

The Church in the Trump Era: Catholicism or Americanism?

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Pope Leo XIII's 1899 encyclical *Testem Benevolentiae Nostrae* condemned "Americanism."

A slight majority of American Catholics (52% versus 45%) helped Donald Trump win the White House.

This is something the Catholic Church in the United States will have to live with.

Future scholars of American Catholicism will not be benevolent towards those who made that possible. The list includes the Democratic Party, which nominated a person who appeared (whether the impression was founded or not) to be politically indifferent, if not dismissive towards the concerns of the nation's so-called "religious vote".

The issue now is how the Catholic Church will react to this political earthquake – in its relationship with the new administration, with a pope like Francis who is much more distant from Trump than the average American Catholic and internally, with a very divided ecclesial landscape.

This last item is the most complex of all because it is something that will have an impact in the long run, well after Trump is gone. The election of the new president of the US bishops' conference this week will be just one step in the long process of making sense of what has just happened in the country.

A little more than a year ago Pope Francis went to the United States. The impact of his extraordinary visit, which galvanized American Catholics, is not yet clear. For sure, it did not change one of the key features of his pontificate – that he has an American Catholic problem, and many American Catholics (included many of the bishops appointed by John Paul II and Benedict XVI) have a problem with him.

We are witnessing the return of what Church history students will remember as “Americanism,” when in 1899 Pope Leo XIII accused the US Church of being too adaptive of American political culture.

But Pope Francis does not have just an “American problem”. There is also a neo-Americanist issue, a two-sided problem for both the global Church and the United States.

First, there is the neo-conservative critique of Francis. It is the most visible side of neo-Americanist Catholicism and it has infiltrated Catholic discourse. It comes from an intellectual point of view apart from theology.

The problem traditionalist-neoconservative Catholic Americanism has with the pope regards not so much his theology as his vision of the Church and his social-political message. Francis made manifest the end of the ideological alignment between political-religious conservatism and the Catholic Church as understood as the pillar of the Euro-North American civilization.

Neo-conservatives accuse him of building his popularity at the expense of the Catholic Church. The key problem here is that they hold this Jesuit priest from Latin America to a different standard.

I do not remember self-appointed guardians of Catholic orthodoxy questioning the side effects of papal popularity under John Paul II and Benedict XVI, or accusing either of them of heresy. But they accuse Francis of building popularity by abandoning or watering down unpopular teachings of the Church (on sexual morality and marriage, for example). In this way, they say, the pope is dividing the Church. But it’s not as if Catholics (including those in America) have not been divided about Church teachings on sexual morality for at least fifty years.

This reveals the gap between Catholicism envisioned by Francis and the narrative neo-conservatives use to describe the role of religion in the destiny of Western civilization. They accuse the pope of failing the crucial test of maintaining a “strong church”. They may be right in the sense that he has all but acknowledged that the social and political strength of the Roman Catholic Church is less important than its Christianity, that is, its Christ-like character.

If you believe that the moral message of Jesus Christ in terms of mercy, social justice, and inclusion of the poor is too costly for the Catholic Church, then Pope Francis is not for you.

But there is also a second side of Catholic neo-Americanism. It is a theological and ecclesiological neo-Americanist Catholicism, which cannot be blamed on pundits and commentators that are theologically illiterate.

Typical of this neo-Americanist Catholicism is the belief that the United States is an exceptional nation charged with a special mission. It’s an exclusivist ecclesiology deriving from non-Catholic theology (specifically, strains of Calvinism) that advocates a smaller, purer Church. It is also a theological delegitimization of politics and the state, argued on the basis of a particular (and questionable) interpretation of Augustine’s ecclesiology of the “The City of God”. And it is a moralistic hypocrisy focused on mere principles, which entails a lack of interest for the consequences of decisions made in the name of a purely nominalist respect of moral principles.

We saw these elements at work in the way influential sectors of the Catholic Church in the United States prepared (or rather, did not prepare) for the presidential election of 2016. There was reluctance to engage and criticize the neo-nationalist and anti-internationalist rhetoric in American politics (especially when it comes from Catholic politicians). There were also appeals from some influential bishops that Catholics should leave the Church (an invitation extended particularly to Catholic politicians active in the Democratic Party). On the issue of abortion we saw – this time more than ever – that single-issue “pro-life” voters (including some bishops) were convinced they only had to consider what a candidate says about abortion. And there was growing popularity of theologians

who have spent decades telling Catholics that being active in the political process can only hurt one's Catholic identity, contrary to what Catholic social teaching says about political engagement. This is a problem especially visible on the left side of the political spectrum of Catholic theological intelligentsia.

This last feature is particularly paradoxical – from the “*non expedit*” issued by the popes of the late 19th and early 20th century against the participation of Catholics in the political democratic process <https://www.britannica.com/topic/non-expedit> to the “non expedit” issued by some lay Catholic theologians in a clear dissonance from the social and political message of Pope Francis.

The Catholic Church in the United States is one of the most vibrant in the world and it has a leadership role. But it is now suffering from several maladies. There is the problem of political and cultural polarization within its Church, of mutual segregation between bishops and the Catholic faithful and of relations between Pope Francis and segments of American Catholicism. This goes beyond the bishops and includes some American theologians, Catholic colleges and universities, and organized lay associations such as the Knights of Columbus.

The issue of the balance between a universal (Catholic) interpretation of Catholicism and its necessary local-national embodiment is a continuous question that every Catholic in the world has to face, consciously or unconsciously.

But in this historical moment, in light of the election of Donald Trump to the US presidency, it seems to me that deep at the heart of the future of the Church in the United States is the fundamental choice between being a Roman Catholic Church in America or being an Americanist Catholic Church.

And this, it seems to me, is a rather urgent and dramatic question for Catholics in this great country.

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