

---

**CATHOLICS AND AMERICAN CULTURE:  
FULTON SHEEN, DOROTHY DAY, AND THE NOTRE DAME  
FOOTBALL TEAM**

MARK S. MASSA, CROSSROAD PUBLISHING CO., 1999.

*Reviewed by Daniel McCue*

*Catholics and American Culture* offers a provocative insight into the reshaping and growth of Catholic culture in the United States during the middle part of the 20th century. The author chose this time period because it has been labeled "The Era of Catholic Triumphalism" (p. 12) in some religious histories, given the arrival of Catholicism as a major player on the cultural scene. According to the author, the irony of this period is that at the very time when the Roman Catholic faith was finally coming into its own in America, "major players in the Catholic story were gleefully laying dynamite to the foundations of an older American Catholic identity" (p. 12). The author therefore attempts to use "representative figures and events" to "offer an important glimpse of 'how we started there and ended up here'" (p. 11).

Each chapter focuses on a particular person, group, or event that played a major part in a watershed moment in the American Catholic journey from 1940 to 1975. The story of each person or event is explored and placed in a historical context that allows the reader to appreciate the story through the lens of the day. The author then reflects on the significance of each figure or event and attempts to show its influence in changing and reshaping Catholic culture in America.

The subjects of each chapter run the gamut from revolutionary Catholic scholars to individuals viewed as true enemies of the Church. One chapter recounts how the religious conversion and monastic life of the Trappist monk Thomas Merton and his subsequent writings opened the door to a renewal of Catholic spirit for a new generation of disillusioned post-World War II Catholics. Another tells the tale of the McCarthy hearings and the battle against Communism, shedding light on the role that Catholicism, intentional or not, played in this ordeal. The events concerning the rise of John F. Kennedy to the Presidency of the United States are recalled, and the presidential victory is presented as a bittersweet victory for American Catholics: They had finally arrived as major players in American social influence, but only through Kennedy's repeated statements downplaying his religion to the point where it was no longer perceived as a threat to other faiths.

Several radical Catholic figures are also examined: Dorothy Day and her Catholic Worker Movement, which pushed the Catholic establishment toward a heightened awareness regarding the corporal works of mercy; the

Immaculate Heart of Mary sisters in Los Angeles, many of whom in 1970 decided to leave the Church to pursue their vocation of teaching and the call "to be beautiful, human, and Christian" (p. 190), a call in which they felt to be hindered by their bishop; and the Jesuit priests involved in the Boston Heresy of the 1940s, in which Fr. Leonard Feeney and his Slaves of the Immaculate Heart of Mary held strictly to the theological dictum of *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* ("outside the church there is no salvation") (p. 21), even in defiance of the Vatican. While the motives of these individuals varied, their stories share a common thread: Each challenged the Church to examine and redefine itself in alignment with the prevailing needs of the people of the day.

The remaining topics represent true "events" in the sense that they spanned several years and were the result of a protracted effort on the part of the people involved. The highly influential television career of Bishop Fulton Sheen is remembered for its impressive grip on the American consciousness in the form of his record-setting show, *Life Is Worth Living*. Another chapter recalls the vision and responsiveness of the Second Vatican Council in its attempt to bring the Catholic Church into the 20th century, an attempt that resulted not only in the changes regarding worship that the Council intended but changes in belief that have far outdistanced anything the Council could have anticipated.

In one respect, this book is a history of significant Catholic Americans. There are many dates, facts, and figures in portions of the book, and for long stretches the text adopts the feel of a research book. At certain points, the language tends to interfere with the text rather than add to it. But this work is also a collection of tales not unlike a children's storybook, full of colorful characters and the adventures that they experienced.

Massa assesses the positive and negative effects that each figure and event had on America's Catholic culture. Most of the positive effects involved a greater acceptance of Catholicism in American culture and an increase in the power and influence of Catholics across the country. However, in each situation Massa believes that the increased acceptance and influence were usually gained as the result of a diminishing of, if not a loss of, certain ideals and values that helped define Catholicism; and he makes convincing arguments for this in each case. He is careful not to pass judgment on the current state of Catholic culture and never quantifies the change in culture as being good or bad; he simply acknowledges the change.

As a critique of the changes America's Catholic culture has seen over the last century, this is an excellent book. Massa very capably weaves discrete historical events into an overall picture of the current state of Catholicism in America. Readers hoping to learn more about the history of Catholics in America would benefit greatly from this book, as would those hoping to gain



a richer understanding of Catholic culture today. As Massa stated in his introduction, he hoped to help illustrate "how we started there and ended up here," and this book has done so wonderfully.

*Daniel McCue teaches mathematics and is director of academics and faculty supervision at McGill-Toolen High School, Mobile, AL.*

## **SEX, PRIESTS, AND POWER: ANATOMY OF A CRISIS**

A. W. RICHARD SIPE, BRUNNER/MAZEL, 1995.

*Reviewed by Benny Morten*

While *Sex, Priests, and Power* by Richard Sipe may seem like a book that is published to take advantage of a recent news-grabbing crisis, it has been on bookshelves for over 7 years. Sipe lays out his arguments throughout the book with startling detail, strengthening his claims with the support of his own experiences. An ordained Roman Catholic priest resigned from active ministry, Sipe has accumulated information from interviews with priests, psychiatrists, and historians for over 25 years. The book begins with some graphic stories of sexual abuse across all levels of the priesthood. Sipe captures the reader's attention through storytelling, quoting Fr. Andrew Greeley on the use of stories to strengthen his position:

Stories have always been the best way to talk about religion because stories appeal to the emotions and the whole personality and not just to the mind. Jesus told parables; the authors of David and Joseph cycles and the Song of Songs in the Jewish scriptures, for example, also told stories. (p. 54)

The stories of abuse from priests and bishops against children, men, women, and other priests attempt to support his claim that 50% of ordained priests violate the vow of celibacy. While that number may seem high, the accuracy cannot be altogether disregarded as more in the book is revealed:

One religious superior who holds a doctoral degree in psychology was incensed at the claim of a 50% celibate practice and insisted that 95% of priests practice celibacy at all times. He also asserted that "one or two lapses in the course of a year do not constitute being sexually active." ...Similarly a priest could impregnate two women in the course of 1 year, and using the criterion that one or two lapses do not count, he would still not be considered sexually active. (p. 61)

Copyright of *Catholic Education: A Journal of Inquiry & Practice* is the property of Catholic Education: A Journal of Inquiry & Practice and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.