

Literacy, Commerce, and Catholicity: Two Contexts of Change and Invention

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How many of our abbeys, which two hundred years ago were resplendent with grandeur and sanctity, are now the refuge of the slothful? The order is still powerful, but the stink of the cities is encroaching on our holy places, the people of God are now inclined to commerce and wars of faction; down below in the great settlements, where the spirit of sanctity can no longer find lodging, not only do they speak (of laymen nothing else could be expected) in the vulgar tongue, but they are already writing in it, though none of these volumes will ever come within our walls—fomenter of heresies as these volumes inevitably become!
—Abbot Abo in *The Name of the Rose*

The pioneering work on orality and literacy by Walter Ong invites revisionist thinking about a great many things. Thus, a new “meta-discipline” is emerging which not only poses new questions but calls for re-exploring territories of learning that have seemed pretty well mapped out. Taking some leads from Ong, I would like to offer some preliminary reflections on an aspect of this re-exploration which seems to me to be especially timely: the relationship of Christianity to the world of commerce. While the chief concern of this paper can be so simply put, an adequate response to it cannot be. Nor can a paper of this sort do anything but begin to explore such a vast topic. Yet the current debate surrounding the U.S. Catholic bishops’ attempt to address the pastoral implications of the contemporary economic environment warrants a start. Shifts on the scale of orality and literacy have

shaped radically both Christian and commercial history in the past. Today we still live out the heritage of that past, but new dynamics in this process raise perennial issues in new forms. My present interest in this topic is essentially theological, and the *leitmotif* of the discussion which follows will be the theological concept of “catholicity.”

Catholicity and Culture

Ong presents the catholicity of the Christian Church as a mandate to permeate and leaven human cultures wherever it finds them in time and space. This is not only because Christians must live in different times and places, but because the missionary character of the Christian gospel entails the work of bringing the entire cosmos back to God the Father through Jesus Christ (Ong 1959:63-64). As Ong has noted in numerous places (e.g., 1956:71-72; 1967b:152), the Greek concept of *katholikos* does not mean “the-same-everywhere” (like the Latin *universalis*, “turning as one”) but something rather more like “through-the-whole-ness.” What is at stake in “catholicity” is not uniformity but unity-in-diversity. On this view, the movement of divine providence is not something external to cosmic evolution; rather God works through the stages of that evolution from within. Christians can transform the world in grace only by living in particular cultures and bringing the vision of Christ to bear on them. Christians find themselves living in tension between two worlds, which Augustine called the City of God and the City of Man.

Since there is no detailed blueprint for human cultural evolution or for the precise Christian response in each instance, specific responses must be invented along the way. From a theological standpoint, the evolution of the media of communications from primary orality, through manuscript and print, to our present technological world of electronic secondary orality lies at the core of that process of invention. The stages in media history determine in important ways the stages of human history, and they structure fundamental stages in salvation history as well. Therefore the way Christians respond to these stages constitutes a significant dimension of Christian history (Ong 1969a).

Much of Ong’s work connects explicitly or implicitly with this history. I will explore here aspects of Christian responses to two shifts on the scale of literacy that triggered two major cultural

changes. The first is the commercial revolution in Western Europe in the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth centuries. The second is the twentieth-century revolution in American Catholicism in the commercial culture of the United States. Neither of these situations is simple, and there are many dimensions of each that cannot be treated here. But the broad patterns of interrelationship are worthy of consideration.

I want to draw together some strands of Ong's work, to interrelate them in ways that he has not (so far as I am aware), to relate them to some other sources, and to offer some reflections on the current scene in American Catholicism relevant to the concerns of the bishops' letter.

Monasticism and the Medieval Commercial Revolution

The connections between literacy and commerce go back to the invention of scripts. Connections between literacy and the Judaeo-Christian tradition reach back over 3000 years. While the legacy of the Holy Scriptures and the tradition received from earliest Christianity embody deep concern about matters that hinge on wealth and poverty, it was in the Middle Ages that commercial activity first seriously challenged the Western Christian imagination. It was a challenge that appears deeply related to changes in attitudes toward and new applications of the written word.

Ong has discussed numerous aspects of medieval literacy, its connections with classical rhetoric, its preoccupation with texts, the separation of Learned Latin from the vernaculars, and so forth (Ong 1958a). The part of the story which concerns us here begins with the fifth century when progressive waves of illiterate barbarians began to erode the western half of the Roman Empire, diluting the quotient of literacy and thereby all but destroying the remnants of Latin civilization. The Christian imagination responded with the invention of the monastery, governed by a written rule and committed to the preservation of texts.

The symbiosis between literacy and monastery in Western Europe from the sixth through the tenth centuries was so thorough that the distinction between "cleric" and "lay" became virtually synonymous with "literate" and "illiterate" (Baldwin 1971:32), although somewhat ironically the monastery seems to have been in part a counter-move against earlier tendencies toward eremitic isolationism. In any event the monastery linked the silence and solitude consistent with its literate mission to a residue of ancient

rhetoric which expressed itself in communal liturgical prayer. Monastic communality bespeaks oral roots, while monastic textuality fosters introspection. Attention to individuality and interiority became heightened.

Symbolically, the monastic life identified itself as the Garden of Eden, the Kingdom of God, the heavenly Jerusalem, the City of God, surrounded by the warring oral world, the barbarian city of man. The monks were drawn largely from the warrior class. They tamed themselves through life under solemn vows, although they retained a certain combativeness in their spiritual life. The vow of poverty amounted to a renunciation of physical violence and the booty which accompanied it (Little 1983:68); the vow of chastity freed them from bondage to the politics of marriage arranged by families and lords (Ong 1969a:13). Vows of obedience and stability provided a supportive, harmonious communal context for the pursuit of learning. Here monks could not only enter into that uniquely individual and inward journey to spiritual perfection modeled on Christ and his saints, but they could engage in communal liturgical combat for the salvation of souls. For the better part of five centuries, the monastic way of life remained the gravitational center of Latin Christendom. Despite its commitment to literacy, texts were few, precariously held, tediously multiplied, and the quest for stability rooted in authoritative antiquity reigned over a basically devotional and conservationist mentality.

The eleventh century initiated radical and dramatic change. A population explosion tripled the population of Europe by the end of the thirteenth century. This necessitated establishing new villages and clearing land that had long lain fallow. Building on earlier advances in technology (White 1962), particularly in agriculture with the invention of the iron plow and effective systems of crop rotation, these new fertile lands helped produce surplus crops which could be traded advantageously beyond the previously self-sufficient estates of lords and monks alike (Southern 1953:41-49). Periodic trade fairs developed into permanent towns, and regions began to specialize in their best products—wine, wool, textiles. Centers on navigable rivers and on sea-coasts grew into privileged commercial cities. The Crusades opened up dormant contacts with the East, bringing not only essential goods and luxuries from afar, but an influx of additional texts from antiquity. Commerce flourished on a scale previously unknown to barbarian Europe.

L. K. Little identifies the economic change as a shift from “gift economy,” where precious metals and even coinage are thought of as treasure, to “profit economy,” where money appears as a convenient and neutral medium of exchange (1983:3-18). Money replaced barter and made possible more abstract, more varied, and more distant transactions. Manor-house artisans moved to towns and cities where they could sell their crafts and skills for more than their subsistence. Merchants engaged in more complex and more long-range trading which required more sophisticated methods of accounting and marketing. More ambitious projects demanded full-scale arrangements for banking, contracts, credit, and investment with networks of brokers and agents spread around the continent. The written contract began to supplant interpersonal oral commitments as the “glue” of society.

Town and city governments grew as well and faced new challenges in civic management, building projects, the regulation of trade, tax collection, social problems, the adjudication of legal issues, the administration of criminal justice. All these things demanded new inventions which required the skills of literacy, and they exploded into a host of new roles: administrators, notaries, stationers, bureaucrats, architects, engineers, lawyers, bankers, educators—as well as new social arrangements to keep all these people working together. Likewise, artisans and skilled workers, including teachers, formed legal corporations called “universities” for mutual aid and protection and for the regulation of their trades (Baldwin 1971:22-23).

This new expansive order could not have been more antithetical to the serene timeless ideal of the monastery. Yet the monasteries themselves quickly became heavily involved in the new system, not only because they and the landed nobility were major owners of production but also because they became major sources of capital and credit. The monastic chamberlain, the manager of financial affairs, became more important than the cellarer, the monk who was responsible for storage of produce from monastery lands (Little 1983:65). Monasteries that became buzzing centers of commercial activity, even with towns growing at their gates, expressed their new-found wealth in building expansion and other forms of luxuriation.

Morris suggests that the monastery, with its somewhat blurred commitment both to the Christian scriptures and patristic writings and to pagan Stoic and neoplatonic writings as well, mirrored in its

spiritual withdrawal and pessimism toward the world the dismal actuality of barbarian feudal society (Morris 1972:20-36). Hence an ambivalence toward the world produced an enduring mistrust of Christian involvement coupled with an equally enduring contribution to secular advancement (Cf. Decarreux 1964). One could hardly expect from monks the comfortable symbiosis of world and faith signaled by the fourteenth-century Italian merchant, Francisco di Marto Datini, who headed his ledgers with the motto "For God and Profit" (Ong 1969a:14; Ong 1958b).

The seeds of reaction also began to sprout, reasserting the anti-secular side of monasticism. Early in the eleventh century complaints arose about the disruption of monastic serenity by the tumult of economic change. Reform-minded monks and abbots hearkened back to the eremitic ideal of the desert fathers who had a different stake in literacy, and they sought refuge from the madding crowd in remote hermitages. By the turn of the twelfth century, full-scale attacks were launched on what was seen as monastic complicity in a corrupt world. Virtually every aspect of urban commercial life was condemned, even its schools, even though the thinking of the reformers themselves registered elements of the new literacy. New monastic orders were formed—the Carthusians, the Premonstratensians, the Cistercians—in hardly accessible places in an effort to restore poverty, simplicity, and contemplation to monastic life (Little 1983:70-96).

In the religious polemic of the day, avarice had replaced pride as the deadliest of sins (Little 1983:36). Symbolically, the crisis had focused on biblical and traditional condemnations of usury, complexly related not only to the charging of interest but to the very legitimacy of a profit, credit, commercial economy. Neither the older monastic mind nor that of the monastic reformers could form a positive interpretation of the new circumstances, and the consequences were often tragic. People involved in urban and commercial activity dangled in a spiritual no-man's land, and even pious lay men and women who caught the spirit of reform and sought voluntary poverty and communal living were subjected to harrassment, even excommunication or execution, at the hands of civil and religious authorities (Little 1983:113-45).

Most damaging of all was the rise of anti-semitism. European Jews, who had gravitated toward the new economy along with their Christian compatriots, were increasingly forced to perform certain economic functions proscribed for Christians.

Where they had enjoyed a lack of discrimination in the pre-commercial age, Jews were now persecuted for engaging in unholy work at the same time as they were required to do so. A figure so prestigious as Abbot Peter the Venerable can wonder “whether a Jew is a human being.” And Bernard of Clairvaux was scarcely more enlightened. This pattern became a lasting part of European culture (Little 1983:42-57).

The rise of commercial culture and the negative reaction to it continued into the thirteenth century when new inventions offered hope of at least a partial resolution of the conflict. During the first part of the feudal age, and for good reason given the chaotic state of worldly affairs, the Christian life had hardened into a form adamantly resistant to change. But the new circumstances called for a breakthrough, and it came signally with the appearance of the friars—the Dominicans and the Franciscans—who, in their distinctive ways, invented and affirmed a new understanding of religious life and embraced the new secular literacy associated with the commercial world, the literacy of the schools, scholasticism.

The history of scholasticism, its development and its manifestations, is too complex a subject to be treated here, but we can note a few ways in which its literacy differed from the literacy of monasticism. Its often-remarked disputatiousness made it more congenial to the world of commercial haggling and negotiation. While still wedded to the texts of antiquity, it typically took a more analytic approach, from the topical organization of sentences (positions, authoritative opinions) transmitted from the ancients to the construction of *summae* which run the gamut of questions for dispute (Baldwin 1971:82-97). Despite its avowed reverence for the past, a new stress on individuality and reasoned explanation became evident (Morris 1972). It was more aggressively empirical in focus, more mobile in its interest in the advance of knowledge as well as its preservation, qualities fostered especially by Dominican attention to newly rediscovered works of Aristotle.

The scholasticism of the High Middle Ages made great advances in logical precision, laying the foundations for modern science and commerce (McLuhan 1951:33). But most important for present purposes, the friars took up study and secular learning in order to wade into the cultural currents of the day. They studied to prepare for preaching in the marketplace, they entered the schools to debate theological and moral issues which the new order had generated, and they affirmed the widening world of vernacular

discourse. Reflective giants like Bonaventure, Albert the Great, Thomas Aquinas, and many others, provided a spiritual and intellectual basis for a life that could be both deeply Christian and thoroughly involved in commercial culture (Little 1983:184-96).

The monks cannot be held accountable for all the evils of the period. They had a point: avarice was running rampant. Nor can the friars be credited with all the good. But the two groups typify the chasm that existed between commercial culture and ecclesiastical attitudes. Despite the vigorous persistence of old attitudes, change did come, often quite rapidly. If Pope Lucius III, a Cistercian in his early days, could call for a crusade against pious textile workers in 1184, just fifteen years later Innocent III would give the same group official sanction and elevate a merchant, Omobono of Cremona, to sainthood (Little 1983:215).

From the standpoint of literacy's drive toward interiorized orderliness, the business person's character is a kind of secularized monasticism (Ong 1969a:13). Seen against the background of the tribal barbarian world, the monastery is a blow against traditionalism. Ironically, monasticism's symbolic attachment to stability rendered it unable to acknowledge its own psychological progeny. The itinerant friars were able to re-imagine, as was Ignatius Loyola in the sixteenth century with his highly interiorized and individualized spiritual exercises. In any event, the encounter between the religious life of the three vows and commercial culture in the High Middle Ages illustrates Christianity's struggle with its catholicity. It was a struggle which involved successes and failures, a learning process by which Christians discovered how to incarnate the faith into those new circumstances. Adaptation is a risky business because it involves treading the narrow path between selling out to the spirit of the times (overadapting) and failing to address the issues of the time (underadapting). Either is a failure from the viewpoint of catholicity. The adaptation which monasticism represented in the early Middle Ages was enormously successful both from the viewpoint of Christianity and from the viewpoint of civilization in the West. But when that embodiment of Christianity failed to meet the challenge of the commercial revolution, new and seemingly antithetical means for realizing itself in the new culture of commerce emerged. As representatives of official Christianity, Franciscan and Dominican friars not only addressed the challenge in their time, they did groundwork which continues to affect the destiny of the globe. Their contribution,

occasioned by the failure of the older arrangement to be catholic enough, is one of catholicity's great success stories.

Catholicity, Commerce, and Literacy in America Today

It would appear at first glance that catholicity is more easily dealt with in the Middle Ages than elsewhere since virtually everyone was "Catholic." This is particularly true if one takes the meaning of "catholic" to be "universal," as is usual in common parlance and most dictionaries. Yet the historical record paints a different picture. It takes only a modest amount of historical reflection to realize that Christianity's "catholicity," like the other marks of unity, holiness, and apostolicity canonized by the Council of Nicaea, admits of considerable variation in degree and form. If one understands these marks as homogeneous qualities statistically assigned always and everywhere, rather than as indications of movement through time and place, they can occasion misunderstanding and even cultural or religious chauvinism. Catholicity describes the gospel's imperative to elevate and humanize every human situation. As such it becomes a standard of judgment, a criterion by which all Christians must measure their performance always and everywhere. It stands as a permanent challenge to individuals or groups of Christians who might be tempted to regard their own practice as ultimate or unqualifiedly normative.

I chose to begin this discussion of catholicity, commerce, and literacy in the context of the Middle Ages rather than in the Renaissance and Reformation for several reasons. First, following on Morris' argument, the contours of the "modern" world lie not only in the Renaissance of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but in the renaissance of the twelfth and thirteenth (Morris 1972:5ff.). And Ong has extensively demonstrated how medieval manuscript Latinity helped make the later Renaissance possible. The sharp opposition between "medieval" and "modern" may reflect the propaganda of later ages more than it reflects actuality.

Second, since the Reformation the term "catholic" has tended to be used as a sectarian identification rather than as a criterion of performance applicable to all sectors. While such usage reflects actuality in some ways, it makes the applicability of catholicity to all sectors difficult to get at.

Third, one of the hallmarks of American Catholicism, according to Ong, has been its tendency to select medieval

European Christendom as the epitome of Christian faith and culture. James Walsh's apologetic work, *The Thirteenth, The Greatest of Centuries*, published in 1913, is a classic embodiment of this symbolization. While it may have been serviceable for the Catholic-Protestant polemic in the United States, its failure to deal with the medieval economic-spiritual crisis I have described shows that symbolization to be horribly out of touch with historical fact. Its backward-looking stance, like that of the twelfth-century monastic reformers, deflects attention from catholicity's essentially forward thrust and increases the danger of mishandling the crises of the present.

Fourth, in today's rapidly globalizing world of electronic culture, identifying Christianity with its European embodiments of any age can seriously hamper efforts to adapt Christian responses appropriately to contemporary shifts in literacy and commerce. We are aware that earlier adaptations in manuscript and print culture are complexly related to and grow out of one another in various ways. But each was a new and unique circumstance of adaptation. We might learn a great deal about the challenge of catholicity from the successes and failures of earlier Christians, but we will not find in any previous era—biblical, medieval, or reformational—a detailed blueprint for meeting our own challenges.

The debate and discussion surrounding the drafts of the "U.S. Bishops' Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy," with their emphasis on dialogue and participation by all members of the society, draws attention to the need for ongoing reassessment of the role of Catholics in America. Without precisely stating it or attempting to understand it, the document nevertheless registers significant changes over the last fifty years or so in the status of Catholics who belong to literate commercial America. This situation gives new urgency and new currency to attempts to understand the interfaces among catholicity, literacy, and commerce.

Literacy in general, but especially print literacy, encourages a tendency toward standardization and a tendency toward homogenization. This is evident in Ramist efforts to subject all knowledge to a single method which assumes knowledge is homogeneous, fostering the illusion that reality is something rather simple and straightforward, needing only to be properly organized for distribution (Ong 1971:142-64). Ong notes how compelling this notion was for sixteenth-century bourgeois merchants and artisans

whose interest in learning was governed by a kind of intellectual commercialism, knowledge as a commodity subordinated to practical concerns (Ong 1971:165-89). Their consumer-minded approach to education is still a prominent feature of American culture and consciousness, not only in education but in religion and other areas as well.

We know today that things are neither so simple nor so homogeneous. Not only because of the legacy of Romanticism but also because of the knowledge accessibility and abundance brought about by electronic technology, the very notion of homogeneity has been greatly eroded as an ideal. Part of the reason for this erosion lies with the heightened historical sense which comes from an immensely more circumstantial knowledge of the past, with its complexity and diversity, and the correlative effect such knowledge has on secular and religious consciousness. We know for example that efforts to standardize and homogenize Christianity played a major role in its fragmentation. Standardization works contrary to catholicity because it renders a thorough and ongoing leavening difficult if not impossible (Ong 1967a:262-86; 1967b:171-73).

The history of Catholicism in America is complex and variegated, often too little known by American Catholics themselves. It has medieval roots in several ways, and any decent assessment of the catholicity of American Catholicism must take that history into account, its successes and failures as well as its contributions to such critical matters as Vatican II's decree on religious freedom and the shaping of Catholic life in a pluralistic society. The American presence, it is worth noting, was felt not only in the work of Vatican II, but even as a tempering and moderating influence at Vatican I (Hennesey 1970:40-42). But we must limit ourselves here to some general observations about post-immigrant American Catholicism in commercial America.

In a variety of significant ways, American Catholics have drunk deeply of the American spirit from colonial times, even though a reflective awareness of that fact has not been evident in the popular mind for most of the twentieth century (O'Brien 1972:26-50). Let us consider this in relation to literacy and then in relation to commerce.

American society has been unremitting in its preoccupation with literacy. We declared our independence in writing before having a revolution. We are committed to a written constitution as the cornerstone of our political integrity. We continuously take

the pulse of our literacy with SAT scores, studies of functional illiteracy, the effectiveness of writing and reading programs in our schools; we even identify our relationship to the latest technology in terms of “computer literacy.” Such concerns reflect the foundations without which American society and its contributions would be impossible, including the pervasive commercial culture toward which much of this literacy is directed.

American Catholics have not been immune to the effects of this milieu. They have in this century tended to think of their massive commitment to parochial and collegiate education as a normal circumstance for Catholics, yet nothing like it exists or has ever existed anywhere else in the history of Catholicism (Ong 1956:7-8). This is ironic since a major argument against separate schools for Catholics in the nineteenth century was that they would retard the Americanization of immigrant Catholics. As a peculiarly American invention, these schools have greatly facilitated that Americanization, and as such have been an instrument of catholicity (cf. O’Brien 1972:93-99; Hennesey 1970:37-39).

Ong characterized his discussion of American Catholicism in the 1950’s in terms of “frontiers” and “crossroads,” images which are nothing less than prophetic given events during the decade following the publication of his two books, *Frontiers in American Catholicism* (1957) and *American Catholic Crossroads* (1959). While noting exceptions to his charge, he struck at the general lack of reflective awareness on the part of American Catholics of the distinctive character and role of the church here as both Catholic and American. He notes, for example, a frozen symbolization of Europe as a recent past from which they escaped. This aspect of “the American Catholic complex,” something shared with many other Americans, was coupled with a romantic idealization of medieval Europe, the deeper past, as the pinnacle of Christian culture. This latter feature could be understood as a largely defensive maneuver by a peasant folk finding itself in an urban slum and faced with open or veiled hostility from the Protestant middle class: the glorious pre-existence that gives assurance of a glorious rising from present degradation. It also encouraged the idea that insofar as the “modern” world is no longer “medieval,” it is thereby “post-Christian” (Ong 1967b:147-65). Whatever the actual facts, immigrant Catholics (who were, incidentally, by no means the majority among immigrants) were often seen as a threat to the American way of life. A significant part of that threat as

perceived, apart from fantasies about a papal takeover, seems to have lodged with Catholics' lack of education (Maynard 1953:3-23, 61-74).

Catholic education, in keeping with a more general tenor in the American church, found itself with a bifurcated mission. On the one hand it sought to preserve the faith by an excessive dependence upon and deference toward European sources either from the remote past (such as the scholasticism of St. Thomas Aquinas) or from more modern sources which seemed safe because they had come from Catholic Europe. There is irony here, given St. Thomas' role in adapting Christianity to new cultural circumstances. Perhaps on another level it is appropriate insofar as Catholic immigrants retained elements of a peasant mentality for which neo-scholasticism provided a transition to the ratiocination required by life in a pluralistic, commercial, scientific, technological culture.

On the other hand, Catholic education had to overcome suspicion at home by inculturating immigrant populations as quickly and completely as possible. The difficulty is not that inculturation was unsuccessful, but rather that the bifurcated mindset prevented this inculturation from being consciously perceived and critically attended to.

Ong devotes attention to the dangers that accompany attempts to live out programs that do not square up with actuality, but he also argues for what he calls "the apostolate of the secular arts and sciences," which he sees rooted in the very substance of catholicity. Far from being inimical to revealed religion or even neutral, secular learning, research, academic excellence, and even a pluralistic cultural setting can serve to advance God's designs for the cosmos and human destiny within it (1959:118-56). Developments in technology and communications make possible greater and more intelligent management of human affairs. Despite difficulties and dangers, these developments offer new possibilities for the human person because they are themselves human inventions, and they call for a thoughtful and judicious assimilation and leavening by persons who claim devotion to a God from whom their very notion of personhood derives.

But there is another dimension to the question that is pertinent here. If the business of America is business, as Calvin Coolidge said, the business of American Catholics is to a great extent business as well. When commerce broke out in the Middle

Ages, it had to find its Christian interior in a new *saeculum*. Similar adjustments occurred during the Renaissance and the Reformation. Now American Catholics, assimilated as they are into the American mainstream, confront the question of catholicity in new ways. In commercial America, the literate drives for independence, personal and career success, and self-knowledge, things often commercially exploited, have largely eroded immigrant ethnic kinship with Europe's feudal past, weakening core elements in American Catholic self-symbolization.

We have seen the Christian-commercial tension in the Middle Ages. It continued into the next Renaissance. Ong notes that Ramism spread chiefly among merchants and artisans with Calvinist tendencies (Ong 1971:165). Catholics, Anglicans, and Lutherans tended not to take to Ramism, not because of religious concerns but because they lacked the mindset found in markedly commercial settings. Methodism also had Ramist affinities (Ong 1953:235-38); New England, as Perry Miller has shown, was just such a markedly commercial setting (Miller 1939), and the characteristics typical of Ramism have shaped American consciousness deeply.

Among the characteristics of this Ramist-commercial mindset, we can note a concern for proof (closely associated with arithmetic and geometry), for keeping accounts balanced, for itemizing and inventorying. It is statistical, concrete, resistant, sensible, orderly, objective, impersonal. This fits well with the Ramist penchant for methodical argument, the tendency to treat knowledge as a quantity or commodity to be conveyed, in short to organize knowledge visually and diagrammatically as in a ledger. This mindset merges well with the qualities Ong finds in the American business environment: utilitarianism, idealism, optimism, naivete, and "uncanny know-how" (1956:24-34). None of this fits well with a peasant's world-symbolization.

The medieval university and the humanist college both arose in commercial contexts. In America as nowhere else, university work and research carried on in the business world itself merges commerce with the study of natural and social sciences. Catholic colleges and universities in particular, partly because of their bifurcated mission mentioned earlier and their often proclaimed commitment to liberal education, insist on a required mix for business majors of modern language, literature, philosophy, religious studies, and natural and social science, along with courses in

accounting and market analysis. The effect of this is to people the business world with individuals — with men and increasingly with women — who have exposure to higher education.

It is here in this expansive world of lunch clubs, boosterism, and enterprise that Ong found also “an apostolate of the business world.” In contrast to the medieval situation, today’s American Catholic Christian can enter the commercial world not under a cloud of suspicion, but with the endorsement of the Church’s own system of education. Ong notes that this has allowed the Church to penetrate the secular world on a scale unthinkable in Europe, where the Church’s ordinary relationship with the secular order has been through the state. Certainly, whatever else may be said about it, the election of John F. Kennedy — literate, urbane, Catholic, scion of commercial success — symbolized for American Catholics ascendancy to full status as citizens.

But what about the condition of “catholicity” in these circumstances? It is not easy to get one’s bearings when the circumstances are characterized by such rapid and radical change. A century ago, most Catholics were wage workers, and they remained so until World War II. Since then thousands of college-educated Catholics have graduated into every corner of the commercial world. Just seven years before Kennedy’s election, Theodore Maynard described the prospect of a Catholic president as “hardly foreseeable” (Maynard 1953:5). And just two years before John XXIII became pope and announced his plans for a second Vatican Council, Ong, noting the discrepancy between the deficient American Catholic self-understanding and its actual evolution into the future, described a malaise in the American church which was “like the malaise of adolescence, full of promise, and rather likely to end in a spurt of productivity” (1956:9). No one could have predicted the extent to which both the malaise and the productivity would be extended into the ensuing three decades. And no one can predict in detail where it will go from here. At the risk of oversimplifying a situation that is complex and still in transition, let me hazard a few observations.

The bishops’ pastoral appears to have brought to the surface a rearrangement of vectors in American Catholicism today. It seems to assume a changed status for American Catholics. It addresses them as having economic power along with a wider sphere of economic agents — other Christians, Jews, believers and non-believers. It averts to no religious identification for the poor,

but calls instead for a preferential option on their behalf, for a new experiment in economic democracy in which all have a fully just level of participation. In building its case it draws on the biblical tradition shared by Christians and Jews, and on the Catholic natural law tradition which has been a major point of access to American political life for Catholics. It stands firmly on the principle of catholicity in proclaiming the solidarity of the human race, the dignity of the human person, and the demands of justice that flow therefrom.

It is not surprising that the document has been met with very little enthusiasm from the Catholic community at large. Most American Catholics have very little experience with reacting actively to episcopal documents, especially when they run upwards of forty thousand words. The bishops themselves will admit that they are still feeling their way through the more independent role given them by Vatican II.

But there has been considerable heated and polarized response among Catholic and non-Catholic business, political, and academic persons to the bishops' invitation to dialogue and consultation in the drafting process. The entire scenario presents a new wrinkle in American Catholic life.

Before Vatican II "liberal" and "conservative" were not prevalent categories for discussing church life. If used at all by lay people, they would have perhaps referred to clerics who were loose or strict constructionists within a widely agreed-upon ecclesiastical consciousness. Hence one could find a characteristically conservative Catholicism functioning in a world of immense practical innovation in church life and very successful adaptation to the secular culture.

Since Kennedy's election and the Vatican Council, the markers of separation, of Catholic difference, have crumbled in various directions. Educationally, politically, and economically Catholics are part of the mainstream. The terms "liberal" and "conservative," as applied to religious attitudes, now almost inevitably carry overtones from politics that would have surprised earlier generations. Moreover, Catholicism has become a major media event in the electronic global village for Catholics and non-Catholics alike, heightening both a sense of Catholic transnationalism and of the distinctiveness of being American Catholic and Catholic American. In this globalized setting, religious and secular issues are compressed, and Catholics can find

themselves openly and publicly debating U.S. foreign and domestic policies on religious grounds. They find themselves propelled into kinships with other Christians, with Jews and other religious and non-religious persons. The resulting polarities even among Catholics themselves readily focus on global polarities in the economic and political spheres, since the heart of the electronic global revolution beats with commercial rhythms.

Although there are many factors involved, one might characterize the change effected by elevated literacy, increased commercial participation, and electronically globalized awareness on the part of American Catholics as a vernacularization of consciousness analogous to what happened in the medieval situation: events outstrip the received symbol system, and bifurcation becomes polarization.

Liberals and conservatives seem to have handled the transition differently. For conservatives, the bishops' entrance into the secular order seems to be an intrusion. They appeal to the tradition of scholastic natural law which holds for a large measure of secular autonomy. The religious realm should form individual moral conscience and leave implementation to individuals wherever possible. Since the religious and secular involve different domains, radical renovation of the religious (which is the guardian of eternal concerns) seems somewhat factitious. Hence the charge that the bishops lack expertise in economic matters. Ecclesiastical medievalism expresses time-honored truth. This posture fits well with the traditional separation of church and state in the American experience.

On the other hand, the liberal charge commonly has been that the bishops have not gone far enough. Riding the winds of three decades of change and building on the foundation of renewed biblical perspectives, they call for a prophetic challenge to the prevailing culture. Sensing that commerce is at best a concession to human weakness and at worst the occasion of greed and the abuse of power, they resonate with the monastic reformers in search of the kingdom of God on earth.

These are, of course, stereotypes. But they are stereotypes that enjoy currency in contemporary American Catholic symbolization. Both of them embody aspects of the medieval controversy and reflect the breakup of the older American Catholic synthesis. Each has its own blind spots, each its own areas of moral tolerance and outrage. From the standpoint of catholicity, a

new leavening and a new synthesis is demanded even if it defies our present powers of imagination. In the emerging world globalized by electronic technology, a world fragmented by poverty and wealth, nationalistic antagonisms, posturing superpowers, and polarized political, economic, and religious ideologies, it is as difficult for us to see the outcome as it was for the people of medieval Christendom to imagine their own future. One wonders what good and what evil our efforts will set in motion.

Yet the history of Christian catholicity is also a witness to how Christ's saving power can be brought into the real human world where salvation is needed, and as such it is an occasion of hope. Perhaps the most important thing the bishops have done is to put forth a long-range agenda for invention. It will certainly involve a better understanding of our actual past and the symbolizations which have come from that past. It involves as well a deeper understanding of what Christian existence means in a technological, commercial world such as ours. It is, indeed, the form here and now taken by the mystery and problem of the incarnation. Perhaps with Walter Ong's help we have made a start toward a new historical conjunction of catholicity, literacy, and commerce.

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