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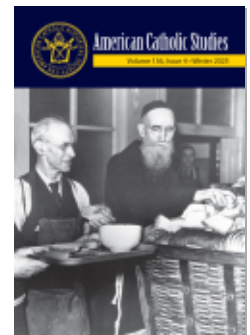
*Catholicism at a Crossroads: The Present and Future of  
America's Largest Church* by Maureen K. Day, et al.  
(review)

Robert Aaron Wessman

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economic, social, and cultural capital—function for *and* against white interests (19). For instance, the case study in chapter 3 illustrates how economic capital, gained from the enslavement of Black Catholics in the South, helped to support institutions of higher education in the North. These institutions actively recruited and educated the sons of slave owners and then taught them Catholic theology that supported slaveholding. At the same time, the author, as a theologian, seeks to bring *spiritual* capital to the forefront to show how it can be employed to resist white supremacy. While spiritual capital has often been withheld or manipulated, as was the case for St. James the Greater, it has also sustained a person or group in the face of oppression. This sustaining grace facilitates the imagination of “otherwise possibilities”—possibilities beyond the confines of white supremacy, which affirm the indwelling grace of God in human beings (28).

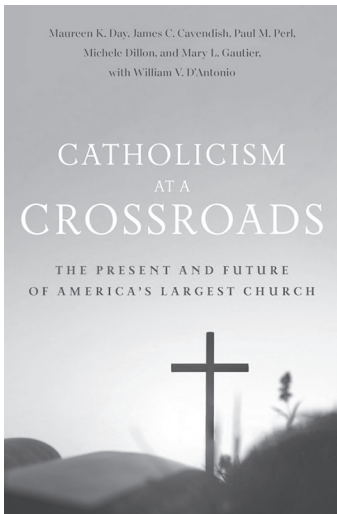
While the Catholic Church has both protected and betrayed certain racialized groups, Hill Fletcher does not propose we write off the institution altogether. Instead, she proposes conceptualizing institutions as “sites of agonistic practice”; that is, as sites where groups of people “struggle together” and negotiate to find balance (170–171). The steadfast practices of faith, resistance, and solidarity sustained many of the individuals encountered in these case studies, and they demonstrate a more expansive vision of who or what comprises an institution (200).

This book, while largely speaking to people racialized as white, holds everyone accountable to the institutions that shape us. The final chapter reimagines the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius of Loyola for reckoning with questions the author poses throughout the book. She asks everyone, especially those in predominantly white institutions, to meditate on the capital we have inherited and to ask whose interests our capital benefits today. I recommend this book to the various stakeholders of our ecclesial and educational settings (students, educators, administrators, parishioners, and pastors). Knowing, analyzing, and sharing our histories is as important as ever if we are to transform our present-day realities.

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***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. 320pp. \$35.00.

What is happening in the Catholic Church in the United States today? For academics, church leaders, everyday Catholics, and the curious onlooker, this question is both of utmost importance—because Catholicism is the



largest denomination in the United States—and exceedingly difficult to answer—because doing so requires extensive data and painstaking analysis. It can be tempting, therefore, in the face of this important inquiry, to answer the question with mere speculation, or to admit ignorance due to perceived gaps in the research. With the newly released *Catholicism at a Crossroads: The Present and Future of America's Largest Church*, a rich, multifaceted, and data-centered answer is now available.

The book covers many of the most pressing themes defining American Catholicism today: civic and political engagement in a polarized milieu, the role of the laity and clergy, self-identified preferences of practicing

Catholics, and issues of race, authority, sexuality, and love. This research is augmented by coupling current, novel data with decades of statistics (going back to the 1980s) to provide one of the richest longitudinal studies ever available on the nature of Catholic life in America.

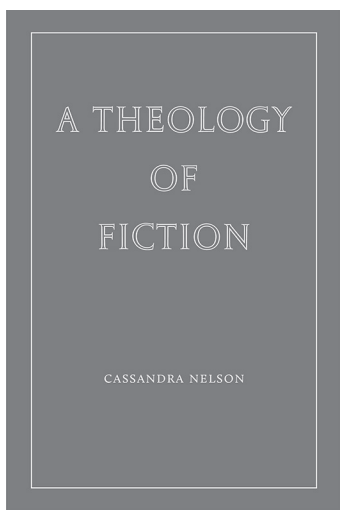
To supplement the extensive data and meaningful analyses, the book creatively weaves in commentary taken from exclusive interviews with knowledgeable church leaders and theologians. This method provides readers with a tapestry of cutting-edge quantitative research, blended with reflective, even spiritual, qualitative discourse.

One benefit of this research is that it complicates and even calls into question certain prevailing narratives that, in light of new data, do not fully capture the reality of Catholicism in the United States. This is witnessed in, among other themes, research that suggests that Catholics do, in fact, have a fairly rich understanding of, and belief in, the Eucharist, contrary to certain perspectives based on previously available data; even after a tumultuous few decades, including the clergy sexual abuse crisis, Catholics generally have positive attitudes toward the papacy, their bishops and priests, and parish leadership; and that, despite low numbers of Catholics who attend Mass regularly, the sacraments are seen by Catholics as essential to their relationship with God. Rather than not caring about the sacraments, Catholics are torn between family commitments or work schedules, which sometimes impede them from regularly practicing these aspects of the faith.

Another value of this study is that it is “evangelical” in nature. The authors are not content simply accepting what is, i.e., merely providing a description of contemporary American Catholicism. They are interested also in discussing what could be, i.e., how their findings could contribute to the revitalization of faith, and of life, in the church.

As a sociological analysis with supplemental spiritual commentary, mission-centered considerations, and theological reflections attempting to contextualize both, this book is essential material for libraries, both secular and ecclesial. Clergy and church leaders would do well by covering this book in organized study days. Any survey course on American Catholicism or evangelization and catechesis should include this text. Finally, theologians, especially those engaged in moral or systematic questions, would benefit from the text by considering the important themes the research raises and offering further commentary on theological topics visited within the book, which could only be covered in a seminal way due to the scope of the project. At a time when Catholic identity is both deeply rooted and under strain, *Catholicism at a Crossroads* provides a timely and credible roadmap for understanding—and revitalizing—America's largest church.

ROBERT AARON WESSMAN  
*Glenmary Home Missioners*



***A Theology of Fiction.*** By Cassandra Nelson. Menomonee Falls, WI: Wiseblood Books, 2025. 116pp. \$10.00.

This slim volume started life as an essay in *First Things*. It seeks to present its theology through the work of Sister Mariella Gable, a Benedictine sister who was a teacher, writer, critic, anthologist, and indefatigable supporter of Catholic literature in the middle decades of the twentieth century. She was also an influential mentor to Elizabeth (Betty) Wahl, a young and gifted writer who would go on to marry another young and gifted writer, J. F. Powers, very soon after Sister Mariella introduced them to each other in 1946.

I have hoped for some time that a scholar of American Catholic studies would look further into Sister Mariella's life and influence. Fellow Benedictine Sister Nancy Hynes published in 1996 *The Literature of Spiritual Values and Catholic Fiction*, a collection of Sister Mariella's essays on Catholic literature that includes an extended biographical introduction. *A Theology of Fiction* relies heavily (almost solely) on this volume as a source for Sister Mariella's life and work.

Cassandra Nelson presents with enthusiasm the theological ideas animating Sister Mariella's writing about literature. Most of these ideas will be familiar to those who have studied US Catholic literature and literary culture of the mid-twentieth century. The highest purpose