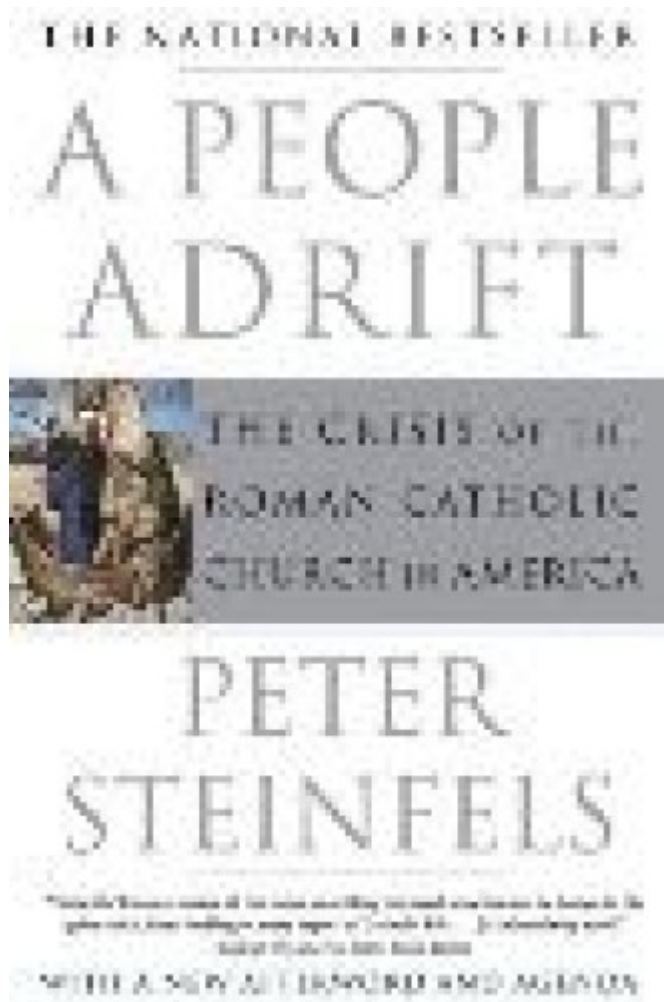


Divided church

By [George Dennis O'Brien](#) in the [September 6, 2003](#) issue

In Review



A People Adrift: The Crisis of the Roman Catholic Church in America

Peter Steinfels
Simon & Schuster

Today the Roman Catholic Church in the United States is on the verge of either an irreversible decline or a thoroughgoing transformation” is the topic sentence of Peter Steinfels’s extraordinarily valuable survey of the present state of America’s largest Christian community. The only caveat one might make on Steinfels’s stark prophecy is that there may well be “thoroughgoing transformation” *and* “irreversible decline.” This pessimistic conclusion can be derived from Steinfels’s own account of the ideological crosscurrents—riptides might be a better metaphor—roiling Catholic waters and leaving the “people adrift.”

Steinfels divides Catholic opinion into four camps: ultraconservative (back to the Latin mass), moderate conservative (enthusiasts for John Paul II and his insistence on strict doctrinal conformity), liberals (who applaud the end of the siege mentality of the Counter-Reformation) and radicals (the Second Vatican Council was a “half-hearted” break with the past and John Paul II has stifled “the spirit of the Council”). Steinfels identifies himself with the liberals “with an admixture of the second, a touch of the fourth, and a whiff of the first.” Each of the camps has visions of “thoroughgoing transformation” and each believes that some rival program has already led to crisis and, if fully implemented, would lead to irreversible decline if not the sort of broad-scale collapse of Catholicism seen in French Canada or contemporary Ireland.

For the ultraconservatives, Vatican II was a fundamental mistake that needs to be reversed at least back to Vatican I, if not Trent. At the far fringes of the ultraconservatives there are those who have officially abandoned official Rome, all the way out to the “crazies” who have elected their own pope. Moderate conservatives insist that Vatican II may have changed the style of the church but not traditional doctrine or morality. John Paul II, they say, has been correct to insist on the doctrinal authority of the Roman magisterium and on upholding controversial teachings like the ban on contraception stated in Paul VI’s 1968 encyclical *Humanae Vitae*. John Paul II’s admiring biographer, George Weigel, expressed the moderate conservative position in the very title of his recent book, *Courage to Be Catholic*. Transformation is to be accomplished not by the changes advocated by liberals and dissenting theologians, but by returning to the heroic disciplines of prayer and asceticism that are the true Catholic heritage.

Liberals believe that the conservative strategies for a return to the past ignore the present culture both outside and inside parish halls. The political, social and

economic transformations of modernity require a positive, if critical, dialogue with the contemporary world—that is the genuine “spirit of Vatican II.” Inside the American church there is too much dissent from official Roman dicta to be ignored. In 1993 Steinfels undertook a survey of Catholic opinion on *Humanae Vitae*. Eight out of ten Catholics disagreed with the statement that “using artificial means of birth control is wrong.” Nonreception of a variety of papal statements by Catholics in the pews is a crisis which cannot be solved by conservative reiteration of traditional doctrine.

Finally, there are the “radicals” who regard everything from Constantine’s acceptance of Christianity to the early church’s split with Judaism as perversion. The underlying theme of the radicals is antiauthoritarianism; a democratic church would effect needed change. The right fringe creates its own pope; the left fringe replaces a pope with a vote.

The problem with following any of the proposed agendas for transformation is that the result is likely to be some species of “decline.” Conservatives are quick to spot heresy in the liberal and radical proposals. For conservatives only a thoroughgoing purge will restore “the true Church.” Radicals often seem to have moved away from the larger historic church already. Steinfels reports the comment of a speaker at the 1993 Women-Church meeting who, though normally identifying herself as Catholic, declared, “The church I come from—and I emphasize from—is the Roman Catholic Church.” A conservative purge or a radical abandonment would, it seems, create a diminished church. Whatever gains might be envisioned in holiness or revolutionary zeal, the “true” church would be a “saving remnant” of the present mixed bag of American Catholicism.

Finally, there is danger of diminishment in the liberal agenda. Steinfels cautions that liberals should recognize that most of their causes have been embraced by liberal Protestants without notably improving their numbers or the impact of those communions in evangelizing the culture. It is the conservative Protestant churches which are growing and having the greatest public influence.

Steinfels was for many years the editor of the lay Catholic journal of opinion *Commonweal*. There is a slogan at the magazine: “It’s a big church!” and that is the spirit of his book. While clearly identifying himself within the liberal camp—*Commonweal*’s long-term ideological stance—he is at great pains to state and give credit where appropriate to the full spectrum of Catholic opinion. Symbolic of his

approach is the framing of the book around the death of Cardinal Joseph Bernardin and the Common Ground project which the cardinal initiated only three months before his death. Bernardin was acutely aware of the tensions within the American church. In announcing the Common Ground project, he asked, “Will the Catholic Church in the United States . . . [be] a church of promise . . . able to be a leavening force in our culture . . . or will it become a church on the defensive, torn by dissension?” In order to create dialogue, Bernardin called together a group of liberal and conservative opinion-makers and charged them to engage in dialogue about the shape of the church. With Bernardin’s death Common Ground lost a high-profile public sponsor and thus the sort of impact that he envisaged.

Not that the prospect for a genuine meeting of the many minds of contemporary Catholicism was good in the first place. The very idea of Common Ground was denounced from its initiation by hierarchical conservatives like Cardinal Bernard Law, who said that there are no legitimate disagreements to be resolved: *Roma locuta est; causa finita est*. On the other hand, Notre Dame’s Richard McBrien criticized Common Ground for failing to include radicals within the dialogue. Steinfels’s book could be seen as a casebook for revivifying a common-ground initiative.

All the ideological combatants share with Steinfels the notion that the American Catholic Church is in crisis. The most obvious source of crisis is the much publicized sex scandal involving predatory priests and episcopal cover-up. From 1988 to 1997, Steinfels was the senior religion editor of the *New York Times*. As *Commonweal* editor and then a *Times* reporter, he followed the problem of predatory priests from the high-profile trial of Father Gilbert Gauthé in 1985 through the bishops’ 1993 statement of principles, which urged prompt and decisive action in cooperation with civil authorities on all allegations of sexual abuse, to the resignation of Cardinal Law this year. His account of the scandal does not minimize the seriousness of the situation, but he underlines the fact that most of the cases predate 1993 and the large number of offenders so often cited reaches back 50 years. For Steinfels, the crisis is deeper and more pervasive than the sensational sex stories of recent date.

His reportorial career gives Steinfels a historical perspective on a whole variety of Catholic crises—not to mention a fascinating ecumenical education reporting on Mormons, Buddhists, Christian Scientists and whomever. The point of his book is not to advance theological arguments. Rather, he focuses his narrative on Catholic institutions: hospitals, colleges and universities, social service agencies, schools, the

parish. Not the least of the crises affecting all Catholic institutions is the precipitous decline in the numbers of priests and vowed religious. To cite just one statistic: between 1965 and 2002 the number of priests, nuns and religious brothers staffing Catholic schools dropped from 114,000 to 9,000. For many years the “Catholicity” of the various institutions was a matter of course and symbol. Obviously it was a Catholic hospital because it was full of sisters in white wimples. Even if you majored in physics at Savanarola University (one of Steinfels’s favorite places!), the fact that the father/ brother/sister professor was ubiquitous made the place at least appear Catholic. And then there were compulsory courses in scholastic theology, priests in the dorms and mass round the clock. No more.

Steinfels points to the multiple factors leading to the changes: Vatican II, rejection of *Humanae Vitae*, the election of John F. Kennedy, the civil rights movement, the sexual revolution, feminism. However one evaluates these factors, there has been a dissolution of the prior Catholic consensus and community. The “thick” Catholicism of the past has largely vanished.

The disappearance of priests and vowed religious at Catholic institutions has precipitated an attempt to establish an ideological base which would define Catholicity absent its previous clerical custodians. The most publicized attempt to define an ideology is contained in John Paul II’s document *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, an admonition to Catholic colleges and universities that “Catholic” must have a pervasive meaning within the institution. For John Paul II, the role of the Roman magisterium is authoritative in certifying genuine Catholic theology for Catholic institutions. Theologians are urged to receive a *mandatum*, a sort of certificate of authentic teaching, from the local bishop. It should come as no surprise that the *mandatum* has been viewed as a threat to academic freedom. Steinfels is critical of *Ex Corde*, but he is deeply concerned about the Catholic character of putative Catholic colleges. (As a recent sometime faculty member at Notre Dame and Georgetown, Steinfels speaks of Catholic higher education with an insider’s authority.)

There is no simple solution *ab extra* from a distant Roman magisterium. Not *mandatum* but mission is the answer for true Catholicity. But that is not simple either. Steinfels is properly critical of the two-paragraph, vapid mission statement tucked in the Catholic college catalogue. If there is to be a genuine sense of Catholicity at colleges or all the other Catholic institutions, it will require a level of sophistication, explicitness, detail and practical application in everything from

program to personnel that is largely missing today.

The attempt to discover an ideological mission, a defining characteristic of Catholicism, which will guide a church more and more in the hands of the nonordained gives special urgency to the conservative-liberal-radical splits. Although there have always been institutional and theological tensions within the Christian community from before Arianism to after Gallicanism, these controversies have largely been within the clerical guild. The emergence of the laity is the underlying theme for part two of Steinfels's book. A chapter titled "Sex and the Female Church" has potency because of the lay concerns. Sexual morality—e.g., the legitimacy of contraception—is an issue for the married laity, not the celibate religious. As for "female": Cardinal Leo Joseph Suenens remarked at the first session of Vatican II that "half the church" was missing. Counting noses, one could argue that in traditional decision-making for the Catholic Church most of the church, the laity, has been missing. The vehemence with which the conservative-to-radical contenders argue may be an unconscious reflection of a passion to capture the lay vote for a coming Catholic Church.

In these ideological quarrels about how Catholicism should institutionalize itself, Steinfels is a model of fairness while at the same time making it clear where he believes the proper direction lies. Not surprisingly, he often operates by offering three alternative pathways that could be pursued: conservative, liberal, radical. Thus on the matter of priests: conservative, retain celibacy and call for heroic holiness; liberal, remove required celibacy, eventually ordain women; radical, restudy the very idea of priesthood (a mature, natural leader, married or celibate, could be ordained only for presiding at weekly Eucharist). While opting for the liberal middle, Steinfels acknowledges the special demands for holiness advocated by conservatives, and the value of radical reevaluation of present structures.

I have suggested that *A People Adrift* constitutes an ideal casebook for dialogue toward a Catholic "common ground." I wish I could be optimistic that it would be so used. Thomas Hobbes was a skeptical commentator on religious matters. "For it is with the mysteries of our religion, as with wholesome pills for the sick; which swallowed whole, have the virtue to cure; but chewed, are for the most part, cast up again without effect" (*Leviathan*, ch. XXXII). Steinfels gives Catholics—and all concerned Christians—lots to chew on, and in this case chewing might lead to health. Unfortunately, conservatives, liberals and radicals all too often insist that we swallow their prescriptions whole, eschewing the chewing that Steinfels's book

commends.