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Cover Photos by Phyllis Galembó. Front: Priestess Idúhòh of Èsàngó. Only a fully initiated òhèn (priest) can wear red parrot feathers. Benin City, Nigeria. Back: An altar to the goddess Iemanjá, Queen of the Waters of the Sea, tended by high priestess Iyalorixá Baratinha, Cachoeira, near Salvador, Bahia, Brazil.

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Marifeli Pérez-Stable interviews

Father Andrew Greeley

MPS: In collaboration with the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) in Chicago, you have conducted surveys among American Catholics for the better part of three decades. What is the sociological profile of Catholics in the United States that emerges from your research?

AG: Like millions of other immigrants, European Catholics came to America in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in search of a better life. Contemporary data on income, education, and occupation suggest that American Catholics have a far better life than they would have had if their parents and grandparents had stayed in Europe. With respect to years of education and what we at NORC call "occupational prestige" — a measure closely connected with income and education, Catholics average about the same as non-Hispanic whites. In terms of income, Catholics have surpassed the non-Hispanic white national average. Thus, although the immigrants themselves did not necessarily find a better life, their children and grandchildren *have*.

MPS: You have described immigrant Catholicism as an urban religion rooted in a network of social relations around parishes, parochial schools, police precincts, corner grocery stores, pubs, parks, and other recreational sites. How has the community of American Catholics changed as they have moved to the suburbs?

AG: The parish continues to be a very important focus of their lives, but for different reasons than it was for their ancestors who sought refuge there from the harshness of their lives. Today American Catholics like their parish communities and support them, not out of necessity, but because they choose to do so. If anything, they are more enthusiastic and dedicated in their Catholicism than were their parents and grandparents.

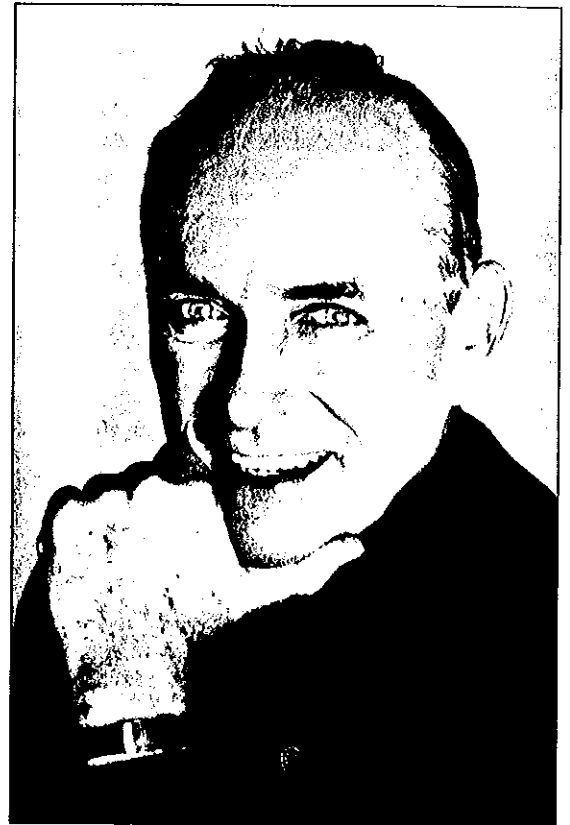


Photo by Francesco Scavullo

Father Andrew Greeley, distinguished sociologist, journalist, and priest, is professor of social sciences at the University of Chicago and the University of Arizona, as well as research associate at the National Opinion Research Center. His latest nonfiction book is Religion as Poetry (Transaction, 1994). Marifeli Pérez-Stable, author of The Cuban Revolution (Oxford, 1993), is associate professor of sociology at the State University of New York, College at Old Westbury.

MPS: But how has the sense of community changed? Suburbs after all are quite different from urban neighborhoods...

AG: Yes and no. Of course, it depends a lot on the suburb and the part of the country. In many suburban parishes the sense of community is pretty much what it was in the old neighborhood. People are better educated and they have more money, but that does not make them any less enthusiastic about their parish community, especially perhaps the parochial schools where they continue to enroll their children.

MPS: In your book *The Irish Americans: The Rise to Money and Power*, you argue that the success of Irish Americans is due in no small part to their ethnic distinctiveness and Catholic identity, and not as traditional sociology would have supposed, to their cultural assimilation. Would you make the same observation about other American Catholics?

AG: I would not say anything much different about Catholics of Italian, Polish, German, or most Hispanic origins. Their ethnicity and their religion are closely identified. Neither is an obstacle to success: most have experienced upward mobility, or are experiencing it, while they continue to be loyal to the church and their cultural heritages. Now, with some Hispanics, particularly Puerto Ricans, there is a tendency among the upwardly mobile to drift away from Catholicism into the Pentecostal churches. But, material success — what the old theories defined as the best indicator of assimilation — has not happened because the descendants of the immigrants *lost* their ethnic distinctiveness; on the contrary, their heritage has been a boon to their "making it" in America.

MPS: Contrary to commonplace perceptions of crisis in the Catholic church, American Catholics are not abandoning their religion. In 1990, as in 1960, about 85 percent of those who were raised Catholic continue to practice their religion throughout their lifetime. They do so in spite of the fact that the church hierarchy has yet to recognize American Catholics for what they are — educated, successful, cosmopolitan — and too often treats them as if they were their parents and grandparents — uneducated, poor, provincial. You have argued that as a result American Catholics, though loyal to the church, are angry. Would you care to elaborate?

AG: In many parishes across this country maybe three-quarters of adult parishioners are college graduates. Parish priests, however, are not necessarily more sophisticated than they were a generation or two ago, nor is the church responsive to the expectations that intelligent, well-educated Catholics have with respect to good sermons, good liturgy, and participation in decision making. What makes people mad are the bad sermons, the bad liturgy, and the authoritarian style of far too many priests.

Since you mentioned the perception of a crisis in the church, let me point out that the only significant decline in church attendance that we can substantiate with the four decades of survey data we have available took place between 1968 and 1975. After much thought, I concluded that the principal reason for the decline was the birth-control encyclical, *Humanae Vitae*, issued in the summer of 1968. American Catholics were angry and frustrated. The explanation for the decline abruptly stopping in 1975 is more complicated and goes to the heart of the tenacity of Catholicism: American Catholics *like* being Catholic. They

like giving their loyalty and devotion to a religious faith that provides them with a rich heritage that is an integral part of their definition of themselves. Being Catholic is a distinction that American Catholics proudly profess, and they were not ready to allow the papal encyclical to deprive them of that joy. That's why those who had drifted away started attending Sunday Mass again in the mid-1970s.

So American Catholics are loyal *and* angry. They manifest their anger in their declining financial contributions to the church. In the early 1960s, when their annual income was \$7,600, Catholics gave the church an average of \$164 a year. Two decades later, their annual contributions had doubled, but their yearly earnings had almost quadrupled. A comparison with American Protestants is quite telling. Although Catholics earn, on average, several thousand dollars more a year than Protestants, they are materially less generous to their churches than Protestants: Catholics contribute about \$320 a year, Protestants, \$580.

MPS: One of your most intriguing ideas holds that the way in which people imagine God strongly influences their response to political and social issues. To measure this proposition, you developed a GRACE scale. What is GRACE and why is it important?

AG: After many years of testing, I came up with a seven-point continuum between four choices people make in picturing God — father/mother, master/spouse, king/friend, and judge/lover — and called the resultant scale the GRACE scale. High scores tended toward the mother/spouse/friend/lover; low scores leaned in the direction of father/master/king/judge. In the mid-1980s, I included this continuum in the General Social Survey. The results confirmed my hypothesis: respondents with a warmer, affectionate, more intimate, more loving representation of God tended to be more gracious or more benign in their response to political and social issues.

A high score on the GRACE scale correlates with social attitudes and political behavior. Those who were more likely to picture God as "friend" and "mother" were less likely to vote for Ronald Reagan. They were also more likely to oppose capital punishment, support civil liberties, advocate social and racial justice, and profess feminist attitudes. The GRACE scale is a more powerful predictor of these attitudes and behaviors than age, sex, and geographical region, though generally not quite as powerful as education.

MPS: Why do you think that the image we have of God is such a strong predictor of political and social attitudes?

AG: Before it is anything else, religion is magic and poetry. While we need to reflect on religion, its raw power comes from the emotions that the imagery and the stories evoke. Religion is a story about life, and our image of God is central to that story. So it shouldn't be surprising that a gracious image of ultimate reality should have gracious consequences for how we view life on earth.

MPS: Historically, American Catholics have been a very important constituency of the Democratic party. You argue that the reason the party lost so many Catholic voters during the 1970s and 1980s was that it did not pay sufficient attention to the distinctiveness of 25 percent of its electorate.

AG: Actually Catholics represent more than 25 percent; the figure is closer to 32 percent. In fact, the Democratic party has not really lost so many Catholic voters: since the 1970s, between 60 and 65 percent of Catholics have voted for Democratic congressional candidates; Catholic disaffection with Democratic presidential candidates was no more marked than that of the rest of the electorate. But it is true that the party has not paid sufficient attention to its Catholic constituency. Between 1972 and 1988, none of the four presidential candidates — McGovern, Carter, Mondale, Dukakis — visited a Catholic school or institution to praise the work the nuns and priests do among the poor. The candidates had no such blind spot regarding blacks, Hispanics, or women. In 1992, Clinton gave a wonderful speech at Notre Dame, though Catholics did not significantly return to the party. Perhaps this was because of the three-way race.

MPS: At one point you wrote that some Catholics viewed McGovern, Carter, and Mondale as "Protestant ministers." What did you mean?

AG: Their sanctimonious preaching style...

MPS: And that's not Catholic?

AG: It rubs some Catholics the wrong way. They remember the anti-Catholicism in the old neighborhoods. Carter especially reminded them of that. It's a question of style to some extent, but also of substance. These candidates were ideological in the sense that they looked at society in stark, judgmental, either/or terms. Catholics tend to view the world through the prism of what I've called the "sacramental imagination," that is, they view society as a sacrament that is unfolding, often flawed, not concluded. Opponents on one issue may be allies on another; the world is much more problematic, with many more shades of gray than the self-righteous tone of these candidates allowed. Catholics were turned off.

At the same time, I think it's important to point out that on most major issues confronting American society, Catholics lean in the liberal direction. They are left of center, though not at the extreme end of the continuum. Even on abortion, Catholics are not the most conservative; black Protestants are. And which is the most liberal gentile group? Irish Americans! That's counterintuitive to the wisdom of academic and media elites but that's what surveys show.

MPS: I'm glad you mentioned the sacramental imagination and its influence on Catholic social and political attitudes. The GRACE scale is a measure of that imagination and its interaction with the world. But now I would like to turn to Catholicism as religious faith. In that sense, what is the significance of the sacramental imagination?

AG: The Catholic imagination sees God working everywhere in the world. The stories of the angels and the saints and the statues and the stained-glass windows and the rituals and the ceremonies — all evoke the image of God's presence among humans. The Protestant imagination, in contrast, sees human society as "God-forsaken": God is radically absent from the world, except on rare occasions such as the life and death of Jesus Christ; human beings are thus wholly separate from God until the afterlife. Protestantism is very skeptical about the images, the stories, the rituals of Catholicism. They see them as idolatry, as contaminating the sacred with the profane.

The sacramental imagination makes Catholicism a warmer faith. Whatever the harshness of the demands of Rome or however frustrating the parish clergy might be, Catholics still have these very consoling stories about people, saints, the rituals that make the world a more sacred place and therefore also more comfortable.

MPS: And the Virgin Mary...?

AG: There is no better manifestation of the Catholic imagination than devotion to the Mother of Jesus. Mary represents the mother love of God, the great historic Catholic insight that God loves us the way a mother loves a newborn babe, the way the Mother loves the Child in the crib scenes. The sacramental imagination insists that such tender passion is a sacrament of what the universe means, what life is all about. Such a notion is so appealing that those who understand it, even dimly and preconsciously, will never give it up. To have a Mother looking down from Heaven, as well as a Father, is for most of us very reassuring.

MPS: And yet you say that sometimes Catholics are reticent about Mary because her worship doesn't promote ecumenism.

AG: Yes, and that reticence is a burst of false ecumenism. Angels, saints, souls in purgatory, stained-glass windows, beautiful churches, and most of all Mary the Mother of Jesus — these are the images that bind Catholics to the church. Community, rituals, imagery — those are the forces that have long-lasting appeal and pull people back to Catholicism. Catholicism cannot — should not — lose its distinctiveness; that's why Catholics remain Catholic.

MPS: Let me ask you one last question. I was quite touched by your understanding of Catholicism. Although I was raised Catholic, I am no longer a practicing Catholic.

AG: Once a Catholic, always a Catholic.

MPS: Maybe I fall into that wayward 15 percent. Nonetheless, it was very moving to read about the sacramental imagination, the poetry, the stories. Catholicism, however, is also about doctrine. You convince me with the poetry, but not with the doctrine. So how do you reconcile the imagery with the doctrine?

AG: Doctrines reflect upon the imagery and the experience; sometimes they are more adequate than other times. Some doctrines are more central than others. The core of Catholicism is that God loves us and that the whole world around us — the people and the events and the objects in the world are expressions of God's love. And that's doctrine, that's the core doctrine. Some others are much less important and have not been constant. There have been changes in the past, so there's no reason to think that the future won't bring change. For instance, the Vatican didn't have the same kind of authority over parish life in early Catholicism as it did later, with the development of better means of transportation and communications. Although American Catholics do not generally deny the authority of the Pope, they would say that in some cases like birth control he simply does not understand what sex and marriage are about.

MPS: Do you want to add anything else?

AG: No, I look forward to seeing this interview in *culturefront*.