

# 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, 305pp.; \$35.00 (paperback), \$25.00 (ebook).

*Catholicism at a Crossroads* is the sixth in a series of volumes reporting the results of the American Catholic Laity Surveys. These surveys, which began in 1987, have shaped scholarly and practitioner understanding of American Catholicism over the decades. This latest volume continues in that vein while supplementing the survey results with insights from interviews with 58 Catholics who work in “important roles” (p. 3), including those employed by Catholic organizations or embedded in church hierarchies.

The authors have a two-fold purpose: first, to provide a robust analytical account of the data, organized around chapters on church, authority, race, citizenship, love, and trends; and second, to draw out the implications of the findings for people who are concerned for the future of the Catholic Church. Each chapter concludes with an “implications” section in which the authors comment on the possibility for renewal. For example, the chapter on trends tells the familiar story of declines in affiliation and attendance. It then reflects on “What, if anything, can be done to improve the odds that younger generations of Catholics engage more fully with and stay active in the church as adults?” (p. 223). An answer to such a question is, of course, complex, but the data demonstrate the importance of

familial socialization as well as attending a Catholic university.

The book's length allows the authors to thoroughly present and analyze survey findings. While the data are expertly handled, it was collected in 2017, making some insights feel outdated. The authors attempt to address this by referencing more recent surveys, such as those from Pew. Still, their dataset does not capture developments since the COVID-19 pandemic, the later years of Pope Francis's papacy, or the perspectives of Generation Z Catholics.

This is the first of the six volumes to include interview analysis, which brings a depth and nuance that are not available from purely quantitative results. The authors employ these data to excellent effect, opening the chapters with interview-based vignettes and using quotations throughout to illuminate the quantitative data. However, the interview data seem to skew toward Catholics who take moderate or liberal perspectives on church teachings and favor more radical institutional change, overlooking the views of traditionalist Catholics.

At the same time, the authors foreground the increasing ethnic diversity of American Catholicism. The percentage of Catholics identifying as White has fallen from 86% in 1987 to 56% in 2017; 35% of American Catholics now identify as Hispanic. The authors highlight important differences among White, Black, Hispanic, and “other” Catholics, including in socio-economic status, attitudes toward and engagement in parish life, political party affiliation, and views on polarizing socio-political issues. The chapter on race is enhanced by quotations from an interview with Maka Black Elk of the Lakota people, presenting often-overlooked perspectives. Indeed, interviewees quoted throughout this chapter emphasize the urgency of “decentering whiteness” in the Church, including

## 2 SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION

through engagement with Black Lives Matter. The authors acknowledge that such a project “will undoubtedly be met with some resistance,” which likely underestimates the degree of entrenched opposition to it (pp. 129–130).

The chapter on citizenship addresses political polarization within American Catholicism. It presents the intriguing finding that “low commitment” Catholics are more likely to put politics before faith, following either the Republican or Democratic line on issues, such as abortion, same-sex marriage, immigration, or the death penalty, while “high commitment” Catholics “are much more likely to defect from their party when the position conflicts with the teachings of their faith” (p. 162). In other words, Catholics who are more regularly engaged with their faith are better able to recognize and understand why Church teachings diverge from political positions and to live with tension between their religious and political commitments. So hopeful are the authors about high-commitment Catholics that in the conclusion, they argue that on a

nationwide level, “Catholicism has the potential to serve as a neutral space for dialogue and the healing of polarization” (p. 247).

While such a claim may be unduly idealistic, the authors also offer a range of suggestions for the renewal of parish life, as well as better societal engagement. For example, they argue that the Catholic Church itself should atone for its handling of the abuse crisis, as well as its role in the marginalization of minority ethnic groups. This involves not only apologizing but also providing space for memorialization and lament.

*Catholicism at a Crossroads* offers valuable insights into contemporary American Catholicism. It is accessible and essential reading for researchers and teachers in the sociology of American Catholicism, as well as practitioners who wish to shape the future of their Church.

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