

2019

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### Recommended Citation

Esten, Kathrine (2019) "THE SAGA OF AMERICAN CATHOLICISM: FAMILY AS MICROCOSM," *University of Massachusetts Undergraduate History Journal*: Vol. 3 , Article 6.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7275/4m3r-wb08>

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/umuhj/vol3/iss1/6>

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THE SAGA OF  
AMERICAN CATHOLICISM:  
FAMILY AS MICROCOSM

KATHRINE ESTEN

**ABSTRACT**

The story of American Catholicism since the 19<sup>th</sup> century is one of social isolation, family devotion, and strict religious doctrine. In contrast, this story is also one of progressive development, Americanization, and the creation of a unique American Catholic identity, even if unintended by the Church. Combining a historical analysis of Catholic movements in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries for Catholic immigrants and their descendants in the Northeastern United States with personal interviews of late 20<sup>th</sup> century members of my own Catholic family, I argue that the decreasing reliance of later generations of Catholics on Church authority, coupled with friction between changing American values and rigid Catholic beliefs, has made Catholicism substantially a matter of individual choice.

## I. THE SAGA OF AMERICAN CATHOLICISM

As a religion, Roman Catholicism is largely centered around the concept of family: the veneration of Mary, mother of God; the sacramental status of marriage; the fourth commandment of “honor thy mother and father.” For immigrants, the role of family and community played a similar social and religious role, providing security in a new, unfamiliar land. In the United States, the role of the Catholic Church increased rapidly with an influx of Irish, Italian, and other predominantly Catholic immigrants in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Initial practice of the faith emphasized an isolated, family-based approach due to converging forces of nativist exclusion and Church desire for preservation. However, the decreasing reliance of later generations of Catholics on Church authority, coupled with friction between changing American values and rigid Catholic beliefs, has made Catholicism substantially a matter of individual choice.

In this paper, the analysis of Catholicism in the United States takes two approaches. Primarily, second-hand accounts, journalistic coverage, and academic works will shape an understanding of larger movements in Catholicism and a pre-20<sup>th</sup> century understanding. Excerpts of interviews from my own family in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (post-1960) will be used to demonstrate examples of how descendants of 19<sup>th</sup> century immigrants view their relationship with the modern Church.

## II. THE 19 CENTURY: AN UNLIKELY ALLIANCE

The role of Anti-Catholicism on the part of American Protestants against Irish and German Catholic immigrants in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century contributed significantly to the social, and sometimes physical, isolation of Catholics in the United States.<sup>1</sup> Encounters between

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<sup>1</sup> Gjerde, Jon, and Deborah S. Kang. *Catholicism and the Shaping of Nineteenth-Century America*. Cambridge University Press, 2012.

the two groups reached a peak as Catholics became visible demographic blocks, often centered on urban ethnic enclaves. In the 1830s, a series of “rhetorical and physical confrontations” led to a Massachusetts mob burning down a Charlestown convent.<sup>2</sup> In 1844, the anti-Catholic Philadelphia Bible Riots saw houses torched, two Catholic churches destroyed, and at least 20 people killed.<sup>3</sup> Even as late as 1870, the summer New York City “Orange Day riot” saw dozens of Catholics die as a result of violent confrontations between city residents.<sup>4</sup> On the political stage, the “Know Nothing” party capitalized on the events as evidence that Catholic immigration needed to be limited, and American Catholics needed to be excluded from society.<sup>5</sup>

The aversion to Catholic assimilation was grounded in a belief that Catholic voters were an “existential threat” to the democratic traditions and Protestant culture the United States was built on.<sup>6</sup> The intense loyalty held by Catholics to a foreign power – the Pope – heightened fears among American voters; Catholics would vote as their priests told them to, subverting the sacred American democracy with their imposed religion.<sup>7</sup> The widely-held belief that American values were inherently incompatible with those of Catholics led to the use of political and social dominance to prevent assimilation.

However, the American Protestants shared an unlikely, indirect partner in preventing Catholic assimilation in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries in the Catholic Church. External persecution by Protestants pushed Catholic immigrant families to form ethnic enclaves centered around their

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<sup>2</sup> Corrigan, John. “Anti-Catholicism.” Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Davis, Kenneth. “America’s True History of Religious Tolerance.” Smithsonian.com, Smithsonian Institution, 1 Oct. 2010

<sup>4</sup> Corrigan.

<sup>5</sup> Zeitz, Josh. “When America Hated Catholics.” POLITICO Magazine, 23 Sept. 2015

<sup>6</sup> Hoffman, Christopher. “19th-Century Irish Catholic Immigrants Faced Unabashed Hostility.” Courant.com, 22 June 2014

<sup>7</sup> McGuinness, Margaret. “Catholicism in the United States.” Oxford Research Encyclopedias, July 2016

community churches; in these communities, the immigrants depended on the Church to provide food, shelter, resources and an extended social network. Even concerning the education of their children – first generation Americans – Catholic families avoided state public schools they believed were “injected...with an evangelical and sectarian spirit,” favoring the establishment of church-operated parochial schools to preserve “rhythms and orthodoxies of Catholic life.”<sup>8</sup> In 1875, a failed constitutional amendment known as the Blaine Amendment attempted to ban financial aid for any parochial school, but the effect took place in all but 10 states.<sup>9</sup> Regardless, the practice was established – Catholic life would be independent of a country that resisted its integration.

### III. NORTH AND SOUTH: POTENTIAL FOR DIVISION

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the diversity of Catholic immigrants made cohesion more difficult to achieve within the American Church; the ethnic communities were separated from the greater American society, but also other Catholic communities. Southern European immigrants, particularly those from Portugal and Italy, fell into the pattern of social isolation established by their Catholic Irish and German predecessors, these immigrants faced new challenges in assimilation: they didn’t speak English, were typically darker in skin tone and maintained large families.<sup>10</sup> These differences didn’t just separate the southern Europeans from Protestant America, but inspired conflict within the leadership of American Catholicism. To southern European Catholics, American Catholicism was distinctively “immigrant Irish,” and it was necessary to remain independent of the other Catholic communities.<sup>11</sup> Within one small town,

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<sup>8</sup> Zeitz, 2015

<sup>9</sup> Zeitz, 2015

<sup>10</sup> Maggio, John, director. *Becoming Americans*. PBS.

<sup>11</sup> Femminella, Frank X. “The Impact of Italian Migration and American Catholicism.” *The American Catholic Sociological Review*, vol. 22, no. 3, 1961, pp. 233–241.

multiple churches could arise to indicate the many subjects that existed within American Catholicism. My grandfather, Richard B., explained that in Warren, Rhode Island, “you had the Polish church, the Italian church, the French church, and the Irish church, two of them right next to each other.”<sup>12</sup>

This disunity in American Catholicism alarmed Church officials at all levels. These officials feared that, given the ability to self-regulate, Catholics would gradually assimilate into American culture and be lost to the European-based Catholic order.<sup>13</sup> By the turn of the century, Pope Leo XIII addressed this fear outright in an 1899 encyclical to the archbishop of Baltimore. Entitled “*Testem benevolentiae nostrae, Concerning New Opinions, Virtue, Nature and Grace, With Regard to Americanism*,” the encyclical called to attention a growing movement in American Catholicism called “Americanism.” Some Catholics in America, Pope Leo XIII claimed, believed they were a “special case” needing greater latitude from Church authority in order to successfully assimilate into Protestant American culture. Immediately, the Pope dismissed the notion, reiterating that Catholic teaching was the same throughout the world and Americans could not look for canonical and theological lessons in American cultural and political experience of democracy and individualism.<sup>14</sup>

Following this encyclical, the Church leadership reasserted control over its distant immigrant followers by passing new doctrine, specifically on the topic of marriage. Specifically, the 1907 “*Ne Temere*” doctrine by the Roman Catholic Congregation of the Council under Pope Pius X regulated the canon law of the Church, declaring that no marriage between a Catholic and

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<sup>12</sup> Esten, Richard. “Interview.” 25 April. 2018.

<sup>13</sup> Check, Christopher. “Americanism, Then and Now: Our Pet Heresy.” *Chronicles: A Magazine of American Culture*, June 2007.

<sup>14</sup> Check, Christopher. “Americanism, Then and Now: Our Pet Heresy.” *Chronicles: A Magazine of American Culture*, June 2007.

a non-Catholic would be valid unless solemnized by a Roman Catholic priest, a decision broadly up to the discretion of individual priests.<sup>15</sup> In the United States, priests generally enforced “*Ne Temere*” by requiring the non-Catholic partner to promise that any children from the union would be “baptized and brought up in that same faith.”<sup>16</sup>

Here, I transition into a living example of this doctrine playing a role in the preservation of Catholic culture in the United States. My great-grandfather, Richard B. Esten, Sr., was born and raised as an Episcopalian in 1918. In the 1940s, after marrying the daughter of French-Canadian Catholic immigrants, Marie Flora Lambert, he made a commitment to raise any children born of the union within the Church.

“From the time he was married, he had always loved and supported his wife who was Catholic,” my father, Brian Esten recalled. Despite an Anglican last name, there was suddenly a new Catholic branch. According to my father, Richard didn’t believe the label of Catholic was important, but instead prioritized the relationship to his wife and family through faith.<sup>17</sup> The Church, however, grew in numbers through enforced doctrine.

While my great-grandfather eventually converted in the 1980s – after four decades of weekly mass and the passing of his wife, Marie – it was a voluntary choice to “develop his own relationship with the parish.” However, during this time, he raised my grandfather, Richard B. Esten, Jr. In turn, he married Anne McElroy, a descendant of Irish Catholic immigrants, within the Church. Their five children, including my father, were raised as Catholics, and eventually nine children – myself, my siblings, and my cousins – entered the 21<sup>st</sup> century as Catholics

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<sup>15</sup> Creagh, John Thomas. *Commentary on the Decree "Ne Temere"*. Nabu Press, 2012.

<sup>16</sup> Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 3, A.A.S. 57 (1965), p. 93. Cf. Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, A.A.S. 57 (1965), pp. 19-20.

<sup>17</sup> Esten, Brian. “Interview.” 23 Apr. 2018.

despite a shared Protestant surname. All of these marriages occurred decades after the 1907 encyclical, but an independent Catholic identity prevailed for generations.

#### IV. AFTER THE VOWS: AMERICAN CATHOLICISM IN DECLINE

While the label of Catholicism remained under Church doctrine, the grip the Church held on the social lives of American Catholics loosened over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Social services, a critical element of Catholic Churches in its communities, took on a more universal, formal role. The National Conference of Catholic Charities, founded in 1910, moved beyond smaller ethnic enclaves and even cities to support national endeavors; during the Great Depression, it was this conference which developed and pushed for the National Housing Act, the creation of Social Security, and the establishment of national programs in the social services.

<sup>18</sup> However, this rapid growth in authority ultimately weakened the Church. Once established, the programs secularized under federal authority, decreasing the need for the local administrations of Catholic officials.<sup>19</sup>

With the federal government able to provide aid to the communities, the social environments of American Catholics had the opportunity to move beyond ethnic enclaves. Second and third generation immigrants from the ethnic enclaves spoke a non-accented English, were tied to American values of government, and moved beyond their parish environment for economic and educational opportunities. Eventually, Catholics began to move into the upper tiers of American society; in 1928, Al Smith became the first Catholic nominated for the presidency. It's important to note that this was not the end of Anti-Catholicism - Smith's nomination caused numerous party members to defect in protest, leading to Smith's loss in the November elections.

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<sup>18</sup> History of the Catholic Church in the United States, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

<sup>19</sup> D'Antonio, William. "Chapter 5: The American Catholic Family: Signs of Cohesion and Polarization." The Religion and Family Connection: Social Science Perspectives | Religious Studies Center, 1 Jan. 1988

However, his nomination alone signaled a change for American Catholics that their identity as Americans could soon outpace their identity as Catholics.<sup>20</sup>

If a presidential election and the Great Depression was starting the engine of Catholic assimilation, World War II was the equivalent of slamming the gas pedal. Catholic soldiers and other minorities fighting alongside Protestants for a common cause of defeating fascism and preserving liberty overcame longtime barriers that had persisted in the U.S. At home, footage of soldiers fighting often depicted a “Jew, Protestant, Italian, and Irishman” cooperating and interacting as equals, encouraging citizens to hold an American identity before holding any other. Following the war, having defeated the Nazi race state seemed to delegitimize “bigotry in nearly all its popular incarnations,” and relations between Catholic communities and greater American society dramatically improved.<sup>21</sup> Following the war, internal disputes gained even less attention as the nation united in opposition against the Soviet Union. Politicians, who had previously emphasized the Protestant nature of the United States, embraced a broader and softer form of religiosity as a “bulwark against Soviet and communist aggression,” focused on deeply felt religious faith, regardless of its denomination.<sup>22</sup>

Three decades after Al Smith’s loss, Democrat John F. Kennedy became the first Catholic elected to the presidency of the United States. During his 1960 campaign, Kennedy avoided being called a “Catholic candidate and insisted that he was the “Democratic party’s candidate...who also happens to be a Catholic,” but his victory served as a symbol of inclusion to

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<sup>20</sup> Rooney, Michael. “Anti-Catholicism v. Al Smith: An Analysis of Anti Catholicism in the 1928 Presidential Election.” *Verbum*, vol. 9, no. 1, Dec. 2011.

<sup>21</sup> Zeitz, 2015

<sup>22</sup> Zeitz, 2015

the remaining ethnic enclaves in the United States.<sup>23</sup> It was interpreted as the ultimate success, with a Catholic receiving the support of not just their own communities but being embraced by the nation.

My grandmother, Anne, described living in an Irish Catholic Providence neighborhood in the weeks before the election as “endless excitement.”<sup>24</sup> “He was from New England, he was Irish, and he was Catholic,” she said. “He looked like he lived next door, and he was one of us. And he was loved all over America.”<sup>25</sup> The day after the election, my grandmother left for classes before election results were announced, and that the entire neighborhood “was at the edge of their seat.” At recess that afternoon, she and her friends were sitting outside when her father came running down the street during his factory lunch break, followed by all his coworkers. My grandmother said, “They were shouting, ‘He won! He won!’ and everyone was cheering. We all took a little credit for the victory.”<sup>26</sup>

While Kennedy’s victory was a symbol of hope for American Catholics, his insistence on the separation of church and state during his campaign signaled that religion was increasingly becoming a matter of individual for Catholics. In a 1960 speech, Kennedy told concerned voters that he would not speak for the church on public matters, and the church did not speak for him. “I believe in a president whose religious views are his own private affair,” Kennedy argued, emphasizing that the Catholic faith was not the end-all-be-all of public life in American society.

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<sup>23</sup> Casey, Shaun. “The Making of a Catholic President: Kennedy vs. Nixon 1960.” *Making of a Catholic President: Kennedy vs. Nixon 1960 - Oxford Scholarship*, 6 Mar. 2018

<sup>24</sup> Esten, Anne. “Interview.” 25 April. 2018.

<sup>25</sup> Esten, Anne. “Interview.” 25 April. 2018.

<sup>26</sup> Esten, Anne. “Interview.” 25 April. 2018.

<sup>27</sup> Shaw, Steve. “JFK And The So-Called Religious Issue.” *The Huffington Post*, TheHuffingtonPost.com, 7 May 2012

Kennedy's election was possibly the final moment of unity of Catholicism in the United States; the 1960s and 1970s marked a start of dissent within the Church on a global scale as members began questioning the intentions of the papal authority.

"Before, it was 'this was what the church said, and that was it,' but it was becoming, more people wanted to have a role in the Church," my grandfather, said, considering Catholicism in the 1960s and 1970s, "People were starting to question things from the Church."<sup>28</sup>

The same year as John F. Kennedy was elected, 1960, Pope John XXIII convened Vatican II, an assembly of Roman Catholic religious leaders meant to settle doctrinal issues. In doing so, the Pope said that "it was time to open windows in the church."<sup>29</sup> The outcomes of the assembly were largely focused on reconciliation: allowing Catholics to pray with other Christian denominations, encouraging friendships with non-Christians, opening the doors for the use of languages besides Latin during Mass, and more liberal positions concerning education and the media.<sup>30</sup>

For American Catholics, Vatican II's easing of restrictions seemingly came too late. Many traditional ethnic enclaves that had supported traditional churches and schools had dispersed, or begun dispersing, by the late 20th century.<sup>31</sup> From the perspective of the individual Catholic, the experience of Vatican II, combined with changing social and cultural factors, demonstrated that the Church was not in sync with the real world and relying on its structure was no longer necessary.<sup>32</sup> My father explained how, growing up in the 1970s and 1980s, he felt that Catholicism for him became "less about the ceremonial church and more about having ethics."

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<sup>28</sup> Esten, Richard. "Interview." 25 April. 2018.

<sup>29</sup> D'Antonio, 1988

<sup>30</sup> Teicher, Jordan G. "Why Is Vatican II So Important?" NPR, NPR, 10 Oct. 2012

<sup>31</sup> Grossman, 2018

<sup>32</sup> D'Antonio, 1988

This unique approach to the church and the practice of the Catholic faith was given a name in the 1980s: “cafeteria Catholicism.” Intended to be disparaging, cafeteria Catholics were accused by more traditional Catholics of just picking and choosing the parts of scripture most palatable to them, and ignoring that of which they did not approve.<sup>33</sup> However, many Catholics in the United States have accepted the practice of cafeteria Catholicism, referencing Vatican II as focusing more on the use of conscience in determining religious practice.

My father said that he felt the “general nature” of Catholics hasn’t changed over time, and that the core beliefs of Catholicism- concern for the poor, love for Jesus and Mary, prayer- have all stayed constant over generations.<sup>34</sup> However, the concept of self-determination in what parts of Catholicism were practiced seemed practical to him and the only thing preventing it from happening in previous generations was the lack of flexibility in Catholic communities.

“It is more acceptable to be different or question today. The repercussions my grandparents would have faced are much more than I would have,” my father said.<sup>35</sup>

My father also moved away from the parochial schools his family had attended for generations in favor of public schools, citing that the schools no longer were focused on a small community.

“I wasn’t going to put my kids on a bus for half an hour, or drive to the city every day, when the schools in town had just as much quality and were able to support students,” my father said, noting that despite attending Catholic schools, he had wished for exposure to more outside communities while growing up.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Wexler, Celia. “‘Cafeteria Catholics’ Are in Good Company.” *The Huffington Post*, TheHuffingtonPost.com, 27 Oct. 2017

<sup>34</sup> Grossman, 2018

<sup>35</sup> Esten, Brian. “Interview.” 23 Apr. 2018.

<sup>36</sup> Esten, Brian. “Interview.” 23 Apr. 2018.

## V. CATHOLICISM TODAY

Perhaps the most obvious practice of interpretative Catholicism for the modern American Catholic family is in the field of politics. While often viewed as an autonomous group, American Catholics in the modern era are largely divided into three different groups. First, there is a white church composed mostly of Republicans that approves of the church's teachings concerning "family values" but rejects its emphasis on social justice. Secondly, there is a white church composed mostly of Democrats that is skeptical of the politicization of the church's social views but embrace its concern for the poor. Lastly, a generation of modern Hispanic immigrants form up a third division of the Catholic Church for politics, voting Democratic and supporting Catholic teaching on divisive issues such as abortion or climate change.<sup>37</sup> These decisions reflect how Catholicism is no longer the main social identity practiced by many Catholics- while it may guide moral opinion, it is not necessarily the end-all-be-all practice of daily life.

Within the family, the rise of personal autonomy replacing obedience to make decisions affecting matters of personal and social morality has widened the gap between formal Catholicism and the actual attitudes and practices of Catholics.<sup>38</sup> Raised with the values of the church, each member may practice it in a different way. However, many individuals raised in Catholic families have chosen to leave the practice of Catholicism entirely. Nearly 25 million adults, or a third of all active members, no longer identify with the Catholic church in the United States. Most who leave abandon affiliated religion altogether.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Brekus, Catherine A. "Do American Catholics Care More About America Than the Pope?" *Slate Magazine*. September 22, 2015. Accessed April 21, 2018.

<sup>38</sup> D'Antonio, 1988

<sup>39</sup> "Catholicism in the United States." *The Wall Street Journal*, Dow Jones & Company

My sister, Emily Esten, chose to leave the church as a high school student, opting against receiving a formal confirmation. While she believes that she is “culturally Catholic,” she would never call herself one “on account of the foundational beliefs that go along with the religion and the communities around it.”<sup>40</sup> Being raised within a Catholic family may pass on the values of the faith, and the experience of the past generations of immigrants, but for individuals like my sister, the Church itself is no longer significant.

With traditional ethnic enclaves dissolving, and many members of the Catholic faith moving away from the religion, or at least moving away from its practice (the attendance of Mass, paying a tithe, etc.), the Catholic Church in the United States has become increasingly dependent on its growing immigrant community, largely from Latin America and Southeast Asia. In fact, more than a quarter of today's U.S. Catholics were born outside the country, and another 15 percent are the children of immigrants.<sup>41</sup> In addressing the modern American Catholic family, the Church finds themselves again seeking to retain immigrants as they move to a new country in a strong parallel to the late 19th century.

However, the Church today, seen mostly through the addresses of current Pope Francis, is not encouraging isolation for the communities or strict adherence to the protocol of the Catholic faith. In an Apostolic Exhortation called “*Gaudete et Exultate*,” the pope discussed how people can be holy in a modern world “filled with secular distractions and materialism,” like those in the American culture. In it, he urged people to try to be “the saint next door” by doing good and living the Gospel as best they could, keeping charity and mercy, rather than rigid rules, at the

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<sup>40</sup> Esten, Emily. “Interview.” 23 April. 2018.

<sup>41</sup> Gjelten, Tom, and Marisa Peñaloza. “Built By Immigrants, U.S. Catholic Churches Bolstered By Them Once Again.” NPR, NPR, 9 Sept. 2015

center of their lives.<sup>42</sup> This appeal for inclusion and community accepts that the American Catholic family is no longer as distinct for the general American family as it once was. Strict rules, like church attendance or observation of fasting, have certainly diminished over time, but these core elements of the Catholic faith remain strong in both old and new American Catholic communities.

In the past two centuries, American Catholic families have gone from being the subject of riots to being everyday Americans within society. Within the Church, these families have gone from being perhaps its most loyal and reliant members to an increasingly distant population. Early generations of Catholic immigrants relied heavily on the Church for social and financial resources, abetted both by the attitudes of distrusting Protestant society and concerned Church authority. During the 20th century, Catholics pushed their way into the American conscious, rising to positions of authority and eventually seeing the first Catholic president of the United States elected. These achievements, while celebrated as a communal victory, reflected also the changes taking place within American Catholic families. Political and social assimilation removed the pressure to preserve traditional Catholicism. Today, Catholic individuals can be seen expressing their beliefs selectively in politics, seeing their faith as cultural rather than religious, or leaving the faith entirely. The Catholic Church is undergoing a time of change, adapting to the loss of traditional communities, a loss of strength in influencing its members, and the introduction of a new generation of immigrants. To paraphrase John F. Kennedy, it is not American Catholic families, but instead American families who happen to be Catholic.

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<sup>42</sup> Pullella, Philip. "Fighting Social Injustice as Important as Fighting Abortion: Pope." Reuters, Thomson Reuters, 9 Apr. 2018.

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