

ROMAN CATHOLICISM IN AMERICA

CHESTER GILLIS, COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS, 1999.

Reviewed by Gregory Hine

Roman Catholicism in America presents an historical and contemporary view of Catholic life in the United States since the introduction of Catholicism into the country. Central to this narrative is the question, "What does it mean to be a Catholic in America in the twenty-first century?" Gillis believes that no single answer existed in the previous century, and that this book "testifies to the variety of expression that American Catholicism manifests" (p. 280). Furthermore, it discusses how American culture has both incorporated and rejected identities consistent with official Vatican teaching. Gillis offers a variety of excerpts and quotations from Church authorities, theologians, and historians to support his assimilative ideas of Roman Catholicism in American society. He uses a methodical analysis of beliefs, expression, and culture to help ascertain valid reasoning for the distinctive change in character of Catholics in the United States.

Gillis provides his readers with insight into the diversity of Catholicism in the United States, describing many people involved in various faith-related ministries, roles, and activities. He collectively identifies these people as Catholics and states, "the heart of the church in America is the parish" (p.16). Gillis also compares types and generations of Catholics, delineates the national Catholic population, and discusses changes made in the Church over time. Direct comparisons are made between pre- and post-Vatican II eras and how Church tradition has subsequently altered. Gillis draws attention to this change by citing the drastic decrease in Mass attendance since the Second Vatican Council and several possible reasons to explain this decrease. Gillis states that those who do not attend "claim that they understand and relate to the church differently" (p. 22). Other reasons include the ideology that the pope is "out of touch with American Catholics" (p. 23) and a significant increase in the belief that free exercise supercedes adherence to faith tradition. Gillis presents his view of Catholicism in the United States as one that has witnessed both an "erosion of culture that supported and defined Catholics" (p. 38) and assimilation into wider American culture. Within this transformation, however, it is strongly noted that American Catholics continue to identify with the Church for many reasons. These include a loyalty to ritual, commitment to values, means of identification, and belief in salvation. Gillis emphasizes that there is no accurate test for a genuine Catholic in modern society and that true definition may be found within the diversity of roles, practices, and beliefs of American Catholics themselves.

The history of the Church in America is outlined by Gillis in two main eras: colonial times to 1900 and 1900 to the Second Vatican Council. Included are specific accounts by historians and theologians that recount the progressive steps taken in the history of the Catholic Church in America. Significant subthemes include African American Catholics, tensions between Rome and America, and an immigrant church. The inclusion of these themes allows the reader to appreciate the difficulties encountered by colonial Catholics, such as persecution at the hands of a Protestant majority, racism within the Catholic population, and the preference that church be separate from the state. Later themes include the commitment of U.S. troops to World Wars I and II, Hispanic Catholics, and, most importantly, Vatican II. Although all content matter, according to Gillis, is deemed important to the foundation of an American Catholic identity, "the most dramatic changes in the church since the Reformation and Counter-Reformation period in the sixteenth century occurred as a result of the Second Vatican Council" (p. 86). With specific reference to identity formation, the "years directly following the Council proved to be some of the most tumultuous in church history and certainly amongst the most influential in American church history" (p. 94). Gillis states that the changes initiated by this Council are critical and continue to shape the universal and American churches.

Gillis accurately states that the post-Vatican II period was one of tumult, yet he does not place any emphasis on this time as being one of optimism for American Catholics. Instead he presents this era as one of drastic change characterized by dismay, disenchantment, and even fear. He elucidates examples of religious reform, but does not embrace Vatican II for the new direction given to the Catholic Church. For example, Gillis writes objectively about the new roles undertaken by women religious and their subsequent dress regulations. Their new social ministry and contemporary clothes are mentioned repeatedly, but the positive effects of their work are not. Gillis' attitude toward the ordination of women, however, is concisely delivered as a one-sided coin. He regards Sr. Theresa Kane's address to Pope John Paul II on full inclusion of women in the ministries of the Church as one of opposition and confrontation, and does not write optimistically of such movement. Writing about numerous other issues prevailing during the post-Vatican period, such as the protests of American Catholics and the American bishops, it is clear that Gillis regards this era carefully and with suspicion. The issues concerning women priests, priests involved in instances of sexual misconduct, and controversial theologians are considered prominent and receive due attention. These circumstances, while being unfortunate and detrimental to the image of the Catholic Church, are still deserving of a place in this text as they contribute to the identity of American Catholicism. Disappointingly, Gillis records few instances during or immediately after Vatican II that positively impacted Catholicism's identity.

In the remaining chapters of the text, Gillis presents the teachings and beliefs of Catholicism, the institutions, roles, and organizations of the Church in the United States, and the future challenges facing this religious denomination. Overall, the teachings and beliefs are presented clearly and unambiguously in a manner that is consistent with the *magisterium*. This section includes contemporary moral issues and subsequent teachings of the Church: homosexuality, capital punishment, homicide, abortion, and biomedical issues. Gillis draws upon the Church's official teachings to assert Catholicism's stance on such matters. However, education systems, health care systems, and other organizations receive minimal mention and appraisal from Gillis, although these constituencies perform vital duties critical to the present and future life of the Catholic Church. This inarticulation discredits the text, as schools in particular have considerably shaped the identity of Catholicism in the United States today. All considered, the changes that have occurred in the Church since Vatican II have been approached cautiously and effected slowly. Moreover, the Catholic Church must first "know its members, respect their thinking, listen to their voices, and take them seriously" (p. 270). At the same time, to preserve a Catholic identity, the Church must continue to listen to the differing views amongst its members and resist cultural pressures when necessary.

Roman Catholicism in America concludes with some thoughts on the future life of the Church in the United States. Gillis readdresses the historical and contemporary challenges faced by its religious and lay congregations and the struggles that have ensued. Several key changes in the last generation of American Catholic culture are also presented as afterthoughts: compliance to Church teaching, dispositions toward moral issues, and attendance at weekly Mass. Gillis notes that in general, "The areas in which the church carries significant authority in a believer's life are fewer than in the past and the authority is of a different type" (p. 274). In answer to his initial question, "What does it mean to be a Catholic in America in the twenty-first century?" a response may favor a Catholic Church separated from Rome. However, due to the loyalty of the congregation and staying power of the Church, "An overwhelming majority of American Catholics are content to be Roman Catholics" (p. 275).

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