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Cultural Catholics in America: Narrative, Authority and Identity since Vatican II

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CULTURAL CATHOLICS IN AMERICA:
NARRATIVE, AUTHORITY AND IDENTITY SINCE VATICAN II

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A dissertation submitted to the faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of Religious Studies.

Chapel Hill
2006

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Last Modified

March 20, 2019

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Abstract

This dissertation interrogates the identifying category "cultural Catholic" in the United States and distinguishes the overarching elements that contribute to its construction and development. I argue that a deliberate connection to the Catholicism of one's past-and its authoritative contexts-constitutes the key component of cultural Catholicism. Adults, removed from their childhood environments and reflecting on the influence of their religious upbringings, use narrative to highlight distinct circumstances that had long-lasting impacts. Selectively emphasizing particular memories, cultural Catholics, from a variety of geographic, ethnic and economic origins, construct similar pictures of their childhood environments. With this range of possible sources available, I have limited this investigation to texts by authors who were born between 1940 and 1965 and who self-identify as having been raised Catholic. This first generation of cultural Catholics highlights three contexts of Catholic authority in mid-twentieth century America-the institutional Church, the family home, and

the ethnic neighborhood where, as children, they encountered definitive responsibilities and expectations. Their narratives emphasize the powerful Catholic forces occupying these different spaces. However, through the process of writing about their early religious experiences, they effectively reclaim a sense of agency regarding those environments. Cultural Catholics exhibit a sense of power over their Catholic past and assume control of the way it takes shape in history. Further, they establish themselves in a new segment of society, one removed from their particularized origins and comfortably settled in professional surroundings, precisely by invoking the past in specific ways. Their stories allow them to perpetuate their connection to the tradition and communities that formed them. However, in the process, they construct a new position that allows them to be prominent figures in secular settings and still deeply shaped by the Catholic influences that characterized their youth.

Date of publication

May 2006

DOI

<https://doi.org/10.17615/pge9-y337>

Resource type

[Dissertation](#)

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Advisor

Maffly-Kipp, Laurie F.

Language

[English](#)


Access

Open access

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The commemoration made all American Catholics more deeply aware of Christ's desire to meet the inhabitants of the so-called New World so that, gathering them into his Church, he might be present in the continent's history. The evangelization of America is not only a gift from the Lord; it is also a source of new responsibilities. and communion between the different forms of the continent's rich cultural heritage. The decision to speak of "America" in the singular was an attempt to express not only the unity which in some way already exists, but also to point to that closer bond which the peoples of the continent seek and which the Church wishes to foster as part of her own mission, as she works to promote the communion of all in the. Since 1960, the percentage of Americans who are Catholic has fallen slowly from about 25% to 22%. [7] In absolute numbers, Catholics have increased from 45 million to 72 million. By far, most Catholics in the United States belong to the Latin or Western Church and the Roman Rite of the Catholic Church. However, the Vatican II document, *Orientalium Ecclesiarum* ("Of the Eastern Churches"), acknowledges that these Eastern Catholic communities are "true Churches" and not just rites within the Catholic Church [19] There are 14 other Churches in the United States (23 within the global Catholic Church) which are in communion with Rome, fully recognized and

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