Jennifer Graber

Pax Christi, Pacifism, and the New Catholic Landscape of Richmond, Virginia

For its remarkable size and diversity, American Catholicism has garnered only a small portion of critical historical study, at least in comparison with its Protestant counterparts. As a result, many aspects of Catholic life in America remain unconsidered. In an effort to address these gaps, this study examines a lay Catholic group working for peace in the Diocese of Richmond, Virginia. A focus on Pax Christi – Richmond (PCR) upsets the apple cart of scholarship in several respects. PCR fulfills some common notions about the Catholic laity, but disconfirms others. Further, it challenges traditional understandings of the Roman Catholic peace movement.

The Catholic laity created Pax Christi and continue to sustain it. Beginning with Vatican II’s revolutionary position that the church is the people, Catholic lay groups such as PCR now constitute a vital wing of the church. However, PCR’s growth has not come at the expense of an increased divide between clergy and laity. Their experience in Richmond, where their bishop fully champions them, shows that some lay groups find more support from the church hierarchy than other parishioners. As one PCR member noted, “The diocese supports us. We represent the position of the American bishops. But the rest of the folks in our parishes, they think we’re just a bunch of granola heads.”

PCR also reveals how lay groups in contemporary Catholicism function similarly to the parachurch organizations described by Robert Wuthnow in The Restructuring of American Religion. Nearly half of the members reported that they attend mass in their parish only a few times a year. Some suggested that Pax Christi represents their primary community of faith. In this way, we can see how the interest group tendency in contemporary American religion has reshaped American Catholicism as well. Unlike Wuthnow’s analysis, however, these two sides in American Catholicism shake down along different lines. Membership in Pax Christi does not determine political party affiliation or a position on issues such as abortion. While Wuthnow’s paradigm for religious alignment is helpful, it requires significant retooling in order to honor the particularities of the new American Catholic landscape.
PCR also transforms traditional ideas about Catholic pacifism in America. Before the Vietnam War, Catholic pacifist circles hosted the radical intelligentsia, including activists such as Dorothy Day. But Pax Christi, a group that focuses on peacemaking from both the pacifist and just-war perspectives, includes a much wider section of Catholic life. Its Richmond members, though more educated than the average Catholic or American, are not philosophers. The group includes teachers and physicians, along with several retired members of the military.

Further, the peacemakers in PCR integrate themselves into diocesan life more than their earlier, more radical peers did. Most members also work with peace and justice activities, particularly the diocesan partnership with churches in Haiti. Many report that they understand peacemaking as vital to their Christian faith. They understand the Catholic Church, particularly the hierarchy, to be moving slowly toward a peacemaking, if not pacifist, position.

The membership and activities of PCR demonstrate that boundaries once understood to be solid have become quite permeable. Old divides between clergy and laity, between ethnic antagonists, have subsided and a new gulf has emerged. Ultimately, a focus on the neglected pockets of Catholicism, including groups such as PCR, requires scholars to question assumptions about American Catholic history and the models for understanding contemporary American religion that are dominated by the Protestant experience.

Finally, a close look at PCR’s membership also challenges the category of Southern religion. The history of Catholicism in the South has always been seriously understudied; but the presence of so many transplanted Yankees in the diocese of Richmond, and particularly among the ranks of PCR, complicates any understanding we might have of Catholicism in the South or something called “Southern religion.” The great migrations between North and South in the past few decades have brought leftist strands to the church in Richmond, and to other cities throughout the region. In light of these movements, scholars must ask how religion in the South is truly Southern anymore.