



## ELEPHANTS IN THE LIVING ROOM

Website: [elephantsinthelivingroom.com](http://elephantsinthelivingroom.com)



### ROBERT BLAIR KAISER EDUCATIONAL FORUM

ST. MICHAEL CHURCH  
STERLING HEIGHTS, MI  
OCTOBER 27, 2006

#### INTRODUCTION

FR. JIM MEYER

Robert Blair Kaiser has plenty to say about the Church so he doesn't need me to, pardon the expression, pontificate. And I also presume that all of you have read the brief bio materials attached to today's promo, so I don't need to repeat them either. But there are some rather delicious tidbits that you may not be aware of: Kaiser was an inch away from ordination as a Jesuit before leaving the Company to pursue a career in journalism. Editors of three newspapers have nominated him for Pulitzers, plus, his publisher, E. P. Dutton, for his exhaustive book on the assassination of R. F. K. Kaiser has reported for every major print and TV news organization and publication except, to my knowledge, *Mother Jones*. This leads me to suspect, that either he has diverse talents, interests and opinions that are in great demand, or he can't hold a job. (Laughter) He's lived with Church reforms, or lack thereof, longer than he might care to admit.

He and his wife presided at a regular Sunday night salon for progressive minded Cardinals during the halcyon days of Vatican II – a tribute to his perception as to what the Catholic Church could be. Nor is Robert Blair Kaiser without a perspective on the contemporary Catholic Church in our society. His spark remains. In a recent interview he asserted, "Without a missionary spirit the Church ends up looking like an ecclesiastical Fort Knox with the Church's Ratzingers guarding the deposit of faith as if it were a pile of gold bars."

My friends, the Elephants proudly present Robert Blair Kaiser. (Applause)

#### MAKING OUR CHURCH A PEOPLE'S CHURCH

ROBERT BLAIR KAISER

I have a friend in Pasadena, California, named Rob Miller; he's an entrepreneur. He's gone through a couple of fortunes, and he's launched on a third – he thinks, he hopes – and so do I. We had lunch a few months back in Pasadena with one of his friends, Michael Jackman, another entrepreneur in the printing business in Los Angeles. A foreign born Irishman (FBI), Michael Jackman told us both a story of his experiences as a member of the finance committee of his parish in Mendocino, California, a suburb of Santa Barbara; it's called Our Lady of Mount Carmel. He and three other members of the finance committee discovered that their pastor had been dipping into the till a little bit to the tune of about three some million dollars. They found his bank accounts and three of his different names in the local Santa Barbara bank; and they went to the pastor, and told them what he learned; and he buzzed them off. So they went to the Auxiliary Bishop for that region of the Los Angeles archdiocese, Bishop Thomas Curry, who's also foreign born Irish, and they presented their evidence to Bishop Curry. And you know what Bishop Curry did? He fired the finance committee.

And Rob was outraged, and said, "Isn't there anything we can do about it?"

And Jackman said, "I don't know what to do about it."

And Rob said, "Well I know what to do about it, I'm going to leave this Church. This is awful!"

And I said, "Rob, you don't have to leave it, you can take it back."

And he said "What do you mean? What do you mean by that?"

And I told him that we could create a people's Church in America along an American model and still be good Catholics. And he wanted me to explain further; and I did; and it will be the brunt of my talk to you guys this afternoon – just exactly what warrant we would have for doing that, and how we could do it, and what the obstacles are, and what the hopes are.

I'm going to do a little bit of history here, back and forth, across the pages of history. I want to go back to, I think it was somewhere in the 1890's, that Leo XIII wrote a letter. It wasn't an encyclical letter, but it was entitled and widely known under the title, *Testem Benevolentiae*, a Testimony of Our Benevolence toward America. It was a letter addressed to one of the American Cardinals, and it inveighed against a heresy that Leo XIII called *Americanism*. As it turned out, he wasn't so much inveighing against democracy in the civil arena in the United States. What he was worried about was that the American Church would become a democratic Church. How dare these Americans think of themselves as Catholics in any way different from the way we are in Rome! And that was pretty much the way everyone got in lockstep behind Leo XIII.

It was a Paulist priest and his writings – the founder of the Paulist Order, Isaac Heckor – who had been writing about a people's Church, when it come right down to it: the church of and for the people. And he was already ten years in the grave when he was condemned in this letter. This is kind of a pattern, I think. John Paul II condemned Indian spiritual writer, a Jesuit, deMello, ten years after he was in the grave. So it doesn't seem to matter to the Vatican whether the man is living or dead; he's got ideas that live, and they have to be squelched. So, if we're getting around to it a little late, we'll do it. I remember having an interview with Cardinal Ottoviani here in Vatican II in 1962, he had just condemned Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, and he explained to me why, and that was in '62; and I think Teilhard died at least ten years before that, maybe '48, if I'm not mistaken. Anyway, people are in lockstep and their thinking, along with the Pope and with the Church. Of course, we can't have democracy in the Church of America. But, it became...history moves.

And in 1925 a famous Cardinal, Cardinal Mercier of Belgium, was running the something called The Malines Conversations between Anglicans and Catholics – ecumenical conversations. He was a little advanced, a little ahead of his time. And he gave a famous talk in 1925 called *United not Absorbed* in which he proposed that the Church of England, the Anglican Church, whole and entire, come into the Catholic Church as an autochthonous Church, like the Melkites, the Maronites and the Copts. They would be Catholic, they would be loyal to Rome, loyal to the pope, but they would have their own patriarch, the Archbishop of Canterbury, their own priests, some married, some unmarried, their own English language liturgy, a book of common prayer would become English Catholic Book of Common Prayer. And so forth. He too was a little ahead of his time. He was squelched by Rome. Pius XI, the pope at that time, wrote an encyclical that finally appeared in 1928 squelching the whole ecumenical movement. The encyclical was call *Mortalium Animos*, and he forbade any more ecumenical conversations of any kind. And found out that the speech that Mercier had given that day, in 1925, was ghosted for him by the famous Benedictine monk named Dom Lambert Beauduin; and Dom Lambert got his reward: he was banished from Benedictine monasteries. He couldn't live in a Benedictine monastery for every after.

He was still a deep thinker, and a progressive thinker, and the kind of guy who would have an influence on an archbishop in Paris, the Papal Nuncio to Paris in 1945. His name was Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli. And it was Dom Lambert Beauduin who suggested to Roncalli that what the Church really needed was an ecumenical council and that was a seed that Dom Lambert planted with Roncalli; and when he became Pope John XXIII, he announced he had a sudden inspiration of the Holy Spirit to call a council. But we know now that the Holy Spirit was speaking to him thru Dom Lambert in 1945. The Holy Spirit does speak to us through nature, through our friends, sometimes even through our enemies. And Roncalli was the kind of ecclesiastic kind of priest who listened. He was a great listener, and also a great storyteller.

In any event we had a Council, and some seeds were planted at that Council that would help lay a groundwork or foundation for this idea that isn't my idea – I'm kind of what they would call a synthetic thinker. It doesn't mean that I'm made out of plastic; it means I pull ideas together. I don't take them apart as an analyst, I'm a synthesizer, and I pull them together, and I sometimes come up with a new thing. And the idea that I've come up with is the result of my mentoring by some very good theologians, mainly in Rome, who have talked to me about the possibility of a Church reform in the sense that we, in America,

can do it, and it can be done in a lot of other countries, each according to their own cultures. And that the Church need not be a monolith, the same in every part of the world as Leo XIII would have seemed to have implied in his letter, *Testem Benevolentiae*.

In fact, at the Council, we saw evidence of the diversity in this single Catholic Church. Every day at midday, the reporters would be standing in St. Peter's square and watching the bishops tumbling down the – not tumbling, walking – but it looked like a waterfall, like a flow of purple water coming down the steps of St. Peters. And if you looked a little closer, as the bishops approached, you would see all kinds of faces: bearded faces, white faces, black faces, ruddy Irish faces, some with funny hats on, that are funnier even than the American Bishops funny hats. And we realized that the Church was more diverse that we thought. And every day the Council would start out with a Mass. And on Monday it might be a Maronite liturgy, and on Tuesday it might be a Melkite liturgy, and on Wednesday it might be a Coptic liturgy. And we could see these were real Masses and yet they certainly did not look and sound like the Masses that we'd been accustomed to – our Latin Masses.

So this idea that the Church doesn't have to be a monolith began to be implanted; and it helps us think outside the box a little bit. We listened at the Council to the bishops who were giving a rationale for an encultured Church, that is, a Church that is diverse in various diverse cultures. It can be Catholic and still be part of a particular nation or region. There's a missionary kind of spirit behind this idea that the gospel always has to be interpreted for us. We have to interpret for ourselves; and we help but do it according to our own culture, our own way of thinking and feeling and speaking. And the best preachers we know have a bible in one hand and a daily newspaper in the other, and they're putting it together, and they're making some sense out of things.

Well, this idea of enculturation kind of needed some explanation; and so a lot of missionary bishops at Vatican II began to explain it by going back into history, and telling us how in the 15<sup>th</sup> century the missionaries starting coming to Africa and Asia, and imposing their culture and their language and their traditions on the so-called godless savages. Backed by colonial soldiers and relying on colonial law, they taught colonial devotions, and a colonial theology, and a colonial Church. "Enough of that!" said these missionary bishops. And the men who were writing the documents of Vatican II agreed with them – that Christ had to have an African face, and had to have an Asian face, and that Christ shouldn't need a passport anywhere. Since Vatican II the authorities in Rome have cautiously endorsed this notion of enculturation, most notably in the Congo, where the Congolese clergy and the Congolese laypeople have a fashioned liturgy with drums and dancing and Mass in any number of different Congolese dialects.

And American Catholics can understand why Africans need a Church that accords with the way Africans think and feel; but few Americans have thought about building a Church in the United States and keeping with the way most Americans think and feel. We're not going to enculturate the gospel in the United States with drums and dancing, as they do in the Congo; we're going to do it another way. We're going to do it an American way. What way is that?

Well, what marks us most as Americans is our history and our Constitution? Is this a radical idea? Yeah, but it started with John Carroll back in Baltimore in 1789. He was elected by a vote of all the priests in America at the time. And he tried to prevail upon the pope at the time, Pius VII, that this should be a pattern for the future of American bishops – that they shouldn't be appointed by Rome. American Protestants would not cotton well to American bishops being appointed by the potentate of a foreign power; and Carroll had a few other good reasons as well. But the pope did not listen to him; and the man that was sent to replace him was appointed by the pope, not elected by the American clergy.

Even so, one of his appointees was an Irishman, John England, who was sent to Charleston, South Carolina in 1820; and he became very quickly Americanized; and he wrote a Constitution for his Church, which then embraced North and South Carolina and the entire state of Georgia, a Constitution for his diocese that gave his people a voice and a vote – very democratic! He, John England, tried to persuade the rest of the American hierarchy at the time, by then there might have been maybe 20 bishops, 'cause the nation was growing fast, and we were getting a lot of immigrants from Catholic countries in Europe; but these bishops didn't think it was such a great idea to be elected by the priests of their diocese or by their

people. They would have a lot more autonomy if they were appointed by the pope. They'd be accountable then, not to the priests and people in their dioceses, but to the pope. And in those days, when a letter took months to get across the ocean and a return letter months to get back, by being accountable to a pope, they were practically accountable to nobody.

So they got into the habit – the American hierarchy got into a kind of bad habit – of imitating the polity that had been pretty much the way to go in Rome, especially after 1829. In 1829 only forty-six bishops were appointed by the pope; the rest were all elected locally in various ways. The forty-six were all representative of various regions in the Papal States, that central part of Italy that was ruled over by the temporal ruler, the pope. But then, Rome began a kind of centralizing process; and they gradually took over and made it very clear that local election was not an option – that really, the selection had to come from on high. And so, this top down Church began to take even more of a decided autocratic shape. So much so, that even today, when reporters, my colleagues in the press, write about the relationship between the pope and the bishops, they pretty much assume that the bishops are working for the pope, which historically and theologically is not correct. Each bishop is a Vicar of Christ in his Church, as the pope is a Vicar of Christ in his Church, the Church of Rome or the Church of Detroit; and unfortunately, many pastors follow the same model, and they kind of think that they work for the bishop. And you can hardly fault them for thinking that, because some bishops are really very autocratic in their own right. In my diocese of Phoenix, any Vatican II type priest can look to be suspended very quickly if he speaks out.

I have a friend named John Cunningham, a priest in Phoenix, who was suspended for two years because he had an Episcopalian minister on the altar at a nuptial mass; and the bishop accused him of celebrating with the Episcopalian minister. And Father Cunningham had proof that he didn't, because he had a video tape of the whole ceremony. And it didn't matter to the bishop. He was still suspended; and he just got off the bishop's shit list by writing a letter of apology to the people of Phoenix; and he didn't even know what he was apologizing for, but he signed the letter, because he wanted to get his pension. That was the quid pro quo. So now, he's not an active priest. He was probably the best pastor in Phoenix: beautiful signing voice, people flocked from all over the city to go to his church. And he's studying now at Arizona State University to get a doctorate in theology; and he'll probably end up teaching theology; and he may well have more influence in the next ten years than he had in the previous ten years. So maybe God writes straight with crooked lines. We have to think so; it's the only way. It's the only way we can get through the day, the week and the month with a sense of humor.

Well, what can we do about it? I'm here to tell you there are things we can do about it! It may be a utopian idea. It might stem from my own Pollyannaish enthusiasm about the Church that I love. I'm a convert to Catholicism, by the way. I became a Catholic at age thirteen. I landed by accident in a Catholic school, a Jesuit parish in Phoenix, Arizona, and fell in love with the Catholic nuns and the Catholic kids, and by Easter I was a Catholic. And then I joined the Jesuits at age seventeen, and that changed my life. I left ten years later, three years shy of ordination, looking eighteen. I was in suspended animation. (Laughter) I'm really one-hundred-five.

My friend Rob Miller says, "Well let's just go in schism."

And I said, "No, we don't have to do that. We just have to persuade the bishops of the United States, and we shouldn't underestimate the power of public opinion, to enculturate the gospel in the United States creating a modern autochthonous American Catholic Church on the model of the Maronites, the Melkites, the Byzantines, the Copts, and 16 other autochthonous churches mainly in the Middle East. They're loyal to the pope but glory in their own governance, their own married clergy, their own liturgies." I know autochthonous is a difficult word and I don't think that when we get our movement going we'll have people with signs on their shoulders marching in front of the NCCB in Washington saying, "Autochthany now! Autochthany now!" But homegrown is a pretty good translation – from the ground up.

It's not an unthinkable idea, because I cite the talk of Cardinal Mercier in 1925. I cite the Indonesian bishops, who came to the Asian Synod in 1998 and asked for an autochthonous Church, because they wanted to do things in Indonesia that the pope wouldn't let them do. They wanted to ordain married men, because they have even more of a priest shortage in Indonesia than we do here. Of course, the Vatican

not only didn't follow through with that, or approve it, they covered up the fact that the Indonesian bishops had even asked for it. It didn't appear in any official bulletins on the Synod in 1998; nor did it appear on the bulletins of the 2001 Synod, when other Indonesian bishops made the same request. That's one of the problems. I don't think we have to request to become an autochthonous Church; we just have to do it.

Would the Vatican have said to the Church in Indonesia, "You're now a schismatic Church, because now all of a sudden you were doing things your own way – not changing doctrine, but changing the way you governed yourself?" I doubt it. Indonesia is one of the largest countries in the world. Even less would they be coming down on the United States of America, which is not only the second largest Catholic country in the world next to Brazil, but gives the Vatican 50% of its operating expenses every year – excuse me: 45%; the German Republic gives 45%, and the rest of the world contributes the other 10%. And there's no reason why if we became an autochthonous American Catholic Church, we wouldn't continue to support the pope, because we love the pope. We love our popes!

It's not an unthinkable idea, because John Paul II himself has talked, before he died, about approving autochthonous Churches in missionary lands; and Benedict XVI has to be thinking very hard about approving an autochthonous Church in China, because that's the only way that he can pull in and make legal the Catholic Church in China: by allow Beijing to appoint the bishops. Beijing is already appointing half the bishops and the Vatican turns around and approves them. So they're already halfway there on way to autochthany in China.

A lot of Catholic reformers talk about having another ecumenical council. I think an autochthonous American Church would be a step on the way toward a universal council, but it would be a lot easier. I spent the last six years in Rome. And Rome thinks a different way than we do; and there's no getting around it. It's a cultural thing; it's not doctrinal. There's no word in the Italian language, for example, for accountability. They use a word called *responsabilita*, but it doesn't have the same meaning that accountability has. Accountability is an American concept. We elect a mayor, we expect him to be accountable for his actions. We expect him to follow through on his campaign promises; and if he doesn't he's in trouble. We can even recall him, or not reelect him, in any event, the next time he runs for office. But that idea is very foreign to the Italian mind. There's a kind of fatalism about the Church in Italy. It's been this way for a long time, and nobody remembers any different, and it's going to be this way forever.

Americans don't think that way. Maybe it's a fatal disease, or maybe it's a virtue. I don't know, but we find something wrong, we try to fix it, almost to a fault. That's probably why we are in Iraq. We think there's something wrong in Iraq so let's go fix it. So that's kind of the defect of a virtue over too much. But I think we have adequate reason to be thinking hard about restructuring the American Church; so that we have an accountable Church in America; so that we're all accountable each to the other; so that the bishops can't get away with their cover-up for their wayward priests; so the bishops can't cover up their financial scandals that they may be aware of. This bishop, Thomas Curry, is aware of his pastor in Our Lady of Mt. Carmel church putting three million dollars away for himself, and not doing anything about it. One can only assume that maybe Thomas Curry is getting a kick-back – these Irishmen stick together. It's called the Irish mafia by some. (Laughter)

I would start with Canon Law itself. I don't like Canon Law, but we can use it to start the ball rolling. Canon Law endorses a time-honored way for a nation to restructure its governance. It's called a regional or national synod. We had three of them in the 19<sup>th</sup> century; the First, Second and Third Councils of Baltimore, where the American bishops met and wrote rules for an American Church. One of the rules they wrote, and later rescinded, was that anyone who gets divorced is automatically excommunicated – not divorced and remarried, just divorced. And they quickly realized that was kind of the wrong way to go, because the children of these divorced moms weren't going to church anymore. So they changed that. Updated Canon Law, 1983 revision, says that a regional or national synod can have up to 50% of the delegates as non-bishops. I don't know why they did that; I'd have to do some research on that, but they may have been taking some sort of a nod to the fact that the Church in wherever might be too clericalized, and we might have more interesting and more apostolically minded, more missionary minded, synods if there were people out there in the hinterlands who could come to the Fourth Council of Baltimore as not members of the hierarchy, but as members of the lowerarchy.

Anyway, if those delegates were not appointed by their bishops, but elected by Catholics; and this would presume a real American model kind of politics – precinct politics, parish politics. We'd have to have members of parishes/parish councils, sending delegates to vicariate meetings, and having those delegates talk to the other people in vicariate meeting, and illustrating the fact that they have ideas for the restructuring of the American Church and get elected to the Fourth Council of Baltimore. So that, if we had the bishops on one side, and all these elected delegates on the other – and they wouldn't all have to be lay people; they could be priests. Father Greeley might come from Tucson, Arizona or Joan Chittister might come from Erie, Pennsylvania to this Fourth Council. It would be a heck of a story. I like it partly because I'm a journalist; and I'd like to cover this kind of a thing. But I would guess that, if they want to restructure the Church in American to make it more accountable, they would use the model ready at hand: the American Constitution – and write rules for tripartite government, an executive branch, a legislative and a judicial branch. And the legislative branch might well be composed of a House of Bishops and a House of Non-bishops or a House of Lay People. They would probably want to write rules for the election of bishops with a stated tenure. We elect senators for a term of six years; maybe we could elect bishops for a term of eight years or ten years; and then they'd be accountable to the people. If George Bush appointed all the mayors in America, would they be accountable to George Bush, or would they be accountable to the people of Detroit or Des Moines or Denver? We don't even have to answer that question.

Is this a radical idea? My friend, Gerry Bechard, my host here this week says, "Yeah! Don't say it's not a radical idea. It is. It hits to the root – *radix* – means root in Latin. A change in the way we govern ourselves, not a change in the way we believe, goes to the root of our problems; and it's is a revolutionary idea too. We're Americans. We're proud of starting our country with the revolution against tyranny; and if we don't have a tyranny in the American Church, then you haven't been reading the newspapers or listening to the gossip about your own ordinary here in this diocese; he does what he wants, when he wants.

That's why Rob Miller and I decided to form an organization called [www.takebackourchurch.org](http://www.takebackourchurch.org). I urge you all to go there; read our manifesto. There's a place where you can sign in. We would like to get together a million members or so, because I don't think the press will pay attention to us unless we do have a sizable number of people. We need a critical mass. We need a tipping point. How many people do we need? I don't know.

I can go back in history and tell you a story about how six British Lords achieved a critical mass in 1215 at Runnymede in England, when they put the pressure on King John to sign the Magna Charta. So: six British Lords! I can tell you about a day in 1983, when eight million people in the Philippines decided they didn't want to put up with their dictator, Ferdinand Marcos, any longer, and marched on the Avenue of the Epiphany. Not all eight million, however, had to march; only 400,000 marched – that's about 5% of the Philippine population; but it was a very effective march. Ferdinand Marcos was gone the next day. There wasn't a shot fired.

So, I think, we in the United States, we Catholics, have the power to start a radical revolution. If the word revolution frightens some American Catholics, I say, "Good!" It's time to become seriously frightened. And the feelings should stir us to act as our founding fathers did, when they wrote a Declaration of Independence, and resolved to fight for it with musket and ball. But we're not talking about a violent revolution here. We won't even write a Declaration of Independence. We'll write a Declaration of autochthany, one that will challenge our priests and our people to work out a constitution for the American Church that carefully puts aside the Rome based, secretive, half-vast, culturally conditioned, legalisms codified in Canon Law in return for the kind of servant Church envisioned at Vatican II. (Applause)

Transcribed by  
*Bev Parker*  
20061221