

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 I. Gautier, with William v. D'Antonio. New York: New York University Press, 2025. 250pp. \$35.00 paper.

The authors of this book leave readers with a *reconsidered* research question at the very end of their volume: "Does U.S. Catholicism have the leadership, the focus, the tenacity, the cohesion, and the trust to discern what manifesting love and flourishing among its 73 million believers might look like? This is Catholicism's crossroads" (p. 250).

Although there are no definitive answers to this question, the research in this book presents the results of an impeccable, empirical study of internal Catholic attitudes toward the institutional Catholic Church in the USA, examined through a sociological lens. It provides evidence of the diverse concerns of Catholic leaders, activists, academics, and adherents regarding the Church's use of authority within the broader context of institutionalism and issues such as race, citizenship, and love.

Broadly speaking, this book presents salient research questions, credible hypotheses, as well as significant quantitative and qualitative evidence for important but not startling conclusions. In general, the authors prove that there is a loss of moral authority about teachings on sexual issues and clerical abuse; that people follow their own consciences rather than Church mandates on personal matters; and that bishops lack unity and priorities.

More specifically, however, Church involvement is characterized by both a sense of sharing and a sense of disappointment. Statistics proved that pastors often lacked the ability to deal with various issues, such as the marginalization of immigrants, Catholic values, and polarized political views. Catholics are not especially engaged in civic life, and problems with family life in the USA are legitimate concerns, as are growing conflicts about how to respond to them.

Realistically speaking, there are no definitive answers to any of these religious, political, or social quandaries. Maybe there is only the quest for proximate solutions to insolvable problems, as Reinhold Niebuhr, the eminent Christian ethicist, wrote in his seminal work *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* (1944). What the authors have done in this text, and do very well, is to synthesize their findings. They draw major implications from their research and suggest potential positive actions to impact spheres of Catholic leadership and education, as well as its dwindling institutional membership and Church attendance, lethargic and disengaged individual parishes, and growing political polarization.

The authors are justified in calling on the hierarchy to provide better priestly formation, to embrace unity and diversity, and to be transparent about civil challenges. Their data emphasize the need for US Catholics to meet and dialogue with groups typically stigmatized, especially those who have suffered due to same sex marriage, cohabitation, and divorce. Statistics also show that there is a need among the clergy to listen and learn from the laity, both the young and the other generations, and that lay adherents should make religion a part of family life, educate their children in the values of their religion, and lead by their own example.

There is no stone left unturned in this book, as its authors seek viable answers to the challenges facing the Catholic Church, but the researchers should consider an unexamined, humane

solution to the quandaries facing the Church. It is the institution of the Church that must embrace the crucial role of *healer*. Those who have been overlooked by the hierarchy and its responses to clerical sexual abuse or who have been silently stigmatized due to race, gender, or marital status deserve apologies, recognition, and meaningful outreach rather than simple offers of reparations to return to, or strengthen, their faith through a compassionate Catholicism.

Finally, the gap between researching, writing, peer review, and publication of this book has made it impossible for the authors to include empirical information on significant issues that would have made their study more valuable in the current US church–state climate. American Catholics currently are trying to process issues that are peripheral to the sociological lens of the researchers, including subjects such as: Catholic advocacy for and opposition to immigration; the impact of the death of Pope Francis and the election of the first American Pope Leo XIV; the shift of American Catholicism toward an ideology of conservatism and the Republican Party; the re-election of Donald Trump; and the imposition of artificial intelligence in education, business, and communications. Perhaps another volume is in order. Academia awaits.

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