The democratic impulse has been present in the American Catholic community since the late eighteenth century. At that time it took the form of lay trusteeism, a model of local church government that stressed the central role of the laity in the governance of the local parish. Such a style of democracy met with stiff opposition and eventually gave way to clerical control of the local church. Nonetheless, the democratic impulse remained strong with new immigrant groups and thus persisted throughout the nineteenth century. By the early twentieth century, however, democracy in the church was all but extinct. The clergy were in control, and the laity were left to pay, pray and obey. This style of church governance fit very well with the prevailing understanding of church as a hierarchical organization ruled by the pope, bishops, and clergy. In the 1960s this system began to change for two principal reasons.

A major reason for the change was the understanding of church articulated at the Second Vatican council. In the document on the church, *Lumen Gentium*, a more social and biblical idea of church emerged that described the Church as the people of God. Such a description gave much greater attention to the role of the laity in the Church and emphasized their responsibility for the welfare of the Church. In addition, at the council itself, a great deal of collaboration took place in the decision-making process. Bishops, theologians, and consultors collaborated in drafting the final council documents. The council also endorsed the concept of collegiality, in which the bishops throughout the world, together with the pope as their head, share supreme authority for the Church. All of these developments at the highest level of church government fostered a climate in which cooperation and consultation between clergy and laity at the parish level became increasingly common and indeed expected.

This new understanding of church shaped the new code of canon law that appeared in 1983. For the first time church law recommended that parish councils be established in the parish; such parish councils reflected the concept, endorsed by Vatican II, of clergy and laity sharing responsibility for the welfare of the parish. At this level of local church government, the idea of democracy once again entered the vocabulary of American Catholicism. To be sure, church law does not speak of democracy or endorse the idea of majority rule’ rather it uses the word *consultative* in referring to the role of the laity in the parish council. Nonetheless, in an American environment in which democracy and the democratic process is a cultural given, the popular expectation is that *consultative* is very close to, if not synonymous with, *democratic*.

Another reason behind the return of the democratic impulse was the cultural awakening of the 1960s that encouraged a great deal of democratic activity. Citizens became involved in neighborhood organizations, and participatory democracy became a popular concept for many Americans, both young and old. Sit-ins and demonstrations became commonplace. As Catholics moved out of their enclave and felt more at home with such American traditions of freedom, shared decision making, and open communication, they sought to bring these concepts into the American Catholic community.

Added to these influences was the emergence of a new type of clergy. Just as Catholic laity began to take more responsibility for the welfare of Catholicism, a new breed of clergy emerged who wanted to share ownership and responsibility for the welfare of the parish with the congregation. A Jesuit priest in Holy Trinity parish in Washington, D.C., described his parish ministry as one of “collegueship.” Like many of his contemporaries, he was “determined to make the laity full partners in governing their church.” The parish of St. Brigid in Westbury, New York, entered the post-Vatican II era when a new pastor arrived in 1975. As one observer noted, this priest “very much embraced Vatican II….He was really the one who brought to the attention of the laity that St. Brigid’s was not his church; it was their church.” Such a mentality contrasted dramatically with the pastor barons of the pre-Vatican II period who never dreamed of collaborating with the laity in administrating the parish. In the past thirty years collaboration between clergy and laity has become the new model of parish governance. A new pastor expressed this idea in one of his homilies to his parishioners. “I come with no agenda except that of the Lord Jesus Christ,” he said. “I have no sense of who we shall hire in the future until together we discern in what direction we
want the parish to go; and I have no intention of putting in kneelers or additional stained glass, as some of you fear. I intend to minister collaboratively.\(^3\)

Catholics have now come to expect a more democratic style of management in their parishes. They expect that their voices will be heard when it comes to making major decisions in the parish. The key to this new model of government is the parish council, described by one historian as “the most significant parochial development in recent times.”\(^4\)

A study of Catholic parishes in the early 1980s concluded that seventy-five percent had parish councils or their equivalent. Some of these councils operate in a very democratic fashion. Annual elections take place to select council members, and those elected serve for a specified period of time. Council meetings are run in a democratic manner with majority rule operative. In such instances priest and people work together to reach consensus to which all can agree. The priest has more of an advisory role in such a situation. Other parish councils are more consultative. This is the model spelled out in church law. The elected lay members vote, but their judgment is not binding on the pastor. The decision of the priest is more definitive than advisory in this instance. A third model is more reminiscent of the pre-Vatican II Church. The parish council exists, but it more for show than for real. Acting in a more traditional authoritarian manner, the pastor retains complete control over the government of the parish. All three models are operative in the Catholic community, but in recent years most parishioners have come to expect a more consultative or indeed democratic styled of government.\(^5\)

In addition to the parish council, Catholic congregations have adopted a style of operation that includes numerous committees. Indeed, the post-Vatican II parish has become a very complex organization, with committees for worship services, religious education, finances, social action endeavors, family life, and other similar concerns. The modern parish also includes full-time staff personnel; in some parishes as many as a dozen laypeople are on the parish payroll. Since such a large staff necessitates more meetings and planning, consultation between clergy and laity has become commonplace. At all levels decision-making has become more democratic, more collegial than in the past. What took place at St. Vincent de Paul parish in Baltimore in the 1980s illustrates the impact of the democratic impulse in Catholic congregational life.

Founded in 1841, St. Vincent’s parish has experienced a long and varied history. In 1973 a new pastor arrived who wanted the people to share in his ministry. Within a year he had organized a parish council, boasting to the parishioners in his first annual report that “Our Council has been elected, our Constitution ratified, our committees established, and the work had begun in earnest; we have stepped into collegial government.” It soon became clear that major renovation was needed in the church, and the manner in which this took place reflected the parish’s commitment to collegial government. After much planning and discussion, the parish council undertook the task of renovating the church. Their mandate was that the parishioners were to be “the principal architects in the church renovation.” Town meetings were held to discuss the proposed designs; surveys of the parishioners were taken to determine what should be included in the renovation. As a result, the parishioners had defined “their requirements and expectations very carefully,” knowing exactly what they wanted in the renovation program. This planning process took place over five years. Finally, a referendum was held to decide if the parish should proceed with the renovation. The response was overwhelmingly positive, and the renovation took place as the people had planned it. It would be hard to find a more democratic process. Indeed, the drafting of the Constitution of the United States and its subsequent ratification did not take as long.\(^6\)

The key to fostering democracy in the parish is the pastor, who ultimately determines the spirit of the parish. If he is a new breed of priest inspired by the vision of Vatican II and seeks to share his authority with the people, than a more democratic model of parish will emerge. If he is jealous of sharing his authority and acts in an arbitrary and authoritarian manner, then, as historian Jeffrey Burns wrote, he will “face stiff opposition and unrest among his parishioners, or his unhappy parishioners will simply attend another parish. The pastor is expected to consult his parishioners prior to important decisions ... the domineering pastor is a thing of the past.”\(^7\)
The democratization of the Catholic parish is not a uniquely American development. Parish councils have become part of the post-Vatican II Church in other countries. Nonetheless, in the United States democracy is so ingrained in the culture that it cannot but reinforce the democratic impulse emerging within the Catholic community. Indeed, it has complimented the new vision of church that emerged at Vatican II to the point where American Catholics now expect a style of leadership that is more collaborative between clergy and people. Growing up in a democratic culture and in the shadow of Vatican II, people now expect the government of the local church to be more democratic.

The democratic impulse was also manifest in the drafting of the pastoral letters published by the hierarchy in the 1980s. Bishops consulted numerous experts, and only after several drafts and a final vote were the documents approved. Such collaboration and consultation were unusual, indeed unprecedented, and it reflected the desire for a more democratic decision-making process among the bishops. Even monasteries and convents have entered the age of democratic decision-making. As a result, they have passed from an era of blind obedience to the mandates of a superior to one of responsible participation in decision-making.

The democratic culture fostered in the local congregation and in other areas of church life has raised the expectations of all Catholics. The experience of collaboration and consultation has conditioned a generation of Catholics to think that their religion nurtures a democratic spirit among its people. This expectation comes into direct conflict with an opposing model of church that envisions Catholicism as a hierarchal institution in which the clergy are the sole decision makers. Both of these visions were present at Vatican II and were apparent in the council document about the Church. At the council the more collegial model of church became the normative, operational theology that most council fathers endorsed. The hierarchal model soon fell into disfavor.

Over the course of the past thirty years, however, the hierarchal model has made a resurgence. This has become especially evident during the pontificate of Pope John Paul II (1978-2004). He increasingly endorsed a more monarchical model of church in which the pope is the boss; and the boss, of course, is always right. Many American bishops appointed by John Paul II have adopted a similar style, allowing for very little consultation or collaboration in the exercise of authority. This development has led to increased tensions within the American Catholic community. Such tensions have produced conflicts quite reminiscent of the trustee conflicts of the early nineteenth century. As historian Patrick Carey observed, they “generally involved objections to the transfer of priests without consultation with the laity, refusal to remove unwanted priests, closing or selling churches and schools without participation in the decision, lack of authoritative lay voice on parish councils, or meaningful consultative voice in the selection of priests and bishops, and general objections to the unrestrained hierarchical powers in the Church and resulting lack of fiscal accountability.”

These competing visions of church have divided the Catholic community. On one side is the local congregation that experiences a process of decision-making that is collaborative and democratic. On the other side is a hierarchy that exercises power in a very authoritarian manner. Such division is inevitable when two different visions of church are competing with each other. This conflict is not peculiarly American; it is evident throughout the Catholic world. Nonetheless, in the United States it appears to be more deeply rooted in the Catholic community because of the intensely democratic culture that is so much a part of the American experience. Polls taken in the 1990s suggest not only that a majority of Catholics do indeed want more democracy in church affairs, but also that the percentage of those seeking such a democratization of Catholicism has increased in recent years.

Every Catholic knows that the Church is not a democracy. The Catholic credo is not the result of a popular vote. It is rooted in scripture and tradition. But when it comes to decision making in the governance of the Church, people expect more consultation and collaboration. The challenge will be to blend the American love of democracy with the Catholic tradition of authority. To the degree that such blending takes place, Catholicism will become a much stronger community of faith.
1/ Adapted from In Search of an American Catholicism by Jay P. Dolan, pp. 204-211, Oxford University Press, N.Y., N.Y., © 2002 by Jay P. Dolan.

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5/ David C. Leege, Notre Dame Study of Catholic Parish Life Among Leaders, Report No. 9, p. 6; University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, IN, © 1986


