

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, Mary L. Gautier, and William V. D'Antonio.
New York University Press, 2025. 320 pages. \$35.00 (paperback).

In 1987 the first American Catholic Laity Survey began what has now become a longitudinal study that catalogs American Catholic life as it is lived in and from the pews. This new book, *Catholicism at a Crossroads*, summarizes and analyzes the latest survey in this set, the 2017 American Catholic Laity Survey. The survey is integrated with qualitative interviews with American Catholic leaders from a range of political and pastoral settings. These Catholics include leaders such as Cardinal Cupich of Chicago and Bishop Flores of Brownsville, Texas, as well as Matthew Kelly of Dynamic Catholic and John Carr of Georgetown's Initiative on Catholic Social Thought. Both Linda Ruf of the JPPI Life Center and Kate McElwee of the Women's Ordination Conference were asked to weigh in on what this data means for ministry, for Catholics in public life, and for the future of the Catholic community in the US. Reflecting these two datasets, the book incorporates extensive block quotes from these Catholic leaders, complementing quantitative charts with qualitative insights into how Catholics are living and thinking. The result is an impressively comprehensive portrait of the current Catholic landscape in the US in six thematic chapters.

The first chapter, "Church," centers on the role of the official church in Catholic life; the authors focus on questions of beliefs, practices, and parish life. Readers will likely be unsurprised by decreased Mass attendance and diversity in the value placed on beliefs in "devotion to Mary" or having a "celibate male clergy." The authors give extended attention to parish life and the role of the priest. They point to how both the data and interviewees describe a need for priests to know their parishioners while improving their preaching skills. In their discussion of how interviewees interpret the data, the authors emphasize a call for "big tent Catholicism," meaning that diversity within Catholic practices is to be celebrated, according to the data.

The role of priests transitions the book into its second chapter, which discusses authority in Catholic life. Here, the authors offer a particularly helpful historical and cultural context for understanding attitudes toward official Church leadership (think: priests, bishops, popes) and their opinions. The standard narrative among many in Catholic studies is that the sex

abuse crisis made public in 2002 led to what we now see as a crisis in Catholics' trust of hierarchical leadership. Much to the authors' surprise, there is "little evidence that the sexual abuse scandal in and of itself produced . . . enduring effects on Catholics' deference toward the teaching authority of their leaders" (66). This kind of willingness to be surprised by their data points to the integrity of this book. They turn to historical social changes, like the rise of moral individualism in the 1960s, and suggest that the sexual abuse scandal has been "easy justification for ignoring authority," though not a cause of the reorientation.

The chapter "Race" opens with Pope Francis's "penitential pilgrimage" to Canada to ask forgiveness for the Church's role in the abuse of First Nations (and Native Americans in the US) at boarding schools. This opens the door for the authors to point out that the Catholic Church of the early twenty-first century is more racially diverse than ever, which is leading to tensions between racial/ethnic identities and Catholic identities but also to an increased need for training among Catholic ministers.

Chapter 4, "Citizenship," also raises identity questions, mostly about what it means to be an American citizen and a Catholic. Notably, Catholics are no more or less engaged in civic life than other Americans, but, the authors point out, Catholicism rests uneasily in the polarized political landscape where the two options are Republican or Democrat and neither allows for all of Catholic teaching. Here, the authors are at their most prescriptive but also their most astute. Rather than relying on the language of polarization, the authors propose that the language of "contestation" is a more useful way to understand American Catholic politics (153). Catholics, especially "high commitment Catholics" (Catholics who report regular Mass attendance and report being unlikely to leave Catholicism; 7), are leading with Catholic ideas and teaching—from both ends of the political spectrum. When there is a conflict, it is often over which Catholic values to prioritize, not whether Catholic teaching matters.

Where Catholics are far less likely to lead with Catholic teaching is on the questions in chapter 5, "Love." This chapter is about sexual ethics, families, and LGBTQ+ identities. The number of Catholics willing to say that you can be a good Catholic without adhering to teaching on these issues, especially, has been on a steady increase since the surveys began in 1987 and continues through the 2017 data (182). Readers who know a Catholic will recognize what the authors describe as the tension between Catholic teaching that demands traditional family life, sex as procreative, and heterosexuality and pastoral care for the Catholics in the pews (192).

The final chapter, "Trends," takes up what the authors report as the most common question they each receive in casual conversation about the data: "Why [is] Catholicism among young adults down?" (200). By comparing Catholic trends with those in Protestantism and by noting across historical changes, the authors find that the Catholic decline is not particularly exceptional. What appears distinctive, however, is the growth in "weakly-religious Catholics," people who are more likely to disaffiliate than previous generations (209). The cause, the authors postulate, is due to a decline in Catholic education across all levels (222).

In the conclusion, the authors explain what they mean by "crossroads" in the title *Catholicism at a Crossroads* to illustrate the intervention of their book. The metaphor of a community at a crossroads means that people have to move intentionally and creatively through it "in order to manifest the potential opportunity," while moving "haphazard[ly] . . . they are more likely to actualize the risk" (238). Catholicism, the authors suggest, is currently facing a crisis—but this crisis should be understood as Hannah Arendt described it: "A crisis becomes a disaster when people attempt to forgo thoughtful dialogue . . . and instead react with prefabricated answers" (238). The authors are confident that this moment calls for careful reflection and consideration of the situation. They observe that Catholics have changed a lot in thirty years, which indicates that the Church is in a period of transition.

This articulation of the moment of crisis points to the dual audience of this book. On the one hand, this is a scholarly longitudinal study of American Catholic life. But on the other, this is also a book written with an eye toward application—what do these data mean for Catholics in the US? Their second audience therefore is the practitioner: Catholic leaders or ordinary Catholics in the pew who sense their religious community to be at a crossroads. Readers uninterested in the pastoral applications of the data may skim certain paragraphs, but even so, most readers will walk away from this book with a nuanced understanding of Catholicism in the US in the first two decades of the twenty-first century.

I read this book against a backdrop of previous studies to further inform my ethnographic work on American Catholics. *Catholicism at a Crossroads*' contributions to the fields of American religion and Catholic studies are at least twofold. First, this work offers a new way of understanding Catholics in the US that does not rely on the American political framework of a polarized Left versus Right. Instead, the authors propose that what Catholics have is a "contestation" over Catholic priorities—to vote with Catholic sexual ethics, Catholic immigration ideals, or Catholic care for the environment is to be involved in a conflict of priorities. Second, this work answers important demographic questions about the relationship between Catholics and the hierarchy; the authority of priests, bishops, and other hierarchical leaders is in flux and has been for several generations of Catholics. The authors propose a theology of personalism to envision a future for Catholicism grounded in care for the community. In short, *Catholicism at a Crossroads* presents a portrait of American Catholicism rooted not in seminaries or the Vatican but in the pews.

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