Family, Religion, Sociology, and Social Activism:
Reflections on My Journey
William V. D’Antonio

On October 27, 2009, Dr. William D’Antonio was awarded the Rev. Louis J. Luzbetak, SVD, Award for Exemplary Church Research by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA). Below is the text of the acceptance speech Dr. D’Antonio gave as a response to this award.

This evening, I want to reflect on how family, religion, ethnicity, education, historical time, and location, have influenced my research and teaching as a sociologist who is also a committed Catholic Christian.

I begin with three readings to provide context for my homily.

The first reading is from the writings of the Rev. Jonathan Edwards, the 18th century Protestant theologian: “A man of right spirit is not of a narrow, private spirit; but he is greatly concerned for the good of the public community to which he belongs, and particularly of the town where he dwells.” (Cited in the Yale Alumni Magazine, March 1996: 38)

The second reading is from the late Senator Paul Tsongas, of Massachusetts: “In the end, there must be purpose to our journey. Human endeavor cannot consist simply of random acts and happenstance. There needs to be meaning beyond self that gives our limited days definition and direction.” (From a lecture at Yale University, 1995)

And the third reading is from the late Robert K. Merton, in his own way a gospel writer for sociologists:

“The narratives [that constitute the stories of our lives] and their interpretations tell of reference groups and reference individuals, the significant others that helped shape the changing character of thought and inquiry. . . . Full fledged sociological autobiographers relate their intellectual development both to changing social and cognitive micro-environments close at hand, and to the encompassing macro-environments provided by the larger society and culture. . . . Such accounts bear witness that one’s experiences and foci of interest, one’s accomplishments and failures, were in no small part a function of the historical moment at which one has entered the field.” (Pp 19-20 of Sociological Lives. 1987. Edited by Matilda Riley)
I entered the world in New Haven, Ct., in 1926, in the same neighborhood as my father had been born, some 27 years earlier. It was overwhelmingly Italian, with an Irish family here and there. Later, I learned that my paternal grandfather had been among the first Italian Americans to buy a house in what had been an all Irish neighborhood. When two great-uncles followed suit, the neighborhood was on its way to the kind of succession process that has become so much a part of American life.

Life in an extended Italian-American family was warm, full of relatives of all ages, a mix of support and control. My grandfather had brought with him a strong sense of Pater familias: and he tried to keep his children, married or not, within walking distance. The warm family embrace could sometimes be suffocating. Lorraine and I like to think we have been more about the embrace than the suffocation. We will let our children be the judge of that.

The neighborhood was a mixture of working and lower middle class families, with St. Donato’s Italian Mission parish on one end, St. Patrick’s Older Irish, toward the southern end, and to the north St. Joseph’s, a newer parish, a mix of upper middle class Irish Catholics, and middle, lower middle and working class Irish and Italians at our end.

Sometime before my first communion, my mother, who chaffed under the control of my grandfather, moved us children from St. Donato’s to St. Joseph’s with her. This was an amazing action, removing us from a closed, traditional Italian parish. For the next 16 years, my mother, brothers and I went to St. Joseph's, while my father continued to go to St. Donato's with his parents. Whatever the reasons for my mother's action, it proved to be a fateful decision, and greatly affected our lives.

Fr. Ralph Kelly, a new Assistant pastor, had just come to St. Joseph's; he was shy and introverted, but as it turned out intellectual and progressive. Over time, he organized a Gregorian Choir for men and boys, introduced the missal into the Mass* and into our lives, and introduced us during our teenage years to progressive writers like the theologian Romano Guardini, a precursor of the progressive voices of Vatican II. In later years he apologized for his male chauvinism. Fr. Kelly was indeed a significant other in my life as well as that of my brothers and so many in the Gregorian Choir. Under his tutelage Irish and Italian youngsters came together in a positive setting. With so many negative stories being told about priests in recent years, it is a pleasure to recount the positive impact that Fr. Ralph Kelly had on our lives.

* The Missal had the English on one side and the Latin on the other.
Being Catholic was like being Italian-American—it was something you were, ascribed not achieved. In the setting of the time you did not question it; you just defended it when necessary. And it was necessary every day at the public school next door to St. Joseph's.

So every day we said the Lord's prayer with the single women teachers I thought of as the Protestant nuns, who wanted to make us kids (Irish, Italians, a few Protestants, and my Jewish friend Freddie C), into 100% Americans.

The setting: 2nd grade: Miss H: “Our Father which art in Heaven”– we muttered “who art”; She said “hallowed be thy name”; we mumbled something that probably sounded more like “Howard be thy name”; she asked God to forgive us our debts; we talked about our “trustpasses”; then came the climax– that mortal sin Protestant ending. We had been coached by our parents to avoid the road to Hell, so all the Catholics shut up– leaving Miss H and the Protestants to finish, with poor Freddie C– just standing there. Whenever someone asks about the importance of school prayer to get the day off to a good start, I think about those days. From a functionalist perspective, I would say the surest thing that happened was that at least for those few minutes the Irish and the Italians were united as one in defense of the faith!

My parents were very religious; never missing Mass, or eating meat on Friday, and expecting the same of us; making contributions to Boy's Town, and annual pilgrimages to Graymore, Garrison, NY. St. Anthony was the number one saint, followed closely by The Little Flower. Then came FDR, and Joe DiMaggio.

From my father—I learned to love sports, politics and verbal sparring; from my mother, caring for others: members from both sides of the family went to her for help. And from both of them, the joy and pleasure of hosting family gatherings.

Those of us with parents who kept us in school, and who assumed that the teacher was always right, were rewarded with an excellent education in New Haven’s public schools.

Those who made it to high school found ourselves out of our religio-ethnic ghettos and into a larger religio-ethnic mosaic, Hillhouse High School. A small segment of the 4,000 students were in the pre-college program. Social and even academic life was tuned to that religio-ethnic mix. There were Irish, Jewish, Italian fraternities and sororities, as well as WASP and a Negro fraternity and sorority. It was unheard of for a person of one religio-ethnic group to be pledged to a fraternity or sorority of a different religio-ethnic gap. Indeed, even dating was narrowly restricted.
The school faculty was outstanding with a regional if not national reputation (Yale Alumni Magazine, November/December, 2009, p 38:"Many [Yale] faculty sent their children to public school, and the academic standards of New Haven's Hillhouse High School were equal to those of the best prep schools.). So it was no surprise that fifteen members of my class received scholarships to Yale, and a dozen more to Wesleyan, Harvard, and other East Coast colleges.

To Yale: 4 Irish, 4 Italian, 5 Jews, and 2 WASPS.

My first year at Yale was something of a struggle between Yale and the street corner gang I had grown up with and never fully broken free from. Some of you may have read all or parts of Wm Foote Whyte’s classic *Street Corner Society*. When I first read it, I felt it was New Haven and not Boston that Whyte had studied.

The Thomas More Chapel at Yale had opened in 1938, and I recall visiting it then with our Gregorian Choir; we met the chaplain, Fr. T. L. Riggs very briefly. He was a Yale graduate, and the son of the President of Riggs National Bank of Washington DC. As a freshman living at home, I did not visit the chapel very often.

I was fortunate to be drafted into the navy when I turned 18 in the middle of my freshman year. I learned something about Jesuit teaching during my two years in the Navy. I was a signalman aboard a Destroyer Escort during the last months of the war. The second in command of the signal crew was an Irish young man from Boston named F. F liked to tell me about what he had learned from the Jesuits in High School. On one occasion, we were anchored near Oran, Algeria, and F came back from shore leave looking like he had had a wild time on the town. He said he needed to get to confession before we set off for our return to the US. I asked what happened. He said he had gotten drunk with a couple of other petty officers and then they all went to a Bordello. So he needed to confess his sin of getting drunk. What about the sex I asked? F replied that was not a sin because he had lost control of his will by getting drunk, so the only sin was getting drunk. He explained that you had to know an act was a sin and have willed to do it. I was chagrined: I had taken the pledge at confirmation not to drink until I was 21. I still had a year to go.

The return to Yale after the war was a much more satisfying experience. It was fun academically and socially. I majored in Latin American Studies, and was active in El Centro Espanol, meeting Latin American leaders, political and artistic guests regularly coming to campus. For me the Centro became a training ground for leadership, with consequences I never imagined at the time. And I went to occasional lectures at the Thomas More Center.
During my junior year I took a course in Ethics from Prof. Brand Blanshard. If any of
you have read *God and Man at Yale*, you will know that Prof. Blanshard was one of the
professors Bill Buckley found fault with. I did not. I just felt he made me more aware of Jesus’
teachings (especially Matthew 25) and the gap between what we said we believed and how we
acted. I wrote my term paper on Leo XIII and Catholic Social Teachings—a C+. Superficial—
but a first step.

As with so many veterans I graduated in Mid-year, and by a series of unexpected events,
I found myself teaching Spanish at an elite New England Prep School, The Loomis School, in
Windsor, Ct. – providing me an unusual exposure to a live version of the Protestant Ethic—at
least that is how I came to see it.

Shortly after my arrival, the Unitarian headmaster asked me: was there a place for him in
my Catholic heaven? Yes, there were special little rooms set aside for good people regardless of
what they believed, and a small closet for Unitarians. He laughed heartily and I knew I would
like the place. It is hard to imagine a better place to learn about the art of teaching-- and to test
one’s commitment to the Catholic Church. I went on a trial basis, and stayed for five and a half
years, teaching Spanish, and for the last three years coaching the wrestling team.

I not only went to Mass on Sunday morning in town, but to Loomis Chapel Sunday
afternoon where I learned to sing the great hymns (with a Unitarian touch), now part of our own
hymnals without the Unitarian touch, and to hear hundreds of sermons from an array of
Protestant ministers who came from all over New England and the Mid-Atlantic. Many of them
were quite challenging, and more substantive than the sermons heard in the morning.

Teaching: the norms and values all supported good teaching; but no one attempted to
instill a specific formula for good teaching. You were expected to know your subject, to be able
to communicate that knowledge to the students, to care about the students, and to be available to
them for help outside the classroom, at least three evenings a week.

Loomis, like most prep schools, fostered the spirit of a close-knit community; it was my
first real experience consciously living in a community built on Protestant principles of self and
social responsibility. Living in the dorm– dining with students at lunch and several evenings a
week all helped foster this sense of community.

Faculty and spouses often gathered in small groups for post-dinner coffee and
conversation. Loomis provided a stimulating intellectual environment–a kind of informal
graduate education. There was much curiosity about Catholicism-- and much concern about the
hierarchical, authoritarian Church structure. Fr. Feeney and his "no salvation outside the Catholic
Church" had just run its course in nearby Massachusetts; my colleagues regularly commented on
the problems Protestant missionaries encountered in Latin America; Spain was an example of a country controlled by the Church with few rights for other religions. They would remind me that Catholics want their rights here, but don't provide them to minority religions when they are in control.

On the other side of the conversations were Thomas Merton and *The Seven Story Mountain*–GK Chesterton, Jacques Maritain. Etienne Gilson; this was the age of the *Commonweal* Catholic, a positive time of growth and pride in Church. There were no big theological arguments to split us, at least none I was aware of; just pride that we had proven our ability to be 100% American and Catholic!

Also helpful to life at Loomis was our marriage in June 1950, with the entire Loomis faculty in attendance. Lorraine and I had prepared a marriage missal with English and Latin, sung by a high school classmate who had just been ordained. The faculty was impressed, and truth be told, many friends and relatives were finally introduced to the missal. We became Commonweal subscribers in 1952, and still are.

We faculty were expected to entertain students who lived on the corridor: this custom led to our having students to dinner at least once a semester, which began at Michigan State, continued at Notre Dame, through to our last active teaching semester at the University of Connecticut in 1982.

The Loomis experience became the model for teaching for me; I tried to implement the idea of small classes, intensive interaction, lots of paper work and feedback in my future endeavors at the university level, especially in my role as department chair at Notre Dame and Connecticut.

Another impressive aspect of Loomis life: the student council actually helped govern the school; I tried to build this idea into all departments in which I served. From the Loomis experience I came to appreciate how personal autonomy properly understood included commitment to the community. Loomis to me exemplified deTocqueville’s New England community.

The School also encouraged faculty to earn advanced degrees, so I spent four summers earning a Masters at the Univ. of Wisconsin. With a Master’s degree in Hispanic Studies from Wisconsin–and a thesis on “The Political Philosophy of the Mexican Revolution as Seen through Selected Readings”, I moved on to accept a research assistantship from Michigan State University to work on the US-Mexico Border with Professors Charles P. Loomis and Bill Form. As with so many other moves, this could not have been accomplished without Lorraine's support.
I was fascinated with the political and economic turmoil taking place within and across the El Paso--C. Juarez border, so Bill encouraged me to study the political and economic elites of these two border cities. Besides introducing me to theory and research methods, Bill led me to the literature then emerging about community power structures. In all, from 1954-1970 I spent 16 years doing research on the US-Mexico border, publishing one book about the two cities, several journal articles, and introducing a number of students to border research. During that time my interest moved slowly to religion on and across the border, in part trying to understand the growth of the Partido Accion National (PAN) party in Mexico, loaded with Catholic activists, some of whom I found to be very progressive.

Graduate studies: religion was a regular topic for conversation among graduate students at MSU: simply because of two very active members of the Church of Latter Day Saints. I was the only “practicing” Catholic, so I received more than a fair share of their attention. In the long run, the relationships became relaxed and slowly transformed into lifelong friendships.

If there was a soc. of religion course, I was not aware of it. However, there were the writings of Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, Karl Marx, Georg Simmel et al, to provide more than enough intellectual food, and I soon became deeply influenced by Weber's works, especially on power, authority, bureaucracy and the rationalization of social life.

In 1957 I received a tenure track appointment at MSU. I finished my dissertation, and began to co-author articles and do more research on the influentials in several border cities. In the spring of 1959, Dr. Julian Samora (then an Asst Professor, and the only other known active Catholic in the Sociology Dept.) and I received job offers from Notre Dame; how that came about is a story beyond this evening's telling. Fr. Hesburgh had made it known that he wanted to expand and strengthen the social science programs, and Julian and I were to be the first of many new appointments in sociology.

For the first time, religion became a factor in my academic decision-making. Bill Form, my mentor and now very close friend, who prided himself on his Waldensian heritage and our many discussions about religion, worried about what such a move would mean to my career; but he never opposed it. Milt Rokeach, on the other hand, creator of the D 10 Dogmatism scale, with whom I played handball regularly, warned that a move to ND would be a dead-end move for me. Prof. Rokeach seemed to know more about the First Vatican Council than I did, and could see nothing good coming from a second Council. However, I felt challenged by their negative evaluation of Notre Dame and Catholic intellectual life in general, so after much discussion with Lorraine we decided to take the plunge and move to South Bend. It also bothered me that at MSU, as at so many big state universities, faculty were paid to teach, but promoted and tenured...
on the basis of research and publications. By contrast, ND offered smaller classes, and what seemed like a more reasonable expectation regarding publications.

*The Notre Dame years – 1959-71*

ND was a great experience in teaching, research, department development, development of a graduate program, and not least the accomplishment of having more than 25 undergraduates go on to earn PhDs in sociology from Berkeley, Yale, Michigan, Wisconsin, Michigan State, Duke, etc.

The timing could not have been better: Fr. Hesburgh was eager to support a strong sociology program; Pope John XXIII surprised us with his call to open the windows of the Church to let in some fresh air in the form of Vatican Council II; Fr. Ted became an important member of the Civil Rights Commission, and helped us expand our research and teaching efforts not only in the Southwest and on the Mexican border, but throughout Latin America.

My interest in community was gradually extending out from family to the importance of voluntary associations in civil life, and the way people related to their larger communities and to who controlled community decision-making. Weber's ideas about authority, power, religion and the rationalization of life kept weaving themselves in and out of my work...

My interest in the social teachings of the Catholic Church found fertile ground at ND. ND enabled me to foster that interest, especially as I became more and more involved in research and writings on the family, ethnicity, and the demographic revolution sweeping Latin America.

Encouraged by a priest whose presence was hardly noticed on campus, I formed a national voluntary association called the Catholic Committee on Population and Government Policy.

The Committee had two big moments:

1. In May 1966 I went to Washington to appear before the Clark-Tidings Senatorial Committee to speak in support of a Bill that would permit public financing of family planning facilities. In the previous summer of 1965 Fr. Dexter Hanley of Georgetown Law School had set forth the conditions under which such financing would be acceptable in a pluralistic society. Some 517 Catholics across the country, academic, medical doctors, attorneys, supported this legislation on the grounds spelled out by Fr. Hanley, who also appeared that day in support of the Bill. Catholics could support it as long as all methods of birth control were offered, and
there were no threats of coercion. The Bill passed and became law in November 1966."

(2) From 1963 to 1968 ND had its own Committee on Population and Responsible Parenthood, and we worked closely with members of the Papal Commission, especially the Crowleys, Fr. Bernard Haring, and several others. In 1965 we sent our own findings to Rome and the Papal Commission, and in lectures around the country we explained why we supported a change in the Church’s traditional teaching on birth control. When Pope Paul VI published Humanae Vitae in July 1968, the C. o Pop and Govt Policy issued a strong protest, and supported the theologians in the US who had also dissented.

As I look back on my ND years, I find that my path to the sociology of religion began with my personal commitment to the social teachings of the Catholic Church, and gradually expanded as Vatican Council II unfolded. For example, a Symposium at Notre Dame led to the book Religion, Revolution, and Reform: New Forces for Change in Latin America (1964).

In 1965 bishop Victor Reid in Oklahoma asked if I would do a study of what Catholics in Oklahoma believed about their religion, not just what he hoped they might believe. In my own mind, that was the actual beginning of my career as a sociologist of religion. With Jim Davidson, and Joe Schlangen, both first year graduate students with no other plans for the summer, we constructed research instruments that compared Catholic and Protestant beliefs and practices, out of which came several articles, both popular and scholarly. Also, from 1966-70, we published our studies on the CFM (Christian Family Movement) as a social movement under stress. Looking back, I see that during this period I was mixing the scholarly role of sociologist with the activist role of social critic and supporter of the Church’s social teachings as I then understood them, and critic for change on the birth control issue.

ND was an extraordinary experience of blending family, ethnicity, religion, autonomy and community. A number of pull factors led me to leave ND in 1971— not least was the rise in racial-ethnic tensions in Connecticut, which I became aware of through family visits. I felt we could do something at the University of Connecticut to reduce tensions through good applied research.

There was also the strong desire to have our children live closer to and interact with our families, almost all of whom still lived within a few miles of New Haven.

My years at Connecticut were productive in several ways, but I will mention here only my presidential address at the 1980 meeting of the SSSR; it was titled "Family and Religion: Exploring a Changing Relationship." This led to an invitation to return to Notre Dame to direct a summer seminar on Families and Religions in American Society. With a generous grant from the ND Sociology Dept. we were able to bring to ND eight scholars whose papers became part of the book Joanne Aldous and I edited, *Families and Religions: Conflict and Change in Modern Society* (1983). The book helped initiate a broad range of research, publications, and policy discussions.

In this last section, I want to turn to our research and writing on American Catholics. It all started in 1987 when Tom Fox and Bill McSweeney of the National Catholic Reporter asked me to carry out a survey of American Catholics which would help the bishops and Pope John Paul II have a better understanding of the thinking of the laity on the eve of the Pope's second visit to the US in September of that year. NCR would cover all costs. I wanted a team to work with: first, I asked Dean Hoge of Catholic University. In 1986 he had found office space for Lorraine in Marist Hall on campus to enable her to move the offices of the three sociology assns that she was then managing to DC; so I knew the Life Cycle Institute had the facilities and Dean Hoge the intellectual and technical know-how, plus a work ethic that would insure getting things done on time.

Then I invited Prof. Ruth Wallace, a graduate student at ND in 1962-3, who was in 1987 a Prof. at George Washington University, and helpful to me in so many ways in my move from UConn to the American Sociological Association; then I asked Jim Davidson to join the team; by now he had established himself as a major presence at Purdue in the study of religion. -- Not bad choices in retrospect: all are Luzbetak award winners.

There are many important findings from our four books on American Catholics—I want to focus on just one here: the age cohort or generation variable. In the first volume (1989) we used simple age group analysis, (18-34, 35-54, 55-64). It seemed to provide some important comparisons across age groups, and satisfied our needs.

By the time we began the second book in 1993, Jim Davidson had worked out a central organizing principle around the experience of Vatican II: he identified three age cohorts: Pre-Vatican II Catholics were those born 1940 or earlier; Vatican II Catholics were those born 1941-60, and Post-Vatican II Catholics those born 1961 and later. Age cohort analysis is built around the idea that people are born in specific historical periods, with events that characterize and give
meaning and even a certain culture to that period. Thus, age cohort analysis has become a key contribution to how we talk about American Catholics.

I need to say a word here about Dean Hoge as a significant other—He not only was a vital member of our team, he encouraged me to remain active. After my retirement from the ASA in 1991 he insisted on providing me an office with access to all LCI facilities and benefits. He was an enthusiastic supporter of the several major projects I undertook between 1991 and his death last year. I note two examples of Dean’s support here:

1. The book, *The Catholic Experience of Small Christian Communities* (2000), with Bernard Lee et al. I felt then and still do that this movement is one of the most positive movements among the laity in the Church today, not only nationally, but also internationally. The rediscovery of the small community has become an other way of being Church for millions of Catholics, and our book provides insights into its diverse manifestations.

2. Dean’s support was also crucial to our research and book *Voices of the Faithful*, which I did with Fr. Tony Pogorelc. Among our findings: VOTF members were twice as likely as non-VOTF Catholics to have Catholic parochial, high school, and college education, and twice as likely to have graduate and professional education, higher income and to be active community members. They were and are the lectors at Mass, the Eucharistic ministers, the CCD leaders; one in 3 men was members of the Knights of Columbus.

I can imagine the bishops who back in 1884 had created the Catholic school and college system looking down from their heavenly heights, saying: See-- we said if we build the system they will come and will blossom into devoted Church members and contributors to society.

But before our study was published, VOTF had been branded as dissident, angry Catholics threatening the life of the Church, because they dared to believe that they had a right to work to help change the governance structure of the Church. Three years earlier, these same Catholics were an integral part of the core of diocesan and parish leadership. Proving again the sociological principle that when things are perceived to be real, they are real in their consequences.

I close by relating back to my three readings: the recognition that life is about more than self-actualization, about the importance of community, and about the influence of significant others, reference groups and reference individuals, and of the particular times we lived in on our sociological journey. My story reflects the influence of being born Italian-American Catholic, in a very religio-ethnic-oriented city, with very religious parents, with a great public school system.
that prepared those who were willing to work, or challenged to by parents and teachers; and then to enjoy the benefits of a Yale education, followed by the unusual experience of a New England Prep School; degrees from Wisconsin and Michigan State. And through various stages of my life, the influence of a priest, Fr. Ralph Kelly; of an academic mentor-- Bill Form; of Fr. Hesburgh, of ND; learning how to balance faith commitment with sociology and social activism.

But this journey over the past 59 years would have been very different without the love, caring and support of my most significant other, Lorraine. It began with her typing my senior undergraduate essay; and then a marriage where she discovered that she had become instant den mother to some dozen prep school boys who lived just outside our apt on the third floor of Taylor Hall; helping me develop my wrestling coaching skills; ---who left the comfort of Loomis to go to live on the Mexican border on a research assistant's monthly check; ; who acted as if she believed me when I said it was the large family that was the happy family, who prepared fabulous Italian dinners for thousands of students and hundreds of faculty and friends, who agreed to help me straighten out the books of the Society for the Study of Religion, and ended up managing it and two other academic associations; and who continues to hope that I will one day learn to dance the waltz..

The closing prayer from our Wedding Missal was from the Old Testament: “May the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob are with you. May God fulfill his blessing in you so that you may see your children's children even to the third and fourth generation.” I don't recall meditating on that prayer that day. But indeed, it has come to pass. And we are very grateful. Thank you for letting me reflect on my journey.