, or that all of the changes which have occurred since that time have roots in the pre-conciliar era. Discontinuities do exist; the Church today is in many ways very different from the institution it was in the 1950s. This altered institution, as the reader is aware, is not a principal focus of this book. But it seems right, in concluding, to look briefly at developments in the Archdiocese of Detroit since the Second Vatican Council. Detroit's experience in these years has hardly been unique, though it did enjoy a reputation, during the tenure of Cardinal John Dearden (1959-1980), as an unusually progressive diocese. It is worth noting too that the post-conciliar years have encompassed a traumatic period in the history of the city of Detroit. This had important effects on the Church in the Archdiocese, and on many individual Catholics. Indeed, it makes good sense to begin our post-conciliar survey with a look at the city's troubled recent past.

Detroit in the late 1980s stands at far remove from its earlier industrial vigor. The city's population has declined by more than 40 percent since the early 1950s, and many of its remaining inhabitants are chronically unemployed. The erosion of the city's economic base has made for growing family instability and for an alarming escalation in the incidence of drug abuse and crime. Troubles of this sort accelerated white flight from the city, which since the early 1970s has had a majority black population. In recent years, moreover, increasing numbers of middle-class blacks have also opted for the suburbs—a development that may presage an even more troubled future for an already devastated community.

As Detroit's population was eroding, that of its outermost suburbs was growing rapidly. Much of this new suburban population was Catholic; the city, on the other hand, had by the 1980s a less heavily Catholic population than at any time in its history. Thus it was that scores of churches in Detroit, built for large congregations, were home by the late 1980s to no more than a few hundred Catholics—and sometimes to many fewer. The situation demanded reform—that much was widely conceded. But little agreement existed as to what the nature and scope of the reform should be. Late in 1983 Archbishop Edmund Szoka asked Auxiliary Bishop Patrick Cooney to initiate a study of the problem. This study led, in the fall of 1988, to a recommendation to close churches, a proposal that caused serious division among local Catholics. Opponents argued against
the number of closings—more than forty churches were initially recommended to be closed or merged with neighboring parishes, a number that was in fact reduced after subsequent modifications in the reorganization plan. Still, detractors claimed, the scope of the closings would be psychologically devastating to Detroiters. Opponents argued too against the criteria used to gauge a parish’s vitality. The small size of many city congregations, they believed, was not necessarily a liability. Reduced numbers could make for an intimate liturgy, for warm and highly personal service to troubled members, and for a strong sense of community. Proponents of the plan had a different perspective. A truly healthy parish, they argued, supported a full complement of sacramental life, afforded its members a wide range of educational and social programs, and worked creatively at the difficult task of evangelization. Under most circumstances, in their view, a parish needed close to 500 households to satisfy these requirements. (The smaller the parish, they cautioned, the more likely it was that its energies would be largely consumed by the demands of fund-raising.) And even with reorganization, proponents pointed out, the ratio of priests to people would be notably higher in Detroit than in the suburban parishes. Nearly all supporters of reorganization, it is fair to say, were genuinely concerned by the pain that such far-reaching change would necessarily cause. “Dying and rising” was a natural metaphor for Cardinal Edmund Szoka to employ in his pastoral letter on the reorganization process. It is perhaps appropriate in this context to note the recent flowering in Detroit of a vibrant black Catholicism. Here, at least, is a sign of resurrection in the city Church. 2

Detroit’s troubled recent past has also meant for the local Church a broader and more ecumenical role in politics and social welfare. Detroit’s remaining Catholic schools and charitable institutions have come in recent years to serve a largely non-Catholic clientele, a portion of which has been grievously wounded by the harsh realities of urban life. Partly in consequence, Catholic leaders since the mid-1960s have worked hard to repair the dangerous breach between the city’s black population and increasingly suburbanized whites. Success on this score has been extremely modest, but the effort has placed the Church unequivocally on the side of racial justice. And this has meant an unprecedented openness to ecumenical social action, something for which the Dearden years were especially noteworthy. “The Church must be the moral voice of the total community,” then-Archbishop John Dearden asserted in 1967. He gave impressive substance to his words a few months later, earmarking no less than $1 million of his 1968 budget for local black organizations and community development projects. 3

The Dearden gift was deeply resented by a good many Catholics locally, particularly those whose schools were in danger of closing for financial reasons. The bitterness stemmed, in some cases, from unadulterated racism, but often had mainly to do with fear—fear at the pace of social change and at the seeming normlessness of the brave new world of the 1960s. Linked to this fear was a general suspicion of Dearden’s increasingly “social” orientation, an orientation
shared by many priests and some of the most articulate members of the laity. The archbishop was no radical; he had troubles of his own with activists in the clerical ranks. But his was a world view and a vision of ministry that was wider and more ecumenical than that of many in his flock, and alien especially to those working-class Catholics whose orientation was almost exclusively toward neighborhood and family. As a consequence, the Church in the Archdiocese was by the late 1960s a seriously divided institution.4

Politics was not, of course, the only cause of tension. Much had changed within the Church, and in remarkably short order, the Second Vatican Council having come to an end only in 1965. That council gave an unexpected blessing to religious liberty and endorsed a more fraternal approach to the various Christian churches and to Jews. Good citizens that they were, most American Catholics were probably relieved by this. But there were those for whom the old exclusiveness had been a valued source of psychological protection. The Council Fathers adhered to an essentially collegial vision of episcopal—and hence papal—authority, and gave an imprimatur of sorts, by the very nature of their proceedings, to disinterested scholarship in theology and the social sciences. Again, these changes brought Church teaching into closer conformity with dominant American values. But there were those for whom the absolutist claims of the Church had been a principal support of faith. For many others, these reforms prompted expectations of continued change, even visions of a democratic Church. Their disappointment on this score, epitomized by the issuance of Humanae Vitae in 1968, led to growing alienation especially but not exclusively among younger and more liberal Catholics.

The most consequential of the changes to flow from the council, however, had to do with public worship. The Mass was said entirely in the vernacular by 1969, and the revised rite had a new “communal” emphasis. The liturgical reforms of Vatican II, as Father Emile Pin has rightly noted, accord “a primordial importance to the active role of the faithful in the sacramental celebration. The faithful must use their intellect and will; they must understand the language and the symbols; they must participate.” Most Catholics seemed willing to embrace this new role; at least in the Archdiocese of Detroit, champions of the Tridentine Mass have failed to draw significant support. But for some, the liturgy lost an important dimension of mystery, of holiness. Bereft and sometimes angry—liturgical reform had been, after all, wholly imposed from above—Catholics like these did sometimes leave the Church. For nearly all Catholics, moreover, the revised liturgy reinforced a fundamental tension with regard to Church authority. A hierarchical ecclesia, infallible in its teaching, was hardly congruent with a liturgy that stressed the importance of community and of enlightened lay participation.5

This tension was heightened, at least for an active minority of Catholics, by the reform agenda of the Dearden Chancery, an agenda that served as a model for progressive Catholics throughout the nation. As early as 1965, Archbishop Dearden was meeting with his priests and with selected groups of laity to chart
the course of local "renewal." In the spring of 1966, the archbishop announced his plans for a reforming synod, one that would be preceded by a long and remarkably thorough period of discussion and consultation. The synod was not, in fact, convened until March of 1969, by which time more than 80,000 Catholics had participated in parish "speak up" sessions, where the need for change—and its direction—was vigorously debated. In this way the laity took an unprecedented role in shaping the synod's agenda.

Synod '69, as it was called, transformed the administrative structure of the Archdiocese. In sharp reaction to the trend of previous decades, the synod approved a radical decentralization of Chancery authority—declaring, indeed, that the Chancery had been abolished. In its place was a network of vicariates, twenty-five in all, each headed by an "episcopal vicar" who exercised many of a bishop's functions. In the early stages of this new regime, these vicars were chosen in part by popular election, and their authority was seen as deriving in a principal way from the consent of the people they governed. Those people, in turn, were directed to establish parish councils, whose elected members would play a role in virtually every aspect of parish life. The various parish councils were also involved in setting policy for their particular vicariates, for they sent delegates to serve, along with all the vicariate's priests, on what was known as the vicariate council. Not without justification did Father—now Bishop—Kenneth Untener tell the Michigan Catholic that the Church in the Archdiocese was rapidly moving toward "a process of participatory decision-making."6

The priests of the Archdiocese were especially affected by this new orientation. It meant a greater liberty for most, and unprecedented opportunities to shape archdiocesan policy. Detroit was among the first dioceses in the country to have a priest's senate, an elected body—albeit a purely advisory one—that met for the first time in December 1966. (The members were initially chosen according to age group, generational tensions afflicting the clergy, at this point, fully as much as the rest of the population.) The Priest's Senate was soon a principal forum for debate on reform of the clerical life, and a source both of pressure and support for the archbishop—the Cardinal after 1969—as he changed the procedures by which priests were assigned to their posts and moved, with some reluctance, toward a greater tolerance with regard to dress and residence for priests and to the kinds of work that priests might legitimately do. The Senate debated celibacy too—with great heat and at great length—but here, of course, no change was forthcoming. Still, the vision of priesthood that permeated these debates—sharing the whole life of the people, knowing their burdens and their joys first hand—may have been a factor in the strong support that Dearden gave to the permanent diaconate, nearly all of whose members are married. Dearden, indeed, gave his blessing in 1968 to a singularly innovative program, one that originated in Detroit, by which black laymen were trained as "Ministers of Service." Their role in the parish is much like that of the permanent deacon.

The Dearden reforms, taken cumulatively, helped to release great stores of
energy, perhaps most notably among the laity but among religious too. Sisters in the Archdiocese, especially, diversified their ministries after 1965, and were more and more identified with the work of social reform. The "activists," whether lay or religious, were disproportionately middle-class—representative of those well-educated Catholics whose numbers had grown so impressively since the late 1940s. They were spiritual heirs of the various Catholic Action movements and of the movement for liturgical reform. But they were also products of the 1960s, of its turbulent politics and its aggressively secular culture. Perhaps it was inevitable, then, that good will and optimism—so much a part of the early stages of reform—should sometimes dissolve in frustration and anger. For by the standards of the 1960s, the pace of change in the Church was slow. There were, moreover, some critical issues that lay beyond the reach of the reformers. Chief among these were official teaching on marriage and sexuality, clerical celibacy, and the role of women in the Church.

By the end of the 1960s, then, the Church in the Archdiocese was at once a vibrant institution, pulsing with life and innovation, and one whose very identity seemed increasingly in doubt. Attendance at Mass had begun to decline, most markedly among the young, and there was a sharp decline, by 1970, in the number of those who went regularly to confession, a trend not reversed by a subsequent reform in the rite—and to some extent, the theology—of penance. The number of priests declined as well: thirty-one diocesan priests left the active ministry in 1969, another thirty-one in 1970. The rate of attrition did slow thereafter, averaging about ten men per year for the rest of the 1970s. But ordination classes were now so small that the shortage of clergy grew ever more acute. (In 1983, there were 187 fewer priests in the Archdiocese, including those in religious orders, than there had been ten years earlier.) As for women religious, their numbers fell so precipitously after the mid-1960s that many parochial schools were soon in crisis. More than 80 percent of the parishes in the Archdiocese had schools in 1965; a decade later, fewer than half of them did.

What emerged—or, more correctly, is emerging—from this welter of change is an essentially voluntary Church, not only in the Archdiocese of Detroit but throughout the nation. A substantial majority of American Catholics today speak the language of individualism when it comes to religion. Their own experience, their own sense of need and of right—this is what Catholics increasingly invoke as they choose with regard to religious behavior and respond to a wide range of moral questions. Catholics are still more regular in their attendance at church than the members of other religious groups, and on certain issues they incline to markedly different views than most Americans. But what is striking, at least to a historian, is less what still distinguishes Catholics from other Americans than the multiple ways in which Catholics today think and act like the other members of their particular class and generational groups. Non-Catholics apparently think so too: save perhaps in the rural South, a candidate's Catholicism sparks little opposition among non-Catholics in the electorate. And the incidence of mixed marriage in the Catholic population is notably higher.
today than it was in the 1950s. On this score, as on many others, American Catholics look to be more and more like mainstream Protestants—rooted in a particular tradition, but tolerant in matters of dogma and discipline and willing to recognize, at some level of their being, the plurality of religious experience and even of religious truth.

The "voluntary" Church, as it has emerged in recent years, has certain clear strengths. Lay ministries have everywhere proliferated, and certainly in the Archdiocese of Detroit, where lay men and women play important roles in nearly all areas of Church life. The Church has thus succeeded in keeping the loyalties—and harnessing the energies—of some of its ablest and best-educated members. A renewed pastoral emphasis on the primacy of conscience has enabled significant numbers of Catholics to be full members of their Church and still embrace a world transformed by successive demographic and sexual revolutions. A greater tolerance and openness has indeed come to characterize the whole of Catholic intellectual life. And insofar as growing numbers of Catholics are highly educated, it is probably healthful for the Church in this country that its discourse be marked by the critical questioning, the ambiguity, even the doubt that seem to be the legacy of modern education. As for Catholics who are troubled by these developments, they are accommodated, in this pluralist Church, by the remarkable Charismatic movement and by a fair number of parishes where a peculiarly Catholic brand of fundamentalism is supported. The Church has thus maintained a formal unity, despite the centrifugal tendencies of its constituent parts.

This Church, however, is not without its problems. A continued drought in religious vocations is the most visible, and points to even more serious problems in the not-too-distant future, when priestless parishes may be a fact of life in many of the nation's dioceses. (The recent closing of St. John's Provincial Seminary is a poignant local reminder of this.) The "vocations crisis" has many causes, and cannot be wholly explained apart from change in the larger society. But it is not unconnected to the rise of a true theological pluralism within the Catholic community. "The priest, it seems, no longer knows who he is," Father Emile Pin wrote in the late 1960s. "The expectations of the faithful no longer give him a clear idea of what he should be and what he should do." It is true that American Catholics have retained a strong sense of themselves as a Eucharistic people; nearly every practicing Catholic today goes regularly to communion. In this sense the post-conciliar years mesh seamlessly with the developments of earlier decades. But there are many Catholics today who do not speak the kind of theological language that was found in the Baltimore Catechism, and their behavior often suggests that they imagine the drama of salvation in ways quite alien to the pre-conciliar Church. These Catholics lack the eschatological consciousness of their parents and grandparents; the fear of hell is largely gone, and with it the complex synthesis of rules and ritual that once directed souls toward life eternal. The religious world of the younger Catholic is less freighted with guilt than the world his forebears knew. But it is in some ways a less vivid
world, and perhaps, for certain psychologies, a less comforting world as well. For nearly all Catholics, moreover, theological pluralism has made for a diminished sense of solidarity, of distinctiveness, even of Catholic purpose. And it has probably made it harder to hold the allegiance of the rising generation.7

The increasing fragmentation of the Catholic community suggests one further question. Will that community, precisely because of its divisions, be less and less a distinctive presence in the national life? Given the recent pastoral letters of the American bishops on war and peace and on the economy, one would perhaps be tempted to say no. (The breadth and passion of Catholic social activism since the 1960s might also be offered as evidence here.) But with the fluidity of their new moral universe, many Catholics today find it harder than ever before to articulate a uniquely "Catholic" approach to the nation's manifold problems. Nor are their institutions necessarily imbued with a clearly defined worldview—one thinks especially of the blurred identity of many Catholic schools and colleges. One could argue, indeed, that the much-increased interest of many Catholics in social and political issues flows in part from their loss of theological confidence. The Protestant churches, after all, embraced the Social Gospel as they moved away from creedal certitude.

There is, however, something a bit mean-spirited about this latter argument, and a real danger in assuming that we have, as yet, a balanced perspective on the post-conciliar period. The changes that mark that period have not yet run their course, and we do not wholly know the shape of the Church our children will inherit. A knowledge of history can assist us here, although only in limited and partial ways. (No prudent historian will venture into prophecy!) Our history, for example, would not lead us to expect a resurgence of Catholic institutional separatism, despite the nostalgia of many Catholics for the ordered world of the 1950s. No religious group of any appreciable size has been able to maintain a permanent distance from the dominant American culture, which is of unparalleled seductiveness and openness. Even in the nineteenth century, Detroit's Catholics were powerfully drawn to America's central values—to individualism, materialism, pragmatism, tolerance—and they were increasingly rewarded by economic and social and political success. What is remarkable is that those Catholics maintained a separatist posture for as long as they did.

Our history also suggests that divisiveness and even enmity among Catholics are not necessarily signs of institutional decline. The Church in the Archdiocese of Detroit has for much of its history been a divided institution—a loose federation, in fact if not in theory, of mutually suspicious ethnic camps. Are today's divisions—based mainly on class, ideology, and gender—more likely to cause schism than the powerful emotions connected to ethnic consciousness? Probably they are not, provided that the Church accommodates diversity as sensibly as it did in the polyglot past. (And even on the difficult question of women's status in the Church, the American Church has accomplished a fair degree of accommodation.) Division might even be said to enhance the life of the local Church. The immigrant parishes of the Archdiocese, it will be remembered, have histori-
cally been prone to conflict and caused endless headaches at the Chancery. But they nourished a lively Catholicism. Lay ministry flourished in those parishes, although our ethnic forebears would not themselves have used the term.

If the ethnic parish was an ironic force for unity in the Church, it was by no means the only such force. A divided Church was held together in the past in part by its hierarchical structure. The disciplinary potential of that structure was important, especially with regard to priests, but so were its symbolic functions. Detroit's bishops, even the redoubtable Cardinal Mooney, had only partial success at imposing their policies on the Archdiocese. They probably succeeded better than they knew in their powerful symbolic role as shepherds in the global Church. And although episcopal authority has been badly undermined, a bishop is still, for most Catholics, a credible sign of their fundamental unity. Cardinal Edmund Szoka, who came to Detroit in 1980, has a following locally that extends well beyond the Polish-Americans who count him as one of their own. His style and his policies are different, for the most part, from those of Cardinal Dearden, who was himself a widely popular man. But Cardinal Szoka has come to stand for Catholic Detroit, and for the ties that bind the people of the Archdiocese to a larger Catholic world.

Beyond bishops, however, and of even greater importance as a force for unity, has been a common liturgy and the immense significance for Catholics of the Eucharist. Ethnic Catholics in the past were brought to a larger sense of Catholicism in part by liturgical means: the ritual in which they participated was increasingly uniform, and they were more and more affected by an increasingly popular Eucharistic spirituality. Catholic worship today, for all the changes that flowed from the Council, is still firmly centered on the Eucharist. And this has decisive effect on the religious sensibility of nearly every Catholic, no matter how much they may disagree when it comes to the specifics of sacramental theology. At the heart of Catholic worship, then, is an experience of great evocative power. Our past suggests that nothing is of greater importance in defining a people.