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Kathleen Kautzer

The Underground Church

Nonviolent Resistance to the Vatican Empire



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By

Kathleen Kautzer



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*For Lily and Curran Chunn, my source of inspiration
and hope for the future*

SERIES EDITOR'S PREFACE

Vatican II not only initiated a process of reform in the Roman Catholic Church, but gave birth to the Reform Movement which has sought to continue this process. With the elections of Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI, the Vatican moved back in a more traditional and conservative direction. The reform movement is a democratic religious movement composed of religious movement organizations. Its primary concerns are equality based on gender and sexual orientation as well as challenging abuses that have taken place within the church. Initially, it pursued insider strategies but frustrated by the Vatican's resistance to change, many involved in it have chosen an exit strategy and established independent Catholic churches. Unlike sects as understood by Ernst Troeltsch or Rodney Stark, these churches are not composed of the less affluent and less educated, but rather of the educated middle class who are in lower tension with this world. The Reform Movement is a movement of religious rationalization which exists in an ongoing dialectical tension with the traditional conservative Catholic hierarchy. This book *The Underground Church: Nonviolent Resistance to the Vatican Empire* by Kathleen Kautzer describes not only the organizations and churches of the reform movement, but the dynamic between it and the ossified patriarchal structure it seeks to reform. Thus understood, it not only employs a critical framework but the movement and countermovement it describes fits well with the mission of this series.

Warren S. Goldstein
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FOREWORD

I had the pleasure of teaching with sociologist Dr. Kathleen Kautzer at Regis College near Boston. It was a women's Catholic College at the time. Feminism permeated its culture and academics. As Religious Studies Ethics Professor, I led student discussions of challenges facing women in business, nursing, and religion. Dr. Kautzer, with her keen sociologist's eye, examined similar issues, but, I felt, often in a more holistic and experiential way than I.

I became very intrigued when I learned of her research into what was happening with Roman Catholic Womenpriests. This topic was strictly taboo in the eyes of church authorities, who later tried to enforce a ban on even discussing it. But forging ahead, Dr. Kautzer proposed to expand this research to include a comprehensive study of the Catholic Reform Movement as a whole.

This was a subject of great interest to me, growing up as I had in a pre-Vatican II world of the 1940s and '50s. I confess to being a true believer in those days, taking immense comfort in the enduring unchangeability of the Roman Catholic Church, with its absolute certitudes and clear-cut laws mapping out the path to salvation. Yes, the rules were often harsh, and hellfire loomed ever menacing, but the clarity and certitude seemed to make it all worthwhile.

This all changed in the 1960s. The Second Vatican Council shook up an institutional church that had become complacent and moribund. The fresh air let in by the reforms of the Council freed Catholics up to respond to the changing world. Dialogue with other religions was opened up; church authority was to become more collegial and shared; freedom for all religions in civil society was affirmed.

These freedoms newly enjoyed by Catholics coincided with a cultural revolution occurring in the wider society affecting politics, morality, and religion. Religious and political authority could no longer command unquestioning obedience. Sexual freedom replaced sexual repression. A kind of religious anarchy sprang up on Catholic college campuses. There was the spectacle of many nuns abandoning their religious garb and priests their roman collars. Others questioned their vocations, and left to join the laity. Small groups of Catholics experimented with the Eucharist, holding services in dormitory rooms using leavened rather than

unleavened bread for Eucharist, and in rarer cases Coca-Cola and cookies replaced wine and bread.

Such initial giddy experiments had no staying power. But soon Catholics set out in earnest to implement and institutionalize Vatican II's reforms. They welcomed vernacular liturgy and increased lay participation. But reformers felt that these baby steps did not address systemic injustices such as the unequal treatment of women and the lack of redress for abuses of clerical power. The equal treatment and respect for human dignity that Catholics expected in their civic life was sorely lacking in their religious life.

Sociologists of knowledge like Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann explained how worldviews are created by the societies in which people move. "We choose our beliefs by choosing our playmates," Peter Berger would say. Abuses of authority were quick to be challenged. The taken-for-granted view that women in the church could not be priests was called into question. Moral absolutes became relativized, as alternative belief systems entered the everyday consciousness of Catholics. Reformers began to selectively shape their communities around beliefs like these.

Particularly upsetting to hierarchs was a new resistance to the clerical caste system. Reformers were no longer content to accept a church divided into the powerful priest-Christians and the disempowered lay-Christians, into a clerical caste and outcasts, into pastors and sheep, into authorities who command and the rest who obey, into men who could aspire to a full priestly Christianity and women who were to be excluded.

The Vatican began in earnest to back away from the freedoms unleashed by Vatican II. Gone was its absolute grip on power. The top-down governing style no longer worked. The church entrusted to them appeared to be dissolving before their very eyes. So the hierarchs pushed back. And in doing so they began to drive the reform groups underground. The account of these tensions is the story that Dr. Kautzer recounts in this amazing book on the underground church.

Reports about parishes and groups that seemed to exist mysteriously in the shadows began to pop up in the press. People, myself included, began to wonder. Who belong to these communities? What is their relation to the Roman Catholic Church? Are their members loyal Catholics, or schismatic Catholics, or have they broken all ties? How do they view authority, or women's roles, or the creeds that define a Roman Catholic believer? Such communities were springing up everywhere, mostly as independent experiments in how to live as Vatican II Catholics in the face of Vatican disapproval. How was a person like me, vitally interested in reform, to get

a hold on what was going on? Nobody had done a comprehensive systematic study of this complex and mostly invisible movement that was coming to be known as “the underground church.”

Dr. Kautzer has undertaken the daunting task of first of all describing who these groups are, and then analyzing them using sociology, political science, anthropology, and theology. She uncovers the forces that pushed them to evolve in different ways and to engage in different strategies. She learned that these communities, while operating with little publicity at the margins of the mainline church, had no intention of subverting the church and every intention of being authentically loyal to the essentials of Catholic tradition.

Dr. Kautzer's study is experience based, drawing on interviews she conducted in the field with representatives of the full gamut of reform communities. She is right to claim her study to be “the only critical comprehensive study of the Catholic Reform Movement” (p. . . .). She brings these communities out of the shadows and into the light. She gives them a face and a voice. She establishes their place and illumines the vital roles they play within the larger religious world, and in society at large. No one else has done this. We owe her a great debt of thanks for this invaluable research.

How will all this play out? Dr. Kautzer points out some cracks in the Movement. First, the implacable opposition of Rome is causing increasing ambivalence among reformers about what loyalty means in such a church. Second, Eucharist is central to the Catholic faith. Where will the priests come from? Will they be clerics, women and men ordained by schismatic bishops? Or lay priests, exercising “the priesthood of the faithful” conferred by Baptism? Recall that Jesus did not ordain any priests. Finally, the structures of these communities are unstable. This makes accountability and continuity difficult to maintain.

But there is hope. There are “rumors of angels,” as Peter Berger might say. The “spiritual but not religious” mantra invoked by Catholic Christians is enlivened by

- a faith not in dogmas or condemnations but in a relation to a loving God, more present to me than I am to myself;
- hints of the divine discovered in science, philosophy, literature, and the arts;
- interreligious dialogue that reveals God speaking to us in many voices;
- and most of all, in the divine encountered through service to the poor and disenfranchised.

In the light of the unforeseeable outcomes presented us by Dr. Kautzer, a modest spiritual stance recommends itself:

1. Start here where you are.
2. Breathe as you go—eyes open, stay attentive.
3. Let go of expectations —The Spirit blows where it will.
4. Wait for the surprise.

Ed Stevens, Ph.D

PREFACE

Almost from the beginning of my research, I recognized that the Reform Movement of Vatican II Catholics highlighted in this study was fading in the face of increasingly hostile responses from American bishops and the rightward drift of recent papacies. The emergence of Voice of the Faithful (VOTF) in 2002 revitalized hope among some reformers when a broad range of Catholics mobilized in response to the deceit and malfeasance revealed by the clergy abuse crisis. Although VOTF drew widespread media attention, I quickly became convinced that VOTF's strategy of seeking concessions from staunchly conservative church hierarchs was doomed, particularly since the abuse crisis revealed deeply entrenched and far-reaching systemic problems in church governance. Vatican officials believed, perhaps correctly, that they could protect their own authority only by warding off any efforts at dialogue or reconciliation with reform groups, even ones as deferential as VOTF.

Although I recognized the formidable odds facing the Reform Movement, I remained convinced that it was a worthy focus for research. Even unsuccessful movements offer valuable insights for scholars in terms of documenting distinctive religious movements and analyzing reasons for their demise. Moreover, this movement can claim a few modest achievements. By focusing negative media attention on church authorities and by supporting lawsuits of clergy abuse victims, reformers did succeed in convincing church officials to adopt new policies regarding abuse and finances. The movement's advocacy for a range of liberal reforms also won support from broad sectors of the American Catholic laity.

More important, although many reform groups did experience massive defections, the movement has retained a vital core of activists, who have redirected their focus toward the creation of independent worship communities that give shape and substance to their vision of a renewed Catholicism. Although these emerging communities are fragile, they have generated hope and constructive efforts among reformers, who are no longer constrained by Vatican decrees. These communities exhibit a vibrant and forward-looking spirit, and a conviction that their vision is more viable and authentic than the backward-looking focus of the Vatican.

According to Catholic theologian O'Murchu (2010), the course pursued by reformers in my study reflects the appropriate response to a deeply entrenched power structure like the Roman Catholic Church; it cannot be

reformed from within because resistance to reform is “too deeply rooted” (p. 26). O’Murchu advises, “What needs to happen for a religion like Roman Catholicism is for the people to withdraw their projections and give their energy instead to creative alternatives” (p. 36). Reformers arrived at this strategy by default, after decades of losing ground in their efforts at insider reform. As O’Murchu states, this stance by reformers “evokes and invites a whole different sense of what it means to be a religious believer and what it means to a participant in a credible faith community” (p. 37).

It remains to be seen whether these independent communities will attract the numbers and resources necessary to sustain themselves. By their very nature, religious movements are diffuse and their goals are often diverse and far-reaching. Thus, the long-term significance and accomplishments of this movement may not be obvious for many decades.

I am indebted to many persons for support during this research process. First, I would like to acknowledge the support of my husband, Clifton Chunn, and my children, Lily and Curran Chunn, who provided invaluable moral support, technical assistance, and a range of advice and dialogue. I am indebted to many of my colleagues at Regis College, including Deans Sarah Barrett, Paula Harbecke, and Pam Menke; faculty colleagues Ann Grady, Deb Cohan, Jan Leary, Ed Stevens, and Laress Wilkins; and many members of the library and ITS staff, especially Eleanor Deady and Cecilia Roberts. These colleagues provided encouragement, advice, and a range of professional assistance. I was fortunate to receive a grant from Virginia Kaneb, an alumnus of Regis College, who has provided generous funding of research by Regis College faculty. I was also awarded several faculty development grants and a sabbatical from Regis College. These funds provided course releases and travel funds that were invaluable in completing my research. I owe a special debt of gratitude to Warren Goldstein, editor of the book series *Studies in Critical Research on Religion*, who provided patient, in-depth, and invaluable guidance in designing and expanding my theoretical framework and in preparing my manuscript for publication. My copy editor, Andrea Lee, has proven to be not just a superb copy editor but also a friend and advisor who played a significant role in shaping the manuscript. Finally, I would like to express gratitude to the numerous audiences (at academic conferences and reform group gatherings) who responded enthusiastically to my presentations and offered suggestions and new information, as well as to the many reformers whom I interviewed and who invited me to their gatherings and engaged in extensive correspondence.

ABBREVIATIONS OF CATHOLIC REFORM GROUPS*

ARCC	Association for the Rights of Catholics in the Church seeks to reform governance structures in the Roman Catholic Church.
CTA	Call to Action USA is a clearinghouse for reform groups.
CFC	Catholics for Choice promotes reproductive rights.
CITI	Celibacy Is the Issue provides certification and an online directory for married priests.
COR	Catholic Organizations for Renewal is a network of reform groups.
CORPUS	Corps of Reserve Priests United for Service is an association of married priests.
DignityUSA	DignityUSA promotes the rights of GLBT Catholics.
ECC	Ecumenical Catholic Communion is a network of independent Catholic communities.
FutureChurch	FutureChurch is a parish-based coalition that promotes women's equality and preserving parishes.
RCWP	Roman Catholic Womenpriests provides noncanonical training and ordination for women and men.
VOTF	Voice of the Faithful is an insider reform group that seeks to end clergy abuse and give laity a voice in policy making.
WATER	Women's Alliance for Theology, Ethics and Ritual is a think tank involved in feminist education and advocacy.
W-CC	Women-Church Convergence is a grassroots coalition of feminist reform groups.
WOC	Women's Ordination Conference is a feminist advocacy organization in the United States.
WOW	Women's Ordination Worldwide is an international feminist advocacy organization.

* More extensive data about these groups is provided in a chart in the Appendix A.

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INTRODUCTION

RESURRECTING THE SPIRIT AND LEGACY OF VATICAN II

Since the 1970s, liberal American Catholics have sustained a Reform Movement to counteract the conservative drift of the Vatican and to preserve and expand on the vision and reforms of Vatican II. The Reform Movement, composed of highly educated, middle-class Catholics, is intent on creating an alternative model of church that exemplifies Vatican II's open, receptive attitude toward the modern world. In response to reformers' demands, church hierarchs have censured outspoken reformers and codified their conservative beliefs in formal church dogma and policy. This backlash from church officials has pushed liberal reformers in a sectarian direction, whereby they take positions and form worship communities outside Vatican control. By distancing themselves from the Vatican, reformers hope to resolve the tension inherent in their status as Catholics who cannot live with the restrictions imposed by reactionary church leaders, but cannot live without some connection to their Catholic roots.

Many observers of Vatican II reformers have decried their efforts by citing the mantra "No one takes on the Vatican and wins." Contrary to this mantra, the Reform Movement can claim modest but significant achievements that did not require approval of church hierarchs but do weaken Vatican authority. This Reform Movement, which represents as many as one hundred thousand Catholics and several hundred reform groups, can cite achievements in three areas:

1. Scholars credit the movement with influencing the views of American Catholics, a majority of whom now express liberal views on contraception, divorce, homosexuality, and equal roles for women.
2. The movement has effectively used pressure tactics, especially negative media attention and lawsuits by victims of clergy abuse, to achieve reforms in church policy regarding clergy abuse, financial accountability, and parish closures.
3. Many reform groups have attained autonomy from the Vatican by establishing worship communities outside Vatican control.

By creating *underground* worship communities, reformers hope to preserve essential features of their Catholic tradition while embracing new liturgical and governance systems that embody a more inclusive, democratic, and (in their view) authentic community engaged in the spiritual challenges of the modern and postmodern world. Corps of Reserve Priests United for Service (CORPUS) leader Anthony Padovano (2007a), among the most eloquent spokespersons for the Reform Movement, uses biblical imagery to capture their vision of “a new city of God on a distant mountain in an alien land” (p. 20). Thus, reformers aim not merely to restore Vatican II principles but also to redesign the entire structure from the bottom up, creating a church capable of meeting the challenges of the twenty-first century and beyond.

Liberal reform groups are likely to remain ineffectual in the short term. Nonetheless, reformers hope to lay the groundwork for future reform with ongoing efforts to educate and mobilize lay Catholics regarding reformers’ key issues and the deeply entrenched flaws in current church structure. These structural flaws were exposed in 2002 when the clergy abuse crisis revealed widespread cover-ups and malfeasance on the part of many church hierarchs. In 2006 a study of Catholic dioceses in the United States revealed widespread financial mismanagement, whereby 85 percent of seventy-eight dioceses that responded to the survey reported embezzlement over the last five years (P. Feuerherd, 2006b, p. 18).

Although reformers continue to press for reform on key issues, privately they often acknowledge that the contemporary wave of the Reform Movement may fade in a decade or less, given the graying of the movement and the widespread apathy regarding church reform among most sectors of the laity, especially young Catholics. Scholars with expertise on Catholic issues have also predicted the demise of the Reform Movement, particularly since Pope Benedict XVI eased public concerns over the clergy abuse during his May 2008 visit to the United States when he pledged to end the crisis and engaged in an unprecedented meeting with abuse victims (Van Biema, 2008).¹

¹ Public dismay over the clergy abuse crisis was reignited in 2010 with revelations of cover-ups and mishandling of clergy abuse by clerics in many European countries, including Pope Benedict during his tenure as Prefect for the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF). However, protests over these new revelations have surfaced primarily in Europe. Chapter 2 cites a range of studies indicating that many American Catholics have moved past the initial shock and outrage over the abuse crisis and are relatively complacent, as evidenced by more or less positive evaluations of American bishops.

LIBERAL CATHOLICS: AN ENDANGERED SPECIES?

I chose to undertake this study for the following reasons. First, I have a long-term interest and fascination with the Roman Catholic Reform Movement, in part as a result of participating for almost a decade in a spirituality group of women who were long-term activists in this movement. I wonder how these women sustain their activism and hope for reform in the face of continual stonewalling or setbacks. Does their activism undermine or enhance their spiritual development? To what extent does their spirituality serve as a source of motivation and inspiration for their efforts?

Second, I question whether the Reform Movement is merely a quixotic movement that appeals primarily to long-term Catholics who are unwilling to sever their ties with the institutional church. Does the movement offer any realistic hope of achieving structural reforms in the Roman Catholic Church in the near or long term? Does the movement command sufficient resources and are its strategies capable of achieving concrete concessions and structural reform?

Third, I am interested in documenting and analyzing the paths pursued by Roman Catholics who have given up on reform efforts yet sustain their loyalty to the Catholic tradition by creating worship communities that the Vatican has not authorized or approved. In this regard, I explore the structure, leadership, and viability of marginal and independent communities, since these issues take center stage and remain controversial within the Reform Movement.

ASSESSING THE MOVEMENT: IS THE VATICAN INVINCIBLE?

Findings of the study center on several points. First, the Reform Movement sustains and enriches the spiritual search of reformers by providing them with a community of like-minded seekers who share their ambivalent relationship with Roman Catholicism and their enthusiasm for issues pertaining to religion and spirituality. Reform groups also sponsor a vast array of workshops, lectures, and retreats by leading theologians, social scientists, and activists.

At a time when many Americans have chosen to abandon or weaken their ties to religious institutions, many of the reformers described in this study remain intensely religious and devote a considerable amount of their time and resources to reform activities or religious education and