



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: New York University Press, 2025. 320 pp. \$35.00, ISBN-13: 9781479832187 (paperback), \$99.00, ISBN-13: 9781479832170 (hardcover)

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The sociological study of religion and religious change can be approached in two distinct ways. One focuses on the growth or decline in the number of religious people (however defined), along with the factors shaping those shifts. The other examines how the people who remain within a specific tradition change over time. This book is a clear example of the latter. A single sentence captures its central theme: “In many ways Catholics today do not live, think, act, or look like Catholics did thirty years ago.” From the introduction onward, this line sets the tone. The authors are less concerned with whether the number of American Catholics has risen or fallen—though relevant figures are provided—than with tracing how Catholics have evolved over the past three decades. The changes they document are substantial. Catholics today show far greater diversity in their attitudes toward authority, their racial and ethnic composition, and their moral views. The book demonstrates that religions change not only because people join or leave them but also because those who remain undergo significant transformation along many dimensions.

This volume is the sixth in a series presenting descriptive findings from the American Catholic Laity Surveys (ACLS), conducted in 1987, 1993, 1999, 2005, 2011, and 2017. The authors place these survey data in dialogue with information, quotations, and interpretive insights drawn from 58 qualitative interviews with Catholics who hold influential roles in the Church or in Catholic organizations. Additional comparisons with other data sources further enrich the analysis, generating a comprehensive portrait of an evolving Catholic landscape.

The interplay of methods results in a dense yet accessible book. Survey findings, interview excerpts, theoretical reflections, and references to everyday experience combine to create a vivid picture of American Catholicism. Particularly engaging are the moments when Church personnel comment directly on survey data, as well as the short narratives that open each chapter.

The book is organized into six thematic chapters, framed by an introduction and conclusion. The introduction outlines the study's methods, defines key terms, and provides essential demographic background on American Catholicism—its population size, age structure, generational dynamics, geographical distribution, educational patterns, racial and ethnic diversity, and income levels. Chapter 1 examines Catholics' relationship with the Church, focusing on what respondents consider essential to Catholic identity, their mixed experiences with parish life, and the growing acceptance of disagreeing with Church teaching while still viewing oneself as a committed Catholic. The chapter also highlights the marked contrast between strong approval of Pope Francis and the far more muted approval of US bishops. Chapter 2 explores the Church's diminishing moral authority amid rising individualism, shifting cultural norms around sexuality, and the long shadow of the abuse scandals. It offers a nuanced account of how institutional credibility has changed and how individual moral judgment increasingly replaces clerical instruction. Chapter 3 addresses questions of race and ethnicity. It traces how American Catholics have confronted issues of identity and diversity, emphasizing the revitalizing role of immigration. The authors argue that recent decades have diversified US Catholicism—

culturally, linguistically, and ethnically—more than any previous period in its history. Chapter 4 turns to citizenship, civic engagement, and political representation, with particular attention to polarization. The main reflection is that polarization undermines both Catholic communal life and the broader democratic fabric of the United States. Chapter 5 explores family life, sexuality, and love, including topics such as birth control, remarriage, same-sex relationships, singlehood, and cohabitation. The chapter clearly illustrates a widening perception that individuals—rather than Church leaders—are the rightful authorities on matters of sexual morality. The final chapter shifts focus to patterns of religious commitment, the effects of Catholic education on adult religiosity, and gender differences in involvement and attitudes toward women ordination. By also drawing heavily on national surveys such as Pew, Gallup, and the General Social Survey, the chapter shows how factors such as race and ethnicity shape religious belief and practice, while also offering comparisons with other religious traditions.

Taken together, the chapters provide what is likely the most comprehensive portrait of American Catholicism currently available, while also suggesting probable future developments. The book speaks to two main audiences. First, it addresses Catholics themselves. Whether laypeople, clergy, theologians, or educators, readers will encounter an invitation to reflect on the state of Catholic life in the United States—its history, present tensions, and possible futures. Anyone seeking a clear, detailed, and evocative account of the contemporary Catholic landscape will find much to appreciate. The book also holds considerable value for scholars. Beyond those who specialize in American Catholicism, it is unusual to encounter a single study offering such a rich, data-driven depiction of one religious tradition. Some scholars may wish the authors had more explicitly situated American Catholicism—and its evolution—within broader academic debates on religious change. Nonetheless, the wealth of material presented will encourage future work that places these findings in larger theoretical and comparative contexts.