



Catholicism at a Crossroads: The Present and Future of America's Largest Church

by Maureen K. Day, James C. Cavendish, Paul M. Perl, Michele Dillon, and Mary L. Gautier, with William V. D'Antonio, New York: New York University Press, 2025, 320 pp, US\$99.00 (hb), US\$35.00 (pb), ISBN 9781479832170 (hb), ISBN 9781479832187 (pb), ISBN 9781479832217 (library eb), ISBN 9781479832194 (consumer eb)

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BOOK REVIEW

Catholicism at a Crossroads: The Present and Future of America's Largest Church, by Maureen K. Day, James C. Cavendish, Paul M. Perl, Michele Dillon, and Mary L. Gautier, with William V. D'Antonio, New York: New York University Press, 2025, 320 pp, US\$99.00 (hb), US\$35.00 (pb), ISBN 9781479832170 (hb), ISBN 9781479832187 (pb), ISBN 9781479832217 (library eb), ISBN 9781479832194 (consumer eb)

Catholicism at a Crossroads: The Present and Future of America's Largest Church is the latest iteration in a series of studies of Catholics in America since the 1980s. This has involved six cross-sectional surveys, "collectively known as the American Catholic Laity Surveys (ACLS)", conducted in 1987, 1993, 1999, 2005, 2011 and, most recently, 2017 (3). Each survey in the series been a collaborative work of scholarship and led to a co-authored book (and sometimes other publications). The most recent survey and accompanying book continues this tradition. Taken together, this scholarly endeavour has developed a wide-ranging picture of the evolving Catholic landscape in America that may be unrivalled in scope and detail, in terms of survey-based research on Catholics in other countries. The broad themes and research framework of the ACLS informed the survey of Catholics in Britain that Stephen Bullivant and I undertook in 2019 (Clements and Bullivant 2022).

In its detailed sociological attention to the lives and faith of Catholics and thoughtful consideration of a wide range of themes and debates, *Catholicism at a Crossroads* shows considerable continuity with its predecessors in terms of key areas of focus: the increasing internal diversity of the Catholic population—generational, ethnic and racial, geographical—and how this affects religious beliefs, belonging, and behaviour; connecting developments at parish, national, and global levels of the Catholic Church and linking these with key papal initiatives, past and present; placing change and continuity in the lives of Catholics and their parishes within wider shifts in American society and politics. As before, the book also provides granular assessment of the most recent survey on its own, incorporates it into analyses of trends across the ACLS, and supplements this with historical and recent data drawn from general survey series, opinion polls, and academic studies. This continuity is evident across five substantive thematic chapters (dealing with church, authority, race, citizenship, and love) and one chapter focusing on explicating noteworthy trends across the ACLS (or, sometimes, comparisons of the bookend surveys of 1987 and 2017).

Where the book provides a new and welcome feature within its scope and analysis is in the consideration of findings from interviews with nearly 60 Catholics working in various roles within the Catholic Church and in institutions and groups in civil society. Consideration of the participants' experiences, views, and reflections features in all of the main chapters and this helps to contextualise and elucidate findings from the survey data and from the attention to shifts and developments in the Catholic Church at different levels. However, at times, the text paraphrases in summary format what each interviewee has just stated and the kinds of recommendations offered seem to be quite broad-brush. The lack of concrete steps might disappoint those engaged in debates about reforming aspects of the Catholic Church and how to repair the disconnect between the clerical hierarchy, parishes, and the laity.

Across the thematic chapters, there is a wealth of interesting data and careful interpretation, with noteworthy discussions of patterns of family structure in Catholic households, the declining

role of Catholic education institutions at all levels, and changing sexual identities. Also emphasised and connected well to the survey data and issues within the Catholic Church is the role of the parish (its leadership, organisation, and associational activity) in the lives of Catholics. As the authors note: “The parish is the nexus between the institution of Catholicism and everyday believers. [...] In short, the parish experience can make or break Catholics’ relationship to their faith, to religion, and to God.” (232) This aspect is enriched by the views and experiences of parish life of ordinary Catholics and of the interviewees.

Given the re-election of Donald Trump to the US presidency, one of the book’s most pertinent discussions comes in the chapter on citizenship, with an extended section on polarisation in American politics and what the Catholic Church and its members can offer to the task of engaging and reconciling deeply entrenched partisan and ideological groups in wider society. Although, inevitably, the survey data on political topics from 2017 can seem a little outdated when discussing political and ideological polarisation in the context of Joe Biden and the Democrats departing from, and Trump and the Republicans returning to, the presidency in early 2025. But use is also made of more recent data on voting and issue preferences from other sources.

Beyond the broad themes and rich mining of the survey data, the book—both the authors and many of the interviewees—conveys something of a sense of urgency for the Catholic Church and its community in the US. This is encapsulated well in the sense of the Church being at a ‘crossroads’, facing different paths to take. Core areas of debate and dispute and approaches to reform are reflected on in the final chapter.

Overall, this is a rich and informative analysis of the sociological structures and wider situation of Catholics in American society, accessibly written and thoughtful in its consideration of the findings and their relevance for internal debates in the Catholic Church. Readers will find much to learn about change and continuity in Catholics’ religious belonging, behaviour, and believing and how these connect to issues of gender, sexuality and equality, and core political debates. Scholars of religion in American politics and society and those studying the Catholic Church in other countries can earnestly hope that a seventh iteration of the ACLS is planned, to continue its tradition of insightful and collaborative scholarship into the lives of Catholics.



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