

# Catholic Identity and Apologetics in a Post-Modern Age

## The 2005 Hecker Lecture

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This summer we will celebrate the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of Isaac Hecker’s *Questions of the Soul*. The book established Hecker as one of the preeminent spokesmen for American Catholicism.<sup>1</sup> Yet Hecker’s life was inextricably linked with that of another nineteenth century adult convert to Catholicism, Orestes Brownson. Brownson was a largely self-educated man, who was raised by Congregationalist parents, became a Universalist Christian minister and advocated a public form of Christian faith, decrying social injustice. After Brownson’s decision to convert to Catholicism he would serve first as a mentor and later a contentious friend to Hecker for over thirty years. Between them, Hecker and Brownson were easily the two most distinguished American Catholic intellectuals of the nineteenth century. David O’Brien once characterized Isaac Hecker as an example of evangelical Catholicism, and it is Hecker and Brownson’s distinctive approaches to Catholic identity, evangelization and apologetics that is of particular interest to me this evening.<sup>2</sup>

They came to maturity in a time when the distinctiveness of Catholic identity was a compelling issue for American Catholics. In 1800 Catholics were but a small minority in the infant republic. By 1860 Catholicism was the largest Christian denomination in the U.S.<sup>3</sup> With its rapid growth came festering resentments and anti-Catholic nativism. Articulating a sense of Catholic identity in the face of such anti-Catholic resentment was no small task. One approach lay in the cocooning of an emerging immigrant Catholic sub-culture. Initially, both Hecker and Brownson resisted that temptation, though eventually, as we shall see, Brownson despaired of any other viable alternative. Their times were different than our own, but their determination to articulate a sense of what it meant to be Catholic in nineteenth century America, and their attempts to craft a Catholic apologetics based on that sense of identity, anticipated a renewed interest in Catholic identity and apologetics today.

It is this topic that I wish to consider this evening. Over the last fifteen years I have had the immense privilege of speaking annually at between ten and fifteen pastoral events and conferences a year and I am not infrequently invited to participate in diocesan priest convocations. I can scarcely speak at any such event without being asked to address one of two issues of pastoral import: 1) the large numbers of young Catholics who have only a very thin sense of their Catholic identity and 2) a small but significant percentage of Catholics who seem, to the outside observer, obsessed with their Catholic identity and seek to define it in ways that

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<sup>1</sup> David J. O’Brien, *Isaac Hecker: An American Catholic* (New York: Paulist, 1992), 105.

<sup>2</sup> David J. O’Brien, “An Evangelical Imperative: Isaac Hecker, Catholicism, and Modern Society” in *Hecker Studies*, ed. John Farina (New York: Paulist, 1983), 87-132. See also O’Brien’s fine biography, *Isaac Hecker: An American Catholic* (New York: Paulist, 1992).

<sup>3</sup> Jay Dolan, *In Search of an American Catholicism: a History of Religion and Culture in Tension* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 58.

alienate many pastoral ministers. Obviously, both issues are concerned with Catholic identity, the very question that engaged Hecker and Brownson. But the cultural and ecclesial context today could not be more different.

I would like to divide the balance of my lecture this evening into two parts. In the first part I will consider briefly the historical and cultural context for this renewed interest in Catholic identity, a context that we might wish to characterize as post-modern. In the second part I shall outline five pastoral and theological imperatives that I believe must guide our quest to construct and articulate an authentic Catholic identity in the American church today.

## ***The Emergence of a Post-Modern Quest for Catholic Identity***

If both Hecker and Brownson wrestled with the temptation of nineteenth century American Catholics to withdraw into an immigrant based Catholic sub-culture, as we stand at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, many American Catholics are struggling with the demise of the immigrant Catholic sub-culture. The insular Catholic sub-culture that emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century became further solidified in the first third of the twentieth century. But by the 1930's cracks began to appear. The work of Catholic social theorists like John A. Ryan sought to demonstrate the applicability of Catholic social teaching to American political and economic issues.<sup>4</sup> The Great Depression drew Catholics into larger debates about the welfare of American society.<sup>5</sup> In the wake of World War II many immigrant Catholics became much more conscious of their American identity. In a quite different key, counter-cultural proponents of what might be called radical Catholicism like Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker movement encouraged Catholics to emerge from their immigrant enclosures and challenge key features of the American settlement in the light of their Catholic faith. The American Jesuit John Courtney Murray demonstrated the possibility of a rapprochement between Catholic teaching and the American constitutional principle of separation of church and state.

There were broader ecclesial currents at work in the larger Catholic world as well that played a role in challenging the insularity of the American immigrant Catholic sub-culture. Catholic Action, the liturgical movement, the *nouvelle théologie* initiatives, all challenged key features of the theological self-understanding and pastoral agenda of immigrant Catholicism in America. These larger theological currents simply reinforced the social factors that emerged in the wake of World War II that were inexorably dismantling the American Catholic sub-culture. As Jay Dolan has pointed out,

even if Vatican II had never happened, the renewal of Catholicism would still have taken place in the United States. That is because the social and cultural transformation of the post-World War II era proved to be as important if not indeed more important for American Catholics than Vatican II.<sup>6</sup>

These social and cultural tectonic shifts, taking place below the surface of American Catholicism, are the often unnoted backdrop to the more explicitly ecclesiological shifts associated with the Second Vatican Council. Many who chafed against the strictures of immigrant Catholicism experienced Vatican II as a breath of fresh air. The reforms of the council were experienced as a liberation "from an immigrant Catholic world that was sufficiently narrow and authoritarian that by mid-century it could be plausibly referred to as a ghetto."<sup>7</sup> The council's more

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<sup>4</sup> For an introduction to John A. Ryan's thought see, Francis L. Broderick, *Right Reverend New Dealer: John A. Ryan* (New York: Macmillan, 1963).-; Charles Curran, *American Catholic Social Ethics: Twentieth Century Approaches* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982), 90ff.

<sup>5</sup> Dolan, 152.

<sup>6</sup> Dolan, 189.

<sup>7</sup> William Portier, "Here Come the Evangelical Catholics," *Communio* 31 (Spring, 2004): 35-66, at 51.

expansive theological perspectives were welcomed by many Catholics of the pre-conciliar generation because their fundamental identity as Catholics, an identity established by way of their immersion in the Catholic sub-culture, was secure.

For many “under forty Catholics” today, this secure Catholic identity is precisely what cannot be taken for granted. They were *not* raised in a developed Catholic sub-culture that communicated a thick and enduring sense of Catholic identity. Their world is characterized not by the suffocating insularity and rigidity of immigrant Catholicism, but by the disorienting free fall of post-modern religious pluralism. This has led to two characteristic responses. The first is a more consumerist approach to religion as a kind of commodity to be marketed by the churches and purchased by savvy religious consumers.<sup>8</sup> For them church belonging is no longer largely inherited, but is freely chosen in an aggressive religious market place that Dean Hoge and his colleagues aptly refer to as a “culture of choice.”<sup>9</sup> This sociological study reports that most young Catholics like being Catholic and accept the basic tenets of their faith, but their commitment to the Catholic church *qua* church is quite weak and their appropriation of their Catholic heritage, where it exists at all, is fairly thin.

The second response has caught the attention of a number of ecclesial commentators. It has been discussed in Colleen Carroll’s controversial book *The New Faithful*,<sup>10</sup> and more recently, in a much more sophisticated form, by the accomplished American church historian William Portier in an article which appeared in *Communio*. Carroll refers to this second response as the rise of “the new faithful,” while Portier writes of the rise of a new form of “evangelical Catholicism.” The distinctiveness of this group of relatively young Catholics is captured by James Davidson’s generational study of American Catholicism, where he and his colleagues discovered a significant number of young adult Catholics under the age of forty, perhaps as much as 30-35 % of their generation, who are distinguished by their embrace of a distinctive style of Catholic faith characterized by a strong commitment to traditional Catholic teachings and practices.<sup>11</sup> Although still a minority, these young Catholics are often among the most active among their generation in church life. Their commitment to traditional church teachings and practices has been described by their proponents as a “return to orthodoxy” while their critics see in them an alarming return to “pre-Vatican II” Catholicism. Their presence has been felt in multiple contexts: in campus ministry programs on college campuses, university theology departments and in the growing interests of young adults in parish and diocesan programs for “more meat” in the presentation of Catholicism that they are receiving. Along with this vigorous reassertion of a distinctive Catholic identity one discovers a renewed interest in a particular style of apologetics. This “new apologetics” promises a much more confident assertion of the distinctiveness of Catholic teaching and its superior truth claims and offers an aggressive refutation of many of the criticisms leveled against contemporary Catholicism from both Protestant fundamentalism and the Catholic theological left.

Portier has made a persuasive argument that it is a mistake to characterize this group of Catholics in ideological terms. They are not, he insists, repudiating the teachings of Vatican II and seeking a return to the Catholicism of the forties and fifties. Rather, their search for a renewed sense of Catholic identity is the logical consequence of the demise of the Catholic sub-culture. They are quintessentially post-modern in their attempt to construct a distinctive religious identity in a culture characterized by pluralism and social fragmentation.

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<sup>8</sup> See Vincent J. Miller, *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture* (New York: Continuum, 2004).

<sup>9</sup> Dean Hoge, William D. Dinges, Mary Johnson and Juan L. Gonzalez, Jr., *Young Adult Catholics: Religion in a Culture of Choice* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001).

<sup>10</sup> Colleen Carroll, *The New Faithful: Why Young Adults are Embracing Christian Orthodoxy* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2002).

<sup>11</sup> James D. Davidson et al., *The Search for Common Ground: What Unites and Divides Catholic Americans* (Huntington: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing, 1997), 124-32.

Consequently, we should not be surprised that this new form of Catholicism will be populated by young adults “drawn to Catholic-specific identity markers such as the Eucharist, the pope, and Marian devotion.”<sup>12</sup> Catholics of an older generation were haunted by a church authoritarianism that often seemed rigid and intrusive, particularly in matters of sexuality. The last two post-conciliar generations of Catholics have experienced none of this and are, predictably, much less interested in a critique of church structure and debates over the possibility of legitimate dissent that have preoccupied Catholics who came of age in the fifties, sixties and even early seventies.

Portier insists that the emergence of this more evangelical Catholicism should not be lamented but rather celebrated as a promising new form of Catholicism appropriate to our post-modern world. He admits that this evangelical Catholicism brings with it certain “perils.” It is prone to an excessive individualism, spiritual self-absorption and an often attenuated commitment to the church.<sup>13</sup> He contends, however, that evangelical Catholics can resist the “perils of individualism and consumerism” through their relationship to church authorities.<sup>14</sup> He recommends that they be mentored by “older Catholics whose ecclesial common sense has not been eroded by years of reflex opposition to the Vatican” and by some of the “new religious movements,” presumably referring to movements like Opus Dei, the Neo-Catechumenate, Communion and Liberation, Regnum Christi, Focolare and the Sant Egidio communities.<sup>15</sup>

## ***Five Imperatives for Constructing and Articulating a Post-Modern Sense of Catholic Identity***

Although I find Portier’s analysis generally persuasive, I am less optimistic than he about placing the future of the American Catholic church in the hands of these evangelical Catholics. I find his analysis of their shortcomings incomplete, and his proposed correctives inadequate. Moreover, it seems to me that the issue of Catholic identity among young adults must be addressed not only in response to these new more evangelical Catholics but also in response to the larger numbers of young Catholics who have become content with a much weaker appropriation of their Catholic heritage without feeling compelled to pursue this more evangelical option.

The pastoral challenge of constructing and articulating a viable sense of Catholic identity for post-conciliar Catholics is real and daunting. Whether we like it or not, there can be no return to the Catholic sub-culture that dominated pre-conciliar Catholicism in America. By way of response to this pastoral challenge I will propose five imperatives that must guide pastoral work in the formation and articulation of Catholic identity today. As I explore each imperative, I will consider ways in which the concerns of each imperative were foreshadowed in the ongoing nineteenth century debates between Brownson and Hecker.

### ***The Catechetical Imperative***

We must begin reflections on the construction and articulation of an adequate Catholic identity today with the “catechetical imperative.” We frequently encounter sharp criticism leveled against the state of contemporary Catholic catechesis for offering what has been disparagingly referred to as “Catholicism lite” or “beige Catholicism.” Such criticisms often rely on caricatures of Catholic catechesis in the 70’s and 80’s, but let us grant that there is some measure of truth in this characterization. The Evangelical Catholics whose cause

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<sup>12</sup> Portier, 55.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 58.

Portier and others champion, do indeed demonstrate a renewed interest in Catholic doctrine and piety, perhaps because they see distinctive Catholic doctrines and traditional Catholic devotional practices as important “Catholic-specific identity markers.”

Turning to our nineteenth century figures, Hecker and Brownson, we find that they too had strong commitments to Catholic doctrine, but their respective understandings of the function of that doctrine differed. Brownson had a more philosophical bent than did Hecker. Early in his career as a Protestant minister, he read broadly in the nineteenth century philosophical writings then current in Germany and France. After his conversion to Catholicism, he soon adopted the apologetical style of the controversialist, eager to rebut the claims of Protestantism and assert the objective superiority of the Catholic religion.<sup>16</sup> Leonard McCarthy notes

At best, Brownson’s style was the style of an apologist who thought like a philosopher, argued like a logician, and who illuminated his expression with the apposite imagery and appropriate emotion of a master rhetorician.<sup>17</sup>

Yet his style of argumentation seemed better equipped to assure Catholics of the “rightness” of their faith than to attract converts.<sup>18</sup> For Brownson the recognition of the objective truth of Catholicism did not come from the exigencies of the human spirit but from both a syllogistic rigor and the objective authority of a Catholic hierarchy which alone could ensure the truth of Catholic teaching.<sup>19</sup> Brownson had come to a conviction regarding the pernicious errors of the modern world which would be articulated in Pope Pius IX’s *Syllabus of Errors*.

Hecker’s approach to Catholic doctrine was quite different. Hecker found in Catholic teaching the confirmation of his most profound spiritual intuitions. Prior to his own adult conversion, Hecker had dabbled in the transcendentalist modes of thought embodied in the thought of Ralph Waldo Emerson and the Brook farm experiment. After his conversion to Catholicism, Hecker retained the transcendentalists’ confident belief in the possibilities of the individual spirit to find God through reason and individual religious experience. Hecker appealed to an American sense of self-definition, arguing that the questions of the human spirit could find an answer only in Catholicism. Both Brownson and Hecker shared a belief in the truth of Catholic doctrine, but for Brownson it was the objective truth of Catholic teaching, guaranteed by the church’s teaching office, that should provide the principal justification for being a Catholic.<sup>20</sup> For Hecker it was the way in which Catholic teaching confirmed the spiritual yearnings of the “seeker” that justified membership in the Catholic church. Indeed, Hecker would reproach Brownson for abandoning in his apologetics recourse to the philosophy of communion that had led him to Catholicism in the first place. Hecker thought this more philosophical journey would have been more compelling than traditional defenses of Catholic doctrine.<sup>21</sup>

Today we are faced anew with questions about the role of doctrine in the task of catechetical formation and the engagement in new forms of Catholic apologetics. Mainstream pastoral ministers have, in the main, been slow to respond to this development. In some circles of contemporary pastoral ministry, it is not in vogue to talk about church doctrine. Sometimes this reluctance reflects a certain embarrassment regarding a

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<sup>16</sup> Thomas R. Ryan, *Orestes A. Brownson: A Definitive Biography* (Huntington: Our Sunday Visitor, 1976), 313-46.

<sup>17</sup> Leonard J. McCarthy, *Rhetoric in the Works of Orestes Brownson*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 1961), 254 as quoted in Ryan, *Orestes Brownson*, 316.

<sup>18</sup> O’Brien, *Isaac Hecker*, 245.

<sup>19</sup> Much of this attitude is reflected in Brownson’s review of Hecker’s *Aspirations of Nature*, which can be found in *the Works of Orestes A. Brownson*, edited by Henry Brownson (Detroit: T. Nourse, 1884), XIV: 543-77.

<sup>20</sup> Ryan, *Orestes Brownson*, 329.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 323.

particular doctrine or doctrines. At other times, however, I fear it is the result of the still inadequate theological formation of many pastoral ministers. Too often, their ministerial formation gave them only the barest of surveys of the history and development of Catholic teaching.

Catholic catechesis must respond to this need for a fuller appropriation of our doctrinal tradition, not by ceding the stage to those who would present church doctrine in a hermeneutically naïve and a-historical mode, but by a new catechetical imperative to provide adult education models that offer robust presentations of the church's dynamic and developing doctrinal heritage. Fulfilling the catechetical imperative today requires that contemporary Catholic catechetics and apologetics resist the overly cognitive approach to church doctrine found in some of the new apologetical writings and even in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and the new *National Catechetical Directory* that was recently released. Brownson's confident assertions regarding the objective superiority of Catholic teaching will not be sufficient.

Catechetical work today must incorporate an appropriation of church doctrine which is historically conscious and which occurs within the larger cultivation of a religious imagination. Some of the most important contributions to a contemporary apologetics have come from theologians like Lawrence Cunningham, Thomas Rausch, Robert Barron, Thomas Groome and Michael Himes, to the extent that each in their own way has helped present Catholic doctrine in a more historically conscious manner and each have sought to cultivate what is variously referred to as a Catholic, sacramental or analogical imagination.<sup>22</sup> The formation of a Catholic imagination is not a substitute for appropriating the Catholic doctrinal tradition, but its necessary pre-condition. Without it, Catholic catechetics and apologetics risk presenting Catholic doctrine within an imaginative framework that is, in fact, quite un-Catholic. This has sometimes been evident in the writings of certain adult converts to Catholicism who were trained in Protestant seminaries prior to their conversion. Their doctrinal orthodoxy as Catholics may be unimpeachable, but their deeper theological imagination often remains strikingly Protestant.

This more comprehensive approach to Catholic doctrine is reflected in the praxis of the restored catechumenate and in the American bishops' wonderful document, *Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us: A Pastoral Plan for Adult Faith Formation in the United States*. Here the presentation of Catholic doctrine can never be abstracted from the praxis of Christian living.

Finally, if Portier is correct about young evangelical Catholics' attraction to "Catholic specific-identity markers," it will be important to sort out the different ways in which these "identity markers" function in the formation of Catholic identity. These markers seem to coalesce around four poles: doctrine, church structures, sacramental worship and distinctive Catholic piety. There is a danger, however, of suggesting that these four poles are equally vital to Catholic identity. Although a Catholic is required to affirm church dogma, strive to give an internal assent to all church doctrine, and embrace the Catholic church's foundational ecclesiastical structures and sacramental life, Catholicism has traditionally recognized a much greater realm of freedom and diversity in its devotional life. It is hard to imagine a robust Catholic identity that does not give due place to the Incarnation or the centrality of the eucharist. It is equally hard to imagine a Catholic identity that does not recognize the need for a Petrine ministry. It is *not* hard to imagine a Catholic identity lacking any commitment to the messages of certain Marian apparitions.

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<sup>22</sup> See Lawrence Cunningham, *The Catholic Experience* (New York: Crossroad, 1989); Thomas Rausch, *Catholicism at the Dawn of the Third Millennium* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1996); Robert Barron, *the Strangest Way; Walking the Christian Path* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2002); Thomas Groome, *What Makes Us Catholic: Eight Gifts for Life* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2003); Michael Himes, *The Mystery of Faith: An Introduction to Catholicism* (Cincinnati: St. Anthony's Messenger Press, 2004); Andrew Greeley, *the Catholic Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

Many of the Catholic identity markers that draw the greatest interest among young Catholics are drawn from the sacramental and devotional life of the church. This is evident in the continued popularity of Ash Wednesday services in which Catholics come to receive ashes which they will proudly keep on their forehead throughout the day. It explains renewed interest in such distinctive devotional practices as eucharistic adoration. It is in the sacramental and devotional life of the church that Catholics are able to find the richest symbols for representing who they are as Catholics. The danger, however, is that in the desire for distinctive religious symbols their appropriation might fall prey to what Louis-Marie Chauvet has called hieratism, in which rituals and symbols are reduced to the arcane with little connection to ordinary life and the received tradition of the faith.<sup>23</sup> I have in mind the interest some students at our university have expressed in scapulars.

In short, the catechetical imperative reminds us that appropriating our Catholic heritage in the construction of an authentic sense of Catholic identity is not as easy a task as one might think. Absent experienced guides, such an appropriation risks becoming an idiosyncratic exercise in *bricolage*, unlikely to produce a sustainable, authentic Catholic identity.<sup>24</sup>

### ***The Communal Imperative***

Let us turn now from the catechetical imperative to a second concern, the communal imperative. It is a common place to assert that communitarianism lies at the heart of Catholic identity. Brownson and Hecker both recognized the importance of an experience of religious community in the Catholic faith. For Brownson, the church was necessary as a bulwark against the worldly powers of secularization. Brownson was not optimistic about gaining from American soil many converts like himself and Hecker. Initially hostile to Irish immigrant Catholicism, he came to be a champion of the vital Catholic sub-culture as the only way of sustaining Catholic identity. It is ironic that although Hecker's experience of Christian community was always tied to ecclesiastical institutions like the Redemptorists and the Paulists, it was Brownson who tended to represent church membership in terms of one's connection to the institutional structures of the church. Hecker believed that one's religious aspirations could only be realized in the life of committed Christian community. Hecker's entire spiritual biography—from his time at Brook farm, to his entrance into the Catholic church followed by his admission into the Redemptorists, and finally his foundation of the Society of St. Paul—reflects his sense that the restless heart could only find its home in a community of faith.

How must the church today respond to a weakened sense of ecclesial and communal identity? Having expressed some concern about the individualist tendencies of young evangelical Catholics, Portier suggests that they might find an antidote in some of the "new movements." There are difficulties with this proposal, however. Many of these movements appear to encourage community belonging built on far too narrow and rigid appropriations of the Catholic tradition, and depend on dubious notions of ecclesial authority and obedience that prevent them from offering viable alternatives for a healthy and perduring Catholic identity.

The desire for "fellowship" suggests the need for an experience of community that offers the possibility for a sharing of one's faith in communities characterized by genuine commitment, gospel hospitality and a willingness to engage the larger world. It should not surprise us to discover that those parishes that have a reputation for vitality in any given diocese are parishes that have found ways, through small faith-sharing communities or parish renewal programs, to create an invigorated sense of this fellowship. A communal sensibility that could be simply assumed in the immigrant Catholic sub-culture, must be consciously and proactively cultivated by those engaged in pastoral ministry today.

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<sup>23</sup> Louis-Marie Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*(Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1997), 332ff.

<sup>24</sup> For a discussion of the notion of *bricolage* as it has emerged in post-modern analysis see, Miller, 154-7.

## ***The Ecumenical Imperative***

A troubling feature of the renewed interest of some Catholics in cultivating a distinctive Catholic identity is their ignorance of Vatican II's teaching on ecumenism. Thus the construction of an authentic Catholic identity must be shaped by a third, ecumenical imperative that flows from the teaching of Vatican II. I am not persuaded by the claim of Weigel and Neuhaus that we are witnessing a new form of ecumenism evidenced in the compact made between the Catholic right and Christian evangelicals around opposition to abortion and same-sex marriages or, more recently, with the issues associated with the Terri Schiavo case. These pragmatic and largely tactical compacts do not seem at all interested in that larger goal that I take to be at the heart of the ecumenical endeavor, namely the full, visible unity of Christianity. Moreover, there is a disturbing tendency in some new forms of Catholic apologetics to articulate Catholic identity primarily in a contrastive key, that is by contrasting the truth of Catholicism to the errors of other Christian traditions.

Returning once again to the nineteenth century, we must note that neither Brownson nor Hecker could be called ecumenists in our contemporary sense. Brownson asserted, without qualification, the ultramontane conviction that salvation could be obtained only by those in communion with Rome. He was a controversialist eager to engage and challenge Protestantism point by doctrinal point. Hecker eschewed a point by point refutation of Protestantism, preferring, in his *Aspirations of Nature*, a more general indictment of what he saw as the crucial flaw in the Protestant religious imagination, namely its doctrine of total depravity which failed to acknowledge the potential of human reason to lead one to the full truth of divine revelation. In response to the increasingly virulent anti-Catholicism of the post-civil war period, his critique of Protestantism sharpened over time, but it never became central to his apologetical vision.<sup>25</sup> Hecker was always more comfortable with dialogue and engagement than with polemics. In this regard, if only in a limited way, Hecker, more than Brownson, foreshadowed the approach of Vatican II.

Vatican II clearly asserted that the cause of Christian unity places a demand upon all the Christian faithful.<sup>26</sup> Concern for ecumenism is not an option but a requirement concomitant on all the baptized. This ecumenical imperative was born of the council's determination to move away from an "ecumenism of return," and toward a new ecumenical vision constructed upon the following affirmations: 1) the council admitted that the Catholic church was a pilgrim community "in continual need of reformation";<sup>27</sup> 2) in looking to the historical events that brought about the current divisions in Christianity it admitted that "mistakes were made on both sides";<sup>28</sup> 3) the council explicitly acknowledged that the boundaries of the church of Christ were not coterminous with those of the Roman Catholic church;<sup>29</sup> 4) the bishops acknowledged that Catholicism shares a real but imperfect communion with other Christian "churches and ecclesial communities";<sup>30</sup> 5) they also acknowledged that many means of salvation were found within these "churches and ecclesial communities";<sup>31</sup> 6) the bishops affirmed that the first responsibility of Catholics in the cause of ecumenism was "to get their own household in order."<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> O'Brien, *Isaac Hecker*, 301,330.

<sup>26</sup> *Unitatis redintegratio*, # 5.

<sup>27</sup> *Lumen gentium* # 8, 48; *Unitatis redintegratio* # 6.

<sup>28</sup> *Unitatis redintegratio* # 3.

<sup>29</sup> *Lumen gentium* # 8, 15; *Unitatis redintegratio* # 3.

<sup>30</sup> *Unitatis redintegratio* # 15; *Unitatis redintegratio* # 3.

<sup>31</sup> *Unitatis redintegratio* # 3.

<sup>32</sup> *Unitatis redintegratio* # 4.

This new ecumenical vision is committed to the full visible unity of the Christian churches as something more than a mere quantitative expansion of the Roman Catholic church as currently conceived, or by the addition of new Catholic “wings” along the analogy of the Eastern churches, an addition which would leave the rest of Catholicism largely unaffected. It is a vision of a church of the future, in recognizable continuity with the church of Jesus Christ which Catholics believe has always existed in the Roman Catholic communion, but whose specific contours cannot yet be known. A Catholic identity that is not cognizant of this new ecumenical sensibility is by its very character, inadequate to the current reality of the Catholic church today.

A Catholic apologetics must be further shaped by the ecumenical imperative to the extent that it sees Catholic identity as dynamic rather than static, an identity that can only be enriched by encounters with other Christian traditions. After all, if the council clearly taught that in the Catholic church alone is found “the fullness of the means of salvation,” the council also implicitly distinguished between the doctrinal and structural integrity of the church and its ecclesial vitality. Francis Sullivan puts the matter well:

Of course it must be kept in mind that this is a question of *institutional integrity*: of fullness of the *means* of salvation. There is no question of denying that a non-Catholic community, perhaps lacking much in the order of means, can achieve a higher degree of communion in the life of Christ in faith, hope and love than many a Catholic community.<sup>33</sup>

Sullivan brings into relief what I think is an important distinction, that between the *doctrinal/structural integrity* of the church and its *ecclesial vitality*. It is undeniable to me that, however much I may support the Catholic church’s teaching and its central ecclesiastical structures, I have often encountered other Christian communities that were far more alive and committed to the life of faithful Christian discipleship than any number of Catholic parishes in which I and my family have worshipped. I have often encountered communities whose commitment to hospitality, youth ministry, social outreach and life long Christian formation would put many Catholic parishes to shame. To the extent that we encourage a Catholic apologetics that seeks to give an account of Catholic identity without clearly acknowledging what can be learned from other Christian traditions, we begin to walk down the dangerous path of Catholic triumphalism.

### ***The Evangelical Imperative***

The fourth imperative for constructing a post-modern Catholic identity, namely the evangelical imperative, is an extension of the third. One of the most significant features of Hecker’s vision lay in his commitment to the missionary character of the church. Few have understood that his desire to bring Catholicism and the American vision into conversation was motivated, not by a desire for a least common denominator accommodation, but by a vital sense of mission. As David O’Brien put it:

[Hecker] understood evangelization in the most modern of terms, as an invitation to be issued from the inside and not the outside, an invitation expressed at the very heart of culture, showing how the culture’s best hopes and deepest yearnings could indeed be answered, that humanity had a destiny and that destiny was an achievable possibility. He believed that the Catholic Church, with the richness of its historical tradition, had the tools to make that invitation, and the resources to help bring the future to life.<sup>34</sup>

Obviously, one could argue that Hecker’s assumptions about the convergence of American ideals and Catholic teaching were naïve, but it is his vision of evangelization as creative engagement that is most important.

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<sup>33</sup> Francis A. Sullivan, *The Church We Believe In: One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic* (New York: Paulist, 1988), 28.

<sup>34</sup> O’Brien, *Isaac Hecker*, 400.

An adequate understanding of apologetics today must see it as but one moment within the larger work of evangelization and mission. Apologetics is concerned with the capacity to “give an account” of one’s Catholic identity precisely in order that one’s faith might be shared with others. Thus the shape of contemporary apologetics must be influenced by the demands of the church’s evangelizing mission.

The Second Vatican Council made a decisive contribution to contemporary ecclesiology by defining the church in terms of mission. In its Decree on the Church’s Missionary Activity the council taught that

[t]he church on earth is by its very nature missionary since, according to the plan of the Father, it has its origin in the mission of the son and the Holy Spirit (AG # 2)

The character of this evangelizing mission in a post-modern world was articulated with unusual perspicacity and comprehensiveness in the 1991 document of the Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue, *Dialogue and Proclamation*.<sup>35</sup> This document explored the twin demands of dialogue and proclamation in the fulfillment of the church’s evangelizing mission. The curial document rejected misguided understandings of the church’s mission that either press for dialogue without proclamation, a stance that ultimately entails a denial of the gift of Christ, or proclamation without dialogue, which risks continuing an arrogant and imperialist form of mission that has failed so tragically in the past.

How does this evangelical imperative shape the formation of Catholic identity today? It suggests that the cultivation and articulation of a distinctive Catholic identity need not be undertaken in a polemical key bent on the rhetorical strategies appropriate to debate (winning and losing), but by the rhetorical strategies appropriate to genuine open-ended yet critical conversation. It is in this regard that I frequently quote one of the best and most concise descriptions of such conversation, one offered by David Tracy,

Conversation is a game with some hard rules: say only what you mean; say it as accurately as you can; listen to and respect what the other says, however different or other; be willing to correct or defend your opinions if challenged by the conversation partner; be willing to argue if necessary, to confront if demanded, to endure necessary conflict, to change your mind if the evidence suggests it.<sup>36</sup>

Tracy’s definition of critical conversation incorporates the twin tasks of proclamation and dialogue. Disciplined conversation does not mean compromising one’s convictions, it in fact presumes that one will give an impassioned account of one’s convictions, of what one holds to be true (proclamation). But it also includes authentic dialogue which entails having the courage to genuinely hear the other, and to be open to the possibility that your conversation partner may bring new insight, and even bring to light flaws in your own position.

The contrasting viewpoints of Brownson and Hecker once again illuminate this evangelical imperative. By the end of his career, Brownson had lost confidence in the potential of Catholicism to bring about any significant transformation of American culture. Hecker, on the other hand, placed apologetics, the assertion of Catholic identity, within the context of a vigorous evangelization confident that the church had something to say to the contemporary world and equally confident that a rapprochement between Catholic faith and contemporary culture, at least American culture, was possible.

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<sup>35</sup> Available at [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/interelg/documents/rc\\_pc\\_interelg\\_doc\\_19051991\\_dialogue-and-proclamatio\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interelg/documents/rc_pc_interelg_doc_19051991_dialogue-and-proclamatio_en.html).

<sup>36</sup> David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity*, (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 19.

In his own way, Hecker himself embodied the twin tasks of proclamation and dialogue. If one can detect at times a Catholic triumphalism in his writing, it is not because he thought the Catholic church was the exclusive repository of grace in the world. Hecker was willing to recognize the goodness and truth of other cultures and religions. On his trip to Egypt in 1874 he was impressed with the practice of the Islamic faith and noted that Christians could learn much from the Arab commitment to prayer. He studied the Qu'ran and was surprised by the resonances with certain elements of Christian spirituality.<sup>37</sup> It should not surprise us then that the religious community he founded, the Paulists, is uniquely shaped by the threefold commitment to ecumenism, inter-religious dialogue and evangelization.

### ***The Mystagogical Imperative***

Finally, I would like to suggest that a post-modern construction of Catholic identity and the pursuit of a Catholic apologetics that can articulate and defend that identity, must be shaped by a mystagogical imperative. By mystagogy I mean the recognition and identification of the subtle manifestations of grace alive in the world. It is perhaps in this final imperative that we most see the spirit of Hecker, for Hecker always maintained a passion for spirituality. Indeed, his friend Brownson often chided him for his preoccupation with the mystical. But Hecker's mysticism was not of an other-worldly variety. His spiritual quest was characterized by a confident expectation that God could be encountered in the world.

The mystagogical imperative brings us full circle back to the catechetical imperative and the question of the role of doctrine. The mystagogical imperative presupposes that, as James Bacik has put it, "human experience and Christian doctrines are connected not simply logically and externally but organically and intrinsically."<sup>38</sup> If church teaching is true, as we believe it to be, it will illuminate daily living. This means that an effective apologetics must be attuned to ordinary human experience if it is to make a difference in people's lives. Effective apologetics must try, at least in part, to draw from the riches of the Christian heritage in order to name what people have in some hidden and confused way already experienced. When we teach of sin and the reconciling love of God made manifest in Christ, these cannot be left as abstractions. They are terms, doctrines and concepts that will speak to people only to the extent that they help interpret the gently wafting melodies and jolting dissonances already playing in their life stories. We must be convinced that God's revelation gives meaning not just to the few precious hours of "religious time" we fight to preserve for going to church, reading the bible or for formal prayer, but to our most mundane of human engagements.

A Catholic identity informed by this mystagogical imperative must be culturally engaged. Hecker's insistence that Christian faith responded to the deepest yearnings of the human spirit and his creative yet critical engagement with American culture both reflected this mystagogical view. To give an account of one's Catholic faith requires that one be able to relate the Catholic faith to the pressing questions and cultural landmarks of the age. It would engage contemporary film and literature, demonstrating the ongoing relevance of the Christian message to basic human questions and aspirations. An adequate contemporary apologetics would be able to bring the Catholic Christian faith into critical conversation with modern science as the Georgetown theologian, John Haught has done. It would demonstrate the relevance of the Catholic faith for a whole range of ethical questions from the ethics of war to the ethics of removing artificial nutrition and hydration from PVS patients.

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 263.

<sup>38</sup> James Bacik, *Apologetics and the Eclipse of Mystery* (?)

## ***Conclusion***

Hecker and Brownson were both men of their times. Neither of their positions could be transposed into our contemporary situation without significant modification. However, both considered themselves apologists concerned with the question of Catholic identity, and it is their respective visions of the apologetical project that led me to reflect on them this evening. I have tried to respond to the pastoral reality that Catholic identity is something that in a post-modern world will have to be constructed rather than passively received. But how are we to view this Catholic identity today? Do we seek the confrontational, counter-cultural vision of Brownson, or the dialogical and optimistic vision of Hecker? In the end, I would hope we would derive some benefit from both. Brownson's critique of American culture and proud assertion of a distinctive Catholic identity resonates with those who are concerned with worrying trends in modern culture that risk diluting Catholic identity. There concerns are real. But I suspect that it is in Hecker that we will find a more adequate basis for the contemporary construction of Catholic identity. A vital Catholic identity capable of being sustained in a post-modern world will need to be shaped by the catechetical, communal, ecumenical, evangelical and mystagogical imperatives that I have discussed this evening, all of which find a greater resonance in the life and writing of Isaac Hecker. For at the end of the day, being Catholic entails not withdrawal but genuine engagement. It means that I can celebrate the richness of my faith without having to shout down other voices that speak of truth and other ways of life that give witness to the graced character of our world. It means, as the author of 1 Peter told us, being able to give an account of our faith, but always with "gentleness and reverence."