

Book Review

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Day, M. K., Cavendish, J. C., Perl, P. M., Dillon, M., Gautier, M. L., & D'Antonio, W. V. (2025). *Catholicism at a Crossroads: The Present and Future of America's Largest Church*. New York University Press. Pp. 320. ISBN: 9781479832170 (hardback), 978147983218 (paperback).

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At a time when perceptions of American Catholics' feelings about such neuralgic topics as authority, race, and citizenship are more often shaped by the opinions of podcast personalities than by social scientific research, *Catholicism at a Crossroads* provides a helpful grounding in reality. The sixth book in a series of studies on American Catholicism begun by William D'Antonio, this snapshot into the largest religious denomination in the United States can help scholars, students, and pastoral leaders move beyond a social-media mapping of the dilemmas and opportunities facing the American Catholic Church.

As with prior entries in the D'Antonio series, *Catholicism at a Crossroads* presents data collected from a national survey of Catholic attitudes and behavior, this one conducted in 2017. While much has changed in both the United States and in Catholicism over the last eight years, because these surveys have been conducted every six years since 1987, Day and her co-authors are able to make valuable diachronic comparisons. For example, they show that two-thirds of American Catholics now have “no lived experience of the pre-Vatican II church or of the European immigrant enclaves” that long shaped American Catholicism, and that the Covid-19 pandemic has had a more significant impact on declining mass attendance than the clergy sex abuse scandals (p. 13).

Catholicism at a Crossroads not only continues the kind of analysis found in earlier volumes of the D'Antonio series, it also makes a significant methodological advance by supplementing this survey data with interviews of 58 Catholic leaders. Because the authors purposively selected interviewees with an eye for racial, gender, doctrinal, and generational diversity, the varied—and sometimes conflictual—lifeworld of American Catholicism emerges in a novel way. Their refusal to diminish the internal tensions present within the American Catholic church enriches their analysis by providing a glimpse into the “contested Catholicism” that currently exists in the Catholic public sphere (p. 152).

This mixed-methods approach takes place over six substantive chapters that take up, in turn, themes of church, authority, race, citizenship, love, and future trends. Two of the

many interesting findings presented in these chapters stand out as particularly noteworthy. First, the authors challenge the conclusions of a 2019 Pew study which showed that only one-third of Catholics concurred with current Catholic teaching on the Eucharist. Through the use of reworded survey questions, Day and her coauthors argue that they are able to more accurately represent Catholic Eucharistic understanding. This rephrasing leads them to conclude, contrary to the Pew study, that in fact “only 4 percent of Catholics knowingly deny Catholicism’s position on the true presence of Christ in the Eucharist” (p. 50).


Second, perhaps the book’s most significant finding is that, although political alignment remains generally more predictive of Catholics’ opinions than religious teachings, the level of commitment individuals show to Catholicism has a major effect on their capacity to “view an issue from a faith perspective rather than from a partisan perspective” (p. 161). The authors arrive at this conclusion by constructing a composite variable that distinguishes between high-, moderate-, and low-commitment Catholics based on frequency of mass attendance, personal importance of Catholicism, and likelihood of remaining in the Catholic church.

This differentiation proves particularly illuminating in the chapter on citizenship. There, Day and her coauthors demonstrate that highly committed Catholics in each party “experience a ‘centering’ effect from their religion” on such divisive issues as the death penalty and abortion (p. 155). While only 20 percent of Catholics fall into the high-commitment category, these findings show that commitment (rather than identification) is a critical factor in considering the ability of religions to create “areas of consensus” in a time of heightened political polarization (p. 163). Given the depth of insight this composite variable allows, readers may find it surprising to see it used so sparingly throughout the book. The chapters dealing with authority, race, and love, for example, would have benefited from similar analyses.

Nevertheless, *Catholicism at a Crossroads* offers insights for multiple audiences. Clergy and lay leaders will find the book a useful guide for understanding their own communities—indeed, there are moments when it reads like a pastoral handbook. Students and teachers will find it an effective and accessible volume capable of reframing popular perceptions of American Catholicism. And scholars will appreciate the book’s mixed methods approach, its attention to the contested nature of contemporary Catholicism, and its demonstration of a religious institution’s capacity to shape the opinions and attitudes of highly committed members.

For scholars and practitioners alike, this book provides essential empirical grounding for understanding American Catholicism’s current state and potential future. As such, *Catholicism at a Crossroads* offers the most comprehensive recent portrait of the U.S.’s largest religious denomination and deserves wide readership among all interested in the state of American religion.

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