

Thomas A. Tweed, *America's Church: The National Shrine and the Catholic Presence in the Nation's Capital*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011. Pp. 391. Retail Price: \$35.00

In *America's Church*, Thomas Tweed examines the honeycomb of mosaic-laden sacred spaces which constitute the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception (hereafter BNSIC) in an effort to extract the lived experience of countless benefactors and pilgrims from around the city, the nation, and the world. The author presents a finely textured account of the rich diversity of peoples who constructed, donated to, and visited the monumental Byzantine-Romanesque church in Washington and exposes the kaleidoscope of functions, meanings, and interpretations which they have given that sacred edifice over time. The undergirding presupposition of *America's Church* is that religious structures have shifting historical contexts which allow those structures to perform differing roles and exert various powers. "It's impossible," Tweed argues, "to step into the same building twice" (241). Sacred sites, in other words, are living sites.

Mindful of the situatedness and dynamism of solid structures, Tweed masterfully employs a multimethod approach to reconstruct worldviews, interpretations, and social profiles. The author devotes attention to—among other factors—the geographic location, physical layout, proper name, material culture, and artifacts of the sacred edifice. The author combines this with an array of standard archival sources—newspaper articles, correspondence, visitor logs, benefactor registers, official guidebooks, promotional literature, memoirs, and photographs. Federal census records, city directories, maps, homilies, catechisms, interviews, and participant observation are woven together to create a profile of hundreds of ordinary donors and pilgrims. Tweed's astute use of sources yields many insights which would otherwise be lost to history.

The book is divided into six substantive chapters (of roughly equal length) which examine one element of the BNSIC's material culture. The synopsis provided here is unavoidably a spattered sampling. The richness and nuance of Tweed's careful unpacking of history does not lend itself to easy repackaging in smaller volume. Nevertheless, a brief synopsis shows Tweed's attentiveness to broader patterns and individuals differences.

In the first chapter, which centers on the foundation stone, Tweed shows that the project garnered widespread support—from popes to paupers—during the "great age of Catholic monumentalism" or "the brick and mortar phase of Catholicism" (26). The clerical promoters of the project "hoped to overcome disappointment, create beauty, promote morality, confront modernity, and make transnational connections that proclaimed the site's hemispheric reach and elevated the status of the U.S. Catholic Church in the eyes of Europe and in the view of the Vatican" (41).

The second chapter, centering on the Mary Memorial Altar, discusses the role of female fundraisers and donors. The Marian Shrine is inextricably intertwined with women: "Women were the leading fundraisers during the early period, and Cardinal Gibbons laid the foundation stone only thirty-six days after women won the right to vote" (17). While pointing out that women were not—and are not allowed—to officiate in the ritual space they helped to fund (62), the author notes that "[women] had more opportunities for challenging leadership and meaningful work within the Church than they did in the wider culture" (90).

The third chapter, which centers on a comic book image, recovers the oft-overlooked role of children. Through his analysis, the author seeks to recover some stories of distinctive individuals rather than "generic collective aggregates" of children (113). Tweed notes the scale of the parochial school network, which at its high point accounted for "fully 12 percent of all the

children enrolled in the United States at that time” (103). The author demonstrates the Catholic impulse to engage children and teens.

The design of the subterranean Crypt Church, which constitutes Tweed’s fourth chapter, shows the Catholic desire “to offer a response to Protestant interpretations of Catholic belief and practice” (123). The space, meant to evoke the early Christian catacombs, serves “liturgical and didactic” functions through its “pictorial theology” (147). Tweed’s careful research shows the interesting fact that Mary Chase Stratton, a Protestant artist from the Midwest, collaborated in an ecumenical spirit to create the space which was meant to serve as a “visual rejoinder to Protestant arguments” (155).

The fifth chapter uses the polychromatic dome and lofty bell tower to discuss Catholic claims on civic space in the nation’s capital and in American society in general. Overt and implicit Protestant hostility toward Catholics began to fade with Catholics’ patriotic participation in World War II’s military campaigns. The post-1960s decline of the national Protestant establishment further defanged Protestant animus (189). Tweed convincingly argues that the BNSIC transitioned from the “subjunctive mood” to the “indicative” during this period (188). That is to say, the previous wishful hopes regarding political, cultural, and economic influence became reality. The BNSIC served as threshold or portal in more than one sense of the term.

The sixth and final chapter discusses ethnic chapels within the BNSIC. Tweed poignantly argues that “ecclesiastical leaders labored [...] to incorporate [immigrants] into the body politic, making immigrants into good Americans [and] they tried to incorporate them into Christ’s ‘mystical body’” (194). The laity, in turn, viewed the ethnic chapels as—among other things—a means to declare their presence and gain recognition. The author concludes by discussing those people—individuals and groups—who have been noticeably absent from the BNSIC. John F. Kennedy, for example, never visited the BNSIC despite being the first Roman Catholic to be elected President of the United States. The author contends that BNSIC’s existence as a monument to “triumphalism, countermodernism, and ultramontanist” likely explained Kennedy’s distance.

From the presentation of the idea to Pope Pius X in 1913 and its dedication in 1959 to its Golden Jubilee in 2009, the BNSIC has served as a microcosm of the Catholic Church in the United States. Briefly put, the story of the BNSIC mirrors the story of American Catholicism. Tweed perceptibly examines fundraising efforts, devotions, pilgrims and visitors, and donations to show the lived reality at various points in the 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century. The author makes not only a contribution to the history of the BNSIC, but also a contribution to the history of American Catholicism.

This impressive book is not without some minor flaws. Throughout the book, Tweed imprecisely uses the term “nuns” to refer to all forms of women in religious life. Nuns, properly speaking, are those women who have professed solemn vows to live a life of contemplation in strict enclosure. The author, who devotes an endnote to explaining the technical distinction between a chapel and an oratory, would do well to draw the proper distinctions between women in consecrated life. Second, Tweed off-handedly reports that in recent years “women had more presence on the Shrine’s altar, assisting the celebrant” (238). The author should have elaborated on this unclear statement. Third, Tweed mistakenly refers to the “brightly colored mosaic of Our Lady of Czestochowa” (217). A bright field of mosaic does serve as a backdrop, but the representation of the Polish Madonna is—by rare exception—a large non-mosaic icon. Lastly, the appendices may be interesting and useful to a few, but will likely seem dull and superfluous

to the many. These small details do not detract from the work as a whole, which is jam-packed with engaging prose and fascinating tidbits.

Though this book targets a scholarly audience, it is accessible and recommendable to a broad audience. The ample citations and extensive endnotes are placed perfectly so as to provide scholars valuable resources without frustrating the average reader who is disinterested in such minutia. Upper-level undergraduates and graduate students in history or religious studies will appreciate the methodological and theoretical complexity undergirding the text, yet *America's Church* is a delightful and inspiring read for non-academicians as well.

Tweed's well-crafted book offers an entrée into a rich conversation about Catholic self-understanding, interdenominational dynamics, and gender in communities of faith. This extensively researched and clearly written account is the first and so-far only critical scholarly study of the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception. Tweed's ability to "squeeze" fascinating history from "more than 250,000 cubic feet of stone" and "10 million bricks" (23) adds to his already distinguished reputation and broadens the horizons of historiographical method. Simply put, *America's Church* sets the gold standard for studies of sacred spaces.

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