

## BOOK REVIEWS

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### SISTERS: CATHOLIC NUNS AND THE MAKING OF AMERICA

JOHN J. FIALKA  
ST. MARTIN'S PRESS, 2003  
\$15.95, 384 pages

*Reviewed by Anthony J. Dosen, C.M.*

Fialka, a reporter for the *Wall Street Journal*, makes a big promise in the title of this book. Promising to provide a history of how Catholic “nuns” were integral to the making of America, the book, however, achieves a more modest goal, telling the story of the Sisters of Mercy in the United States. The story that is woven provides examples of the rise and fall of the Mercy sisters’ educational and healthcare works in the United States. Fialka posits the role of the Sisters of Mercy, and other sisters, as nurses in the Civil War provided the impetus for their acceptance by physicians—both Catholic and non-Catholic—in the post-Civil War era.

The story of the sisters also provides examples of the struggles that sisters endured, both internally and externally. The stories of how the sisters remained constant in the face of the anti-Catholic prejudice of the likes of the Ku Klux Klan and the Know-Nothing Party provide a bulk of the framework of the external prejudices. Fialka describes the sisters’ encounters with the rough and tumbling characters of the Old West, demonstrating how their goodness won the hearts of the more hardened characters of the era: cowboys, gold miners and even Billy the Kid.

The description of the internal struggles—those of the sisters’ communities with local bishops—proves much more interesting. Fialka describes the attempts of bishops to rein in the Sisters of Mercy by proscribing particular works, ignoring their canonical status, and attempting to place these sisters under their personal protection. Fialka also relates stories of individual bishops directly interfering in the election of leadership within the community. While Fialka focuses primarily upon the bishops’ shenanigans, parish priests were also found guilty of interference. Fialka also describes the healthy ways in which particular bishops and priests worked together in community with the Sisters of Mercy.

Missing from *Sisters* is a serious discussion of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton and the Sisters of Charity, the first American community of sisters. Similarly,

St. Katharine Drexel and the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament receive only minimal mention. Also, noticeably absent were the struggles of those communities of sisters that emigrated from Europe alongside others from their homelands. These sisters ministered to émigrés, providing for their health, education, and social welfare, all while crossing the cultural divide between the Old World and the New World along with those they served. It seems that one cannot understand the role of the sisters in building the United States without a serious conversation about the communities that were founded in the United States to serve particularly American needs and the sisters who came to the United States from other countries to be of service to their conationals.

Fialka's work suffers from three internal problems: (a) an imprecision about language, (b) a series of grammatical and textual errors, and (c) a loss of thematic focus.

Fialka makes use of terms, such as the Protestant orders, within the text. An examination of the context of this term proves that the author is attempting to describe the various denominations and sects within Protestantism, rather than movements within mainline Protestantism toward living a more evangelical life within the context of a celibate, or married, community. The point in developing the description is a fairly common assumption, namely that religious communities provide for contextual variations in how an individual lives out an evangelical life. The problem with the analogy is that those who are unfamiliar with Roman Catholic religious life or the history of Protestantism could be misled by the term Protestant orders.

Second, there are serious editorial problems within the text. For example, there is a description of the sisters' work in transforming "public education" in the United States. Certainly from the context, the author was attempting to speak to the issue of the development of Catholic education in the United States. Therefore, the word Fialka was looking for was either "private" or "Catholic" education. Much more frequent were small grammatical errors that should have been caught by editors prior to publication. These errors proved distracting and took away from the readability of the text. Sister's red pen would have worked overtime in correcting these "little errors."

Finally, Fialka loses focus toward the end of the text. The book moves from telling the story of the Sisters of Mercy to their development in the United States to their flowering and their diminishment in the post-Vatican II era. The text alludes to the issue of conservative communities such as the Nashville Dominicans providing a potential model for the renewal of religious life in the United States. Then the book moves into and ends with a discussion of women's ordination. The late and brief treatment of the women's

ordination issue is uncalled for, remains unrelated to the history in question, and overshadows the creative works of contemporary sisters faithful to their followers that Fialka was seeking to describe in the final chapters of the text. As such, *Sisters* is an incomplete history of women religious in the United States.

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## CHRIST THE LORD: OUT OF EGYPT

ANNE RICE

ALFRED A. KNOPE, 2005

\$25.95 (Hardcover), 336 pages

*Reviewed by Frank W. O'Linn*

Imagine a childhood in which you are gifted with supernatural power but are uncertain of your own past as you grow curious about your impending future. Welcome to the world of a 7-year-old Jesus Christ, the protagonist in Anne Rice's latest novel, *Christ the Lord: Out of Egypt*. Rice's book is an entertaining read and a valuable teaching tool grounded in research of early Church history and literature. Appropriate for middle school readers through adults, the novel invites readers to walk with Jesus as he discovers for himself his true nature and purpose in life.

This detailed narrative is a suitable introduction to Christology, or the study of the theology of Christ. At the heart of the novel, the first in a series planned by the author, is the mystery of Jesus' nature, that he is at once human and divine. It is important to stress that Rice's book is first and foremost a piece of historical fiction, not an attempt at revising history or the Gospels. It is an opportunity for readers to understand the theme of mystery. As opposed to the mystery stories with which students may be familiar, where a puzzle is solved by the conclusion, this mystery will not be wrapped up neatly by the story's end. Rather, it is a mystery of faith: a spiritual reality that human reason cannot fully comprehend. In this novel, the reader