

COLLEGE THEOLOGY SOCIETY PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

Reimagining the “America” in American Catholicism

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Your faces bring back memories of thirty-six previous CTS convention banquets. The first was in 1979.¹ It was held at Trinity College in Washington. I was a graduate student. Bill Cenkner was president. I’m here tonight, warts and all, where Bill stood in 1979. I think of Gerry Sloyan, Vera Chester, Dolores Greeley, Mary Lea Schneider, and the rest. To a much younger me they loomed larger than life. Tonight I want to thank you for the honor of serving briefly with them in the long line of our society’s presidents. And a special thanks to my family, who made the trip to Newport to be here with us tonight.

We’ve been talking about “American Catholicism.” The churches we live in and the theology we practice are located squarely in what we call “America.” Throughout US history, we have contested the meaning of “America.” To mangle Paul Simon, we’ve all come to Newport to look for America. Imagination makes worldly transcendence possible. Its songs and other creations have the power to negate unjust presents, envision futures that do not yet exist, and inspire us to bring them about. The Spirit of Pentecost

¹ The following is the presidential address delivered at the 2017 College Theology Society convention banquet on Saturday evening, June 3, 2017, the vigil of Pentecost, at Salve Regina University, Newport, Rhode Island.

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enters our souls through the portal of our imaginations. Rather than taking America back or making it great again, we might better reimagine it.²

We US citizens usually call ourselves “Americans.” This annoys Canadians and other hemispheric neighbors. Nevertheless, the rest of the world generally follows suit, as do most US Catholic historians. We call what we write about “American Catholicism.” After warming up with Maryland, however, we ordinarily tell the stories of nineteenth- and twentieth-century European American immigrants in the urban Northeast and Midwest.

European American Catholics were not always white, but this is now clearly a very white story. Our “immigrant church” narrative marginalizes Spanish-speaking Catholics, who descend from a racially mixed population of Spanish, indigenous, and African peoples. They lived in the Southwest for centuries before there was a United States.³ Cyprian Davis’ groundbreaking work in previously ignored sources in St. Augustine, Mobile, New Orleans, Savannah, and St. Louis concludes drolly, “From the records it seem clear that Catholicism was much more Africanized than many would believe.”⁴ Except for Savannah, these cities were Spanish and French ports rather than parts of the original thirteen English colonies. Here, on the edges of empire, as defined by Westphalian cartography, African, indigenous, and Spanish and French peoples came together in a racial and cultural mix that often included Catholicism.

The opening lines of the Declaration of Independence demand that we reimagine what is exclusionary and marginalizing about our country. “American Catholics” have even deeper reasons to reimagine the “America” in “American Catholicism.” We are citizens of the United States, but we also participate in an ecclesial belonging that transcends national boundaries. And yet “American Catholicism” remains captive to the logic of Westphalia. Nothing makes this clearer than our founding bishop’s consecration. Both Santo Domingo and Québec had cardinal archbishops

² Thanks to the students from the Fall 2016 seminar on Americanism, especially for their moving reflections on what it might mean to love America, and to Annie Huey, my research assistant, for their contributions to this talk.

³ Timothy Matovina, *Latino Catholicism: Transformation in America’s Largest Church* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), especially chap. 1, and pp. 6, 36–41, which offer a “hemispheric perspective” as an alternative to a “unilateral Americanization paradigm.”

⁴ Cyprian Davis, *The History of Black Catholics in the United States* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 82; and Bryan N. Massingale, “Has the Silence Been Broken? Catholic Theological Ethics and Racial Justice,” *Theological Studies* 75, no. 1 (2014): 133–55, especially the remarks on idolatry at 151–52.

in 1789, but John Carroll had to sail to an island off the coast of England to become a bishop.

About twenty years ago, many US historians found the national boundaries that defined their field too narrow, too “suspicious of boundary-crossing ideas, institutions, and people—immigrants, mestizos, half breeds, mulattoes, Creoles, people whose liminal experiences and identities could not be easily corralled.”⁵ In response, “American history” took a “transnational” or “transatlantic” turn. Here is my proposal for tonight. The Catholic Church is transnational. As context for Catholic theology in the United States, “American Catholic history” needs a “trans-American turn.”

Pope Francis came to the United States in September 2015 as a son of his Argentine *el pueblo*. To us he appealed in terms of the history and culture of our own people. But Francis is also a transnational figure, subject to no sovereign. To “American Catholics” he also came as the chief pastor and teacher of our church. Mysteriously in Christ we belong to the same “people” as our southern neighbors. We must imagine how to make more real the “ecclesia in America” of John Paul II’s 1999 apostolic exhortation.⁶ In keeping with Latin American usage, Francis in the United States, like his Polish predecessor in 1999, spoke consistently of “America” in the singular. Indeed, his pilgrimage epitomized the North-South encounter that he proposes for the peoples of the Americas. When he concluded his historic address to Congress with a familiar “God bless America!” his prayer overflowed with excess meaning. Tonight I hope you will listen hard for that meaning.

Francis’ trans-American perspective breaks into an ongoing struggle over the theological meaning of “America.” It began with John Winthrop’s seductive image of the “shining city on a hill,” most recently invoked by Presidents Ronald Reagan and Barack Obama.⁷ In its nineteenth-century, westward expansion, the United States obliterated cultures and exterminated peoples. We were “God’s New Israel.” On the eve of the Mexican

⁵ David Thelen, “The Nation and Beyond: Transnational Perspectives on United States History,” *Journal of American History* 86, no. 3 (December 1999): 967. This lead article is part of a special issue of the journal of the same title.

⁶ On Pope John Paul II, *On the Encounter with the Living Christ: The Way to Conversion, Communion, and Solidarity in America (Ecclesia in America)*, 1999, https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_22011999_ecclesia-in-america.html and its significance, see William L. Portier, “Americanism and Inculturation: 1899–1999,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 27, no. 1 (Spring 2000): 139–60.

⁷ President Obama invoked it, borrowing from President Ronald Reagan, as recently as the 2016 Democratic National Convention in Philadelphia. See Eugene Robinson, “Obama’s Reinvention of the ‘City on a Hill,’” *Washington Post*, July 29, 2016, commenting on Obama’s speech of Wednesday, July 27.

War of 1846, journalist John L. O'Sullivan coined the phrase "manifest destiny." Later he spoke of "the right of our manifest destiny to overspread and to possess the whole of the continent which Providence has given us for the development of the great experiment of liberty and federated self-government entrusted to us."⁸

Catholics in the United States have worked hard to map their story onto this mission of America. Embracing exceptionalism, they wanted a piece of white Christian America. As Willie Jennings argues, however, when imperial powers fancy themselves "God's New Israel," they forget that, just like the people they want to colonize, they too were once Gentiles, relatively recently and so mysteriously grafted onto that wounded and very Jewish body of Christ.⁹ Theologians who live amid such imperial fantasies of "God's New Israel" have deformed imaginations, portals closed to the Spirit. Reimagining "America" can be hard.

The appeal to the Creator in the Declaration of Independence has led many European American Catholics to believe in a providential fit between Catholic natural law tradition and US political institutions. This Catholic variation on God's New Israel is finished. It's over and done. But we can still hold onto what is good about US political institutions. "Ours is not a loyalty to blood and soil. It is an embrace of a series of powerful sets of propositions."¹⁰ These propositions include such affirmations as the rule of law, the right to dissent, freedom of speech, and freedom of the press.

We have much to lament about the contemporary United States. We could begin with a pervasive corporatization ranging from health care to education, neoliberal economic encroachments on what remains of our politics, and the closely related wars without end. But, though I love Canada, the United States is still my "home and native land." I love basketball. I love what remains of our voluntary institutions: fire and rescue companies, farmers' markets, Little League, and churches. What I love most about the United States, however, is that anyone can be an "American." There's no test except commitment to our propositions. As David O'Brien often points out, the transatlantic migrations that brought many of our families here were, indeed, journeys of liberation.

⁸ John L. O'Sullivan, *New York Morning News*, December 27, 1845. On "manifest destiny," see John C. Pinheiro, *Missionaries of Republicanism: A Religious History of the Mexican-American War* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

⁹ Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination, Theology, and the Origins of Race* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010). "Gentile forgetfulness" and its deforming effects on the Christian imagination are a central theme of this work.

¹⁰ E. J. Dionne, "We Don't Call It Nationalists' Day," *Washington Post*, April 17, 2017.

In addition, those who currently find themselves threatened with exclusion, marginalization, and even death in the United States can judge it by our ideals, find it wanting, and protest. President Barack Obama's March 7, 2015, speech at the Edmund Pettus Bridge marked the fiftieth anniversary of the march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama. Police beat protesters on that bridge. The president described the forces that met there as "a contest for the meaning of America." Appealing to our propositions, he praised the marchers' "moral imagination." The young John Lewis and his companions risked death. They couldn't know they would succeed and their effort become a civil rights icon. "At Selma, Obama consecrated ground, placing the events on the Edmund Pettus Bridge on a par with Concord, Lexington, Appomattox, and Gettysburg."¹¹ He reimagined "America."

But such struggle wearies the soul. And so there are songs. Selma marchers did their share of singing. Amused by "We Shall Overcome," we forget that those who sang it back in civil rights days often risked their lives. Soon after he learned of yet another white police officer's acquittal for shooting a fleeing black man in the back and killing him, columnist Leonard Pitts found himself "burdened by the faith of my elders." Have you ever been burdened by the faith of your elders? "I hear King," he wrote, "reminding me how the arc of the moral universe is long but bends toward justice....I hear Curtis Mayfield...Sam Cooke...and Mahalia Jackson."¹² Pitts knew his elders would eventually "beguile me back into faith," but on this day only the songs kept him connected to faith. Such is the power of imagination.

A song that keeps me connected is Springsteen's "Land of Hope and Dreams" (1999). An eight-minutes-plus quasi liturgy, it takes off from a 1920s gospel song, "This Train Is Bound for Glory." Woody Guthrie took the title of his 1943 autobiography *Bound for Glory* from this song. Artists from Sister Rosetta Tharpe to Johnny Cash to Mumford & Sons have covered it. This "narrow gate" train carries none "but the righteous and the holy,...no gamblers, no crap-shooters, no mid-night rambles." Not so Springsteen's train. Through "fields where sunlight streams" his train carries a more raggedy crew to "a land of hope and dreams." It carries "saints and sinners...whores and gamblers...lost souls...broken hearted...thieves and sweet souls departed."¹³

¹¹ Greg Jaffe, "Which Obama Speech Is the One for the History Books?" *Washington Post*, July 24, 2016, B1, B4, at B4.

¹² Leonard Pitts, "Fervent Hope of My Elders Poses Difficult Challenge," *Dayton Daily News*, December 11, 2016, A23.

¹³ *The Essential Bruce Springsteen*, Columbia, 2003.

When he came to the United States in 2015, Pope Francis spoke of “America” in terms of hope and dreams, most often in the context of immigration. He made me think of Springsteen’s train. In Rome last March, Francis identified Europe’s biggest challenge: “the long file of women, men, and children fleeing war and poverty, seeking only a future for themselves and their loved ones.” More than an economic question, the migrant crisis is about culture. “What kind of culture does Europe propose today?”¹⁴

Francis challenged Congress in the same way. Speaking primarily in David O’Brien’s “republican” style, he appealed to the civic piety of sociologist Robert Bellah’s “Civil Religion in America.”¹⁵ Only subordination of the nation to higher ethical principles can save civil religion from idolatry.¹⁶ Francis spoke not of providential missions or shining cities. Rather than denounce our country as a “culture of death,” he exhorted us to live up to our own ideals as expressed in the Declaration of Independence, the Golden Rule (Matt 7:12), and the “historical memory” and “spirit of the American people.” He appealed to our “cultural heritage” as embodied by Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King, two preeminent theologians of American civil religion. To them he added Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton. Selma’s fiftieth anniversary reminded him “that America continues to be for many, a land of ‘dreams.’”¹⁷

The pope flew to Washington from Cuba. Like the immigrants for whom he pleads, Francis came from the South. It is said that he “is convinced that

¹⁴ Pope Francis, as quoted in James Carroll, “Pope Francis Proposes a Cure for Populism,” *The New Yorker*, March 28, 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/pope-francis-proposes-a-cure-for-populism>.

¹⁵ On the three “styles” of contemporary public Catholicism, see David O’Brien, *Public Catholicism* (New York: Macmillan, 1989), 242–52, “republican” style at 249–51.

¹⁶ On “civil religion,” see Robert Bellah’s classic essay, “Civil Religion in America,” *Daedalus* 96, no. 1 (Winter 1967): 1–21; Bellah’s *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in a Time of Trial* (New York: Seabury Press, 1973); and his 1978 “Afterword,” which appears in the 1993 University of Chicago Press edition of *The Broken Covenant*.

¹⁷ “Address of His Holiness Pope Francis,” Joint Session of the Congress of the United States, September 24, 2015, <http://aleteia.org/2015/09/28/read-the-full-texts-of-all-of-pope-francis-addresses-during-his-visit-to-the-u-s/>. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from Pope Francis’ US addresses are from this source. On April 4, 2017, the forty-ninth anniversary of King’s assassination, Pope Francis sent a personal letter to Chicago’s Cardinal Blase Cupich and the young people of Chicago: “I urge all people, especially young men and women, to respond to Dr. King’s prophetic words and know that a culture of nonviolence is not an unattainable dream, but a path that has produced decisive results. The consistent practice of nonviolence has broken barriers, bound wounds, healed nations—and it can heal Chicago.” <https://zenit.org/articles/quoting-martin-luther-king-pope-francis-prays-for-nonviolence-in-chicago-popes-letter-to-cardinal-cupich/>.

the mass displacement of people at this time is the most important moral choice facing Western countries. Will we embrace the stranger in need or [will we] build new iron curtains?"¹⁸ Francis introduced himself as an immigrant and appealed to our history as a nation of immigrants: "As a son of an immigrant family, I am happy to be a guest in this country, which was largely built by such families."¹⁹ The next day, he thanked Congress for its invitation to address a joint session. Congress invited him, he thought, because "I too am a son of this great continent, from which we have all received so much and toward which we share common responsibility." His greetings to both Congress and the bishops on the previous day presume one continent, one America.

Recalling King's dream, Francis told Congress, "We the people of this continent are not fearful of foreigners. I say this to you as the son of immigrants, knowing that so many of you are descended from immigrants." Mindful of the injustices associated with "first contacts," he urged that "when the stranger in our midst appeals to us, we must not repeat the sins and errors of the past." Invoking the Golden Rule, he exhorted legislators to treat as they would want to be treated the thousands "who are led to travel north in search of a better life for their loved ones." "We must not be taken aback by their numbers, but rather view them as persons, seeing their faces and listening to their stories, trying to respond as best we can to their situation."²⁰ "I am certain," he had assured the bishops the day before, "that as in the past, these people will enrich America and its Church."²¹

The "immigrant church" story is about how Irish, Germans, Italians, Poles, and other Southern and Eastern European peoples, at least until our country blocked their entry in 1924, struggled to find their way in a land that did not always welcome them, a land where they faced job discrimination and other forms of systemic exclusion. As Muslims are to contemporary nativists, so Catholics were to earlier nativists. In response, and with no little help from government investments in urban infrastructure, public health, and education, Catholics created a vibrant network of voluntary institutions. It paradoxically turned them into Americans who no longer needed those

¹⁸ Austen Ivereigh, as quoted in Griff Witte and Anthony Faioloa, "Pope to Issue Moral Call to Europe on Migrants," *Washington Post*, April 16, 2016, A8.

¹⁹ "Remarks of His Holiness Pope Francis at Arrival Ceremony," The White House, September 23, 2015.

²⁰ "Address of His Holiness Pope Francis," Joint Session of the Congress of the United States, September 24, 2015.

²¹ "Speech of Pope Francis to the Bishops of the United States," St. Matthew's Cathedral, Washington, DC, September 23, 2015.

institutions.²² How can we, descendants of the Micks, the Krauts, Dagos, and Polacks of the past, pull up the ladder our elders used to climb into "America"? "You shall love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Deut 10:19). How, in the face of God's own plea for the stranger in Deuteronomy, can we turn a deaf ear to pleading refugees and immigrants?

At the 1982 CTS convention, David O'Brien gave the opening plenary address.²³ To theologians, tangled as often we are in systematic abstractions, he explained the religious implications of recent demographics. "Catholicism," he declared, "is becoming more evangelical,"²⁴ more voluntary. We live in the remains of a European American immigrant subculture. We need a faith in Christ and the Holy Spirit "strong enough to believe that its truth...will be enriched by its entry into human life."²⁵ We need to go out from the church. Go forth, as Francis puts it in *Evangelii Gaudium*. Rather than identifying with "massive categories whose members we never meet," we need a "faith in people...a commitment to real people, in this case the American people." Rather than "Who is our 'public'?" O'Brien urged us to ask this question: "Where are our people and how are we to be with them?"²⁶

O'Brien anticipated Pope Francis by three decades. To go with his pastoral revolution of accompaniment, Francis has also initiated a linguistic revolution. His consistent use of "America" in the singular challenges us as citizens of the United States to reimagine the American people O'Brien urged us to accompany. The first American pope has made O'Brien's question even more challenging, but no less urgent, than it was in 1982: "Where are our people and how are we to be with them?" That's what we need to imagine. God bless América!

²² Una Cadegan, "Catholic Immigrants Didn't Make It on Their Own. They Shouldn't Expect Others To," *Washington Post*, April 18, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2017/04/18/catholic-immigrants-didnt-make-it-on-their-own-they-shouldnt-expect-others-to/?utm_term=.7ba131adf549.

²³ David O'Brien, "Literacy, Faith, and Church: An American Religious Perspective," in *Foundations of Religious Literacy*, ed. John V. Apczynski (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1983), 3-29.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 17.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 24.

²⁶ *Ibid.*