

Introduction

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The Catholic Church has been the largest single religious denomination in the United States since the mid-nineteenth century, consistently claiming between 20 and 25 percent of the nation's population over the past 170 years. Arriving in the Americas with the earliest Spanish and French missionaries, following pathways of settlement and expansion to all corners of the United States, and bolstered by successive waves of immigration, both in the past and today, Catholicism has been a constitutive element of American history from the very beginning. It has shaped the development of the nation in myriad ways, from formal political engagement and social activism to subtle cultural influence and anonymous works of charity. It is also one of the nation's most internally diverse religious denominations, drawing together members from all races and ethnicities, socioeconomic classes, ideological perspectives, and political persuasions. American Catholics espouse a wide range of beliefs, customs, and practices that reflects the church's cultural richness, but that has also given rise to numerous clashes and outright conflict. They continue to maintain a strong sense of collective unity, yet also exhibit much of the same polarization found within wider society. It is a church that today is at once growing and contracting, vibrant yet visibly scarred by scandal. For all these reasons, American Catholicism captivates and confounds, and it deserves scholarly attention.

This volume is designed to provide readers with a broad overview of American Catholicism in its diversity and complexity. It is intended to be accessible to those with little or no existing knowledge of the subject, yet also to serve as a resource for those who already possess some degree of familiarity with the topic. As a work of synthesis, the volume distills vast material into concise chapters that address different aspects of American Catholicism. In contributing to a unified whole, each chapter is also designed to stand on its own as an introduction to its particular topic or subject. The goal is to inform readers of broad trends and transformations rather than advance narrow scholarly arguments or a particular research

agenda. Taken together, the volume provides context for understanding American Catholicism as it exists today, helping situate twenty-first century developments and debates within their longer trajectory.

Grappling with American Catholicism requires coming to terms with the inherent tension present in those two terms. Could one be both American and Catholic? As a religious minority within Protestant America, Catholics were viewed with suspicion, if not outright hostility. From the colonial era on through the twentieth century, waves of anti-Catholic sentiment relied on the conceit that Catholicism was essentially incompatible with American political values. It was viewed as a foreign faith whose core tenets and teachings were fundamentally at odds with American democracy, individual liberty, religious pluralism, and the separation of church and state. Such concerns spurred successive generations of Catholics to affirm their patriotism and defend the proposition that their faith was not an obstacle to full participation in American life.

One of the main trajectories of American Catholicism has been Catholics' movement from the margins to the mainstream. As they grew in number and in organizational strength, they claimed an increasingly powerful presence and voice in American affairs. By the mid-twentieth century, Catholics had attained a secure place within the social, political, and economic mainstream. Yet this movement into the American mainstream came at a cost. It eroded old markers of Catholic distinctiveness and erased some of the critical distance that Catholics had maintained towards American culture and its values. In many regards, they became virtually indistinguishable from their non-Catholic counterparts. While this trend signaled Catholic acceptance and respectability, it also had the effect of distancing American Catholics from their counterparts in other parts of the world, especially the global south and other developing regions. The pontificate of Pope Francis, in particular, has called attention to the fact that the concerns and priorities of church in the United States today do not always align with those stressed by the Vatican or held by Catholics in other parts of the world. To understand American Catholicism is to recognize a degree of exceptionalism that has long characterized the history of the church in the United States.

Guiding this analysis is a recognition that Catholics view the world through their own distinctive lens, which some have termed the "Catholic imagination."¹ This includes an emphasis on sacramentality, or the notion that physical reality is a reflection of the divine. Rooted in

¹ See Andrew Greeley, *The Catholic Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

the doctrine of the incarnation, which teaches that Christ took human form and became one like us in all things but sin, sacramentality reflects a core Catholic belief that God is present in the created world and knowable to us in those myriad manifestations. It teaches that spiritual meaning can be found in diverse realms of human activity, including family and community life or in artistic and cultural production. As a result, the study of American Catholicism has long been attentive to the relationship between faith and culture. It recognizes that art, music, literature, architecture, fashion, and other forms of cultural expression are an integral part of Catholic life and provide a source of religious meaning. The Catholic imagination also recognizes how ordinary objects and everyday routines can acquire sacred significance. This helps account for the importance of devotional activity within Catholicism, with its emphasis on relics, rosaries, medals, holy cards, and other material objects, as well as the places and practices associated with them. For Catholics, the mundane and the miraculous are intimately intertwined. The experience of faith is connected not just to the church's formal rituals and official worship, but also to a range of popular practices and folk customs that operate in tandem with them.

Just as the Catholic population has grown and changed, so too has our historical understanding of its development. This volume reflects the tremendous transformations that have taken place within the field of American Catholic studies over the past thirty to forty years. The history of American Catholicism had traditionally been told through the lens of church history. This narrative framework tended to emphasize institutional development, internal church affairs, and the contributions of bishops, clergy, and others holding formal positions of authority within the church. Although these works provided a rich chronicling of Catholicism's growth as told through official church records – often with a triumphalist tone designed to glorify Catholic achievement, uphold Catholic truth, and extol Catholicism's contributions to the nation – they often contained little critical analysis.² But starting in the 1970s, a new generation of scholars inspired by the reforms of the Second Vatican Council and the shift towards social history within the historical profession began to approach Catholic

² The best works of the period – such as John Gilmary Shea, *History of the Catholic Church in the United States*, 4 vols. (Akron, OH: D.H. McBride, 1886–1892); Peter Guilday, *The Life and Times of John Carroll, Archbishop of Baltimore (1735–1815)* (New York: The Encyclopedia Press, 1922); and John Tracy Ellis, *The Life of James Cardinal Gibbons* (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1963) – demonstrate a great deal of scholarly sophistication, but gained little attention outside of Catholic academic circles.

history with an eye towards the experience of ordinary churchgoers and the diverse communities who comprised the “People of God.” These works focused on the Catholic experience within the United States, drawing attention to the rich Catholic subculture that had marked and sustained Catholic distinctiveness and charting the gradual integration of Catholics into the American mainstream.³

In more recent decades, the study of American Catholicism has been influenced by scholarly interest in lived religious experience, with insights drawn from multidisciplinary perspectives. These works have explored the ways that Catholicism has been experienced and expressed in family and community life, in popular religious practice and folk customs, and through other forms of collective activity, including those that operate outside official institutional structures and spaces.⁴ Scholars have also become much more attuned to the unique experiences of the many diverse groups found within American Catholicism, looking at how issues of gender, race, ethnicity, social class, geographic location, generational difference, and other sociological variables affect Catholics’ relationship with the church and with one another. Their work reminds us that the Catholic Church has never been as unitary or monolithic as many have assumed, including Catholics themselves. They have also brought attention to the painful realities of racism and other forms of discrimination and inequality within American Catholicism, as well as how the church itself has been responsible for establishing institutional barriers to equality or complicit in perpetuating forms of systemic oppression.⁵

³ See, for example, James Hennesey, SJ, *American Catholics: A History of the Roman Catholic Community in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981); Jay P. Dolan, *The American Catholic Experience: A History from Colonial Times to the Present* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1985); and John Cogley and Roger Van Allen, *Catholic America: Expanded and Updated Edition* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1986).

⁴ This transformation began with Robert Anthony Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880–1950* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985). For other examples, see Thomas A. Tweed, *Our Lady of the Exile: Diasporic Religion at a Cuban Catholic Shrine in Miami* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Kristy Nabhan-Warren, *The Virgin of El Barrio: Marian Apparitions, Catholic Evangelizing, and Mexican American Activism* (New York: New York University Press, 2005); James T. Fisher, *On the Irish Waterfront: The Crusader, the Movie, and the Soul of the Port of New York* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009).

⁵ See, for example, John T. McGreevy, *Parish Boundaries: The Catholic Encounter with Race in the Twentieth-Century Urban North* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Steven W. Hackel, *Children of Coyote, Missionaries of Saint Francis: Indian–Spanish Relations in Colonial California* (Chapel Hill: University of North

The study of American Catholicism today reflects the disciplinary diversity of its practitioners. Once the domain of seminary professors and those housed in theology and history programs at Catholic institutions, the field of Catholic Studies now also includes those working in the broader field of religious studies and related disciplines, including an increasing number whose training has taken place at secular institutions. Their work has widened the scope of inquiry and helped move the field beyond some of its earlier parochialism. Catholic resources are now being mined to shed light on topics beyond the conventional confines of Catholic history, making a case for the relevance of Catholicism to larger trends and transformations in American history.⁶ Another effort to expand the scope of American Catholicism has come from those who have sought to situate events within a global framework, highlighting patterns and connections that stretch beyond American borders. Their work calls attention to the fact that Catholic history is, by its very nature, transnational in scale and scope, with developments in the United States intimately connected to decisions made in Rome, the influence of international geopolitics, and the continuous movement of people and resources across countries and continents.⁷

Reflective of these wider scholarly trends, the nineteen essays contained in this volume comprise an effort to write histories of US Catholics attuned to the diversity found within the church and mindful of the continuous interplay between faith and culture. Some are more broadly historical in nature, while others are focused on a specific topic. While every effort has been made to provide comprehensive coverage, it is impossible to include everything in such surveys. These essays,

Carolina Press, 2005]; Mary J. Henold, *Catholic and Feminist: The Surprising History of the American Catholic Feminist Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008); Shannen Dee Williams, "Black Nuns and the Struggle to Desegregate America after World War I" (Ph.D. diss.: Rutgers University, 2013).

⁶ On this point, see R. Scott Appleby and Kathleen Sprows Cummings, eds., *Catholics in the American Century: Recasting Narratives of American History* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012).

⁷ See, for instance, Peter R. D'Agostino, *Rome in America: Transnational Catholic Ideology from the Risorgimento to Fascism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); Gerald McKevitt, *Brokers of Culture: Italian Jesuits in the American West, 1848–1919* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007); John T. McGreevy, *American Jesuits and the World: How an Embattled Religious Order Made Modern Catholicism Global* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016); and Kathleen Sprows Cummings, *A Saint of Our Own: How the Quest for a Holy Hero Helped Catholics Become American* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019).

however, offer foundational overviews of the most salient elements of the American Catholic experience. Also included in this volume are chapters on topics and themes not usually discussed in similar overviews of American Catholicism – such as gender and sexuality and Catholic art and culture.

The first section of the book provides a chronological overview of American Catholicism, with essays on colonial origins, the nineteenth century, and the twentieth century that allow readers to trace the general themes and issues that are part of the church's history. Catholics during the colonial and revolutionary eras were more integrated into the mostly Protestant environment of the United States than future generations. This would change as nineteenth-century Catholic immigrants arrived in the United States and developed a system of schools, hospitals, and social service institutions that would not only educate and care for American Catholics, but would insulate them from their non-Catholic neighbors and compatriots. Twentieth-century Catholicism would begin as a period of tremendous expansion within the church, but the end of the century would be marked by a decrease in the number of parishes, schools, and social service institutions as changes in the church and society led to new ways of living and practicing Catholicism.

After an introduction to the historical framework of Catholicism in the United States, the second section, entitled "Catholic Life and Culture," allows readers to understand the many facets of American Catholicism. The first essay is devoted to Catholic worship, which includes the Mass and formal prayer, but also a range of popular devotions. Although the way in which American Catholics worship, including at Mass, has changed over the decades, the focus on communal worship and prayer has remained a constant. The following chapter surveys Catholic intellectual life. Philosophers and theologians have traditionally played an important role in interpreting the teachings of the church to the Catholic faithful, but they have also responded to social, economic, and political issues in light of church teaching.

The parochial school system, which has been a significant part of American Catholic culture since the nineteenth century, is the subject of Chapter 6. US Catholics have been able to attend schools steeped in their faith from preschool through graduate school, and the system remains intact in the second decade of the twenty-first century despite demographic and societal changes in both the United States and the church. In addition to schools, Catholics developed a network of hospitals, orphanages, and social service agencies that have met the needs of many, Catholic and non-Catholic alike. Social

welfare in the church includes both individual acts of charity and an emphasis on social justice that addresses a variety of systemic issues. In Chapter 7, readers will see the many ways in which the American Catholic Church responded to those in need. The church could not have developed its vast network of parochial schools and agencies devoted to reform and social justice without the work of women religious, who continue to serve the church in a variety of ways. Chapter 8 is devoted to a study of the ways in which sisters and nuns have shaped and served the church. Although declining numbers and an aging population, along with changes in education and health care, have changed the way in which women religious serve their church, they remain the face of Catholicism for many.

In addition to creating their own institutions devoted to “taking care of their own,” Catholics actively participated in the larger culture. Chapter 9 describes the ways in which Catholics have engaged in the political process, noting that they went from being “outsiders” to political power brokers. The role Catholics have played in the arts is the subject of Chapter 10. Catholics helped shape, and at the same time, were shaped by television, movies, literature, and art. Their participation in these areas has expanded to social media in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The very presence of Catholics in the United States and their participation and engagement in every aspect of American life and culture has resulted in anti-Catholicism, which is the subject of Chapter 11. The essay reminds readers that anti-Catholicism has its roots in puritanism and continues into the present.

The final chapters of this section discuss American Catholicism from the perspective of issues especially relevant to the twenty-first century. The subject of Chapter 12 is sexuality. In addition to discussing the ways in which issues related to gender and sexuality influenced how American Catholics were viewed by others, this essay explains the way in which this topic has been controversial in the US church. Evangelization has always been an important component of Catholicism. Chapter 13 focuses on the ways in which American Catholics experienced the many dimensions of mission – to, within, and from the United States – in order to help readers understand the global context in which the church in the United States functions.

The focus of the volume’s third section is “The Many Faces of Catholicism.” The first essay in this section is devoted to laywomen and feminism. Although Catholic laywomen have not necessarily followed the same path to liberation within their tradition as their Protestant and Jewish sisters, they have created spaces for themselves

within the institutional church. The clergy sexual abuse crisis and the shortage of ordained clergy, combined with the growing number of women who possess the necessary educational credentials, has prompted many to call for women to exercise greater leadership roles in parishes and in dioceses. Chapter 15 is devoted to a survey of the history and presence of Black Catholics from the era of Spanish, French, and English colonization efforts until the twenty-first century. Included in this discussion are the topics of racism and racist practices within the church, and ways in which African Americans struggled to claim their rights and find their voice in an institution that remains predominantly white. Latinx Catholics are the subject of Chapter 16. Although there has been a Latinx presence in the church since the Spanish sought to colonize portions of what is now the United States, this group is currently emerging as an important part of the church's future. Areas covered in this chapter include the history of Latinx Catholics in the United States and themes in contemporary Latinx Catholicism. Chapter 17 focuses on Asian-American Catholics, specifically the Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Vietnamese, and Korean presence in the church. The essay discusses the history of Chinese and Japanese Catholics in the US church in the nineteenth century, as well as Asian-American Catholics since the 1965 Immigration Act. The final chapter in this section is on the topic of the growing significance of so-called cultural Catholics within the church in the United States. As many American Catholics have moved away from traditional practices, the church has tried to keep them within the institution.

The final section is the concluding essay of the volume. This discussion of the church today also offers some reflections on how issues impacting today's American Catholic Church might influence the future. Examining trends that include population, practice, belief, and pastoral leadership, the essay offers some concluding thoughts on what might be next for American Catholicism. One issue that will certainly affect the future of the Catholic Church in the United States is the clergy sexual abuse crisis. As Mary L. Gautier correctly notes in the final chapter of this volume, "The clergy sexual abuse crisis is a cloud across the church in the United States at the beginning of the twenty-first century." What that means for the church in America remains to be seen.

When the *Boston Globe's* Spotlight Team began its in-depth coverage of what has become known as the sexual abuse crisis in the Catholic Church on January 6, 2002, no one anticipated the tremendous impact this would have upon the church and its people. What started out as an investigative report of a systematic cover-up of priests engaged in the

sexual abuse of minor children in the Archdiocese of Boston quickly evolved into a worldwide scandal involving thousands of priests and church leaders. The scandal has become a part of the recent history of every US diocese, and will impact the American church for decades to come. It is now clear that the topic of sexual abuse by Catholic priests – and in some cases, sisters – will clearly affect the future work of historians, sociologists, psychologists, and others working in the field of Catholic Studies, though it is far too early to understand the long-term impact of the crisis.

Scholarly work on the sexual abuse crisis is really just beginning, and as a result, readers of this volume will not find a chapter devoted to the topic. It is clear, however, that this subject will figure prominently in future work by historians of Catholicism in the United States, who are already discussing ways in which to incorporate this piece of history into the larger story. A panel at the 2016 American Catholic Historical Association's annual meeting, for instance, brought together historians and archivists to reflect upon the importance of including the sexual abuse crisis in works devoted to American Catholic history. The discussion ranged from best practices for archives holding materials related to the crisis faced by historians struggling to write on the topic.⁸ It is worth noting at this juncture that this volume does not contain an essay specifically focused on the priesthood in the US Catholic Church because of the difficulties scholars have had researching this topic. The two topics are, of course, intimately entwined and a comprehensive history of one cannot be written without exploring the second. Researching and writing about these topics will be the work of future historians.

A full and accurate understanding of American Catholicism is essential for the history of Catholicism as well as the history of the United States. As these essays demonstrate, the place of Catholics in education, politics, arts and culture, and social reform must be included in any history dedicated to these topics. In addition, Black, Latinx, and Asian-American Catholics, as well as women religious and laywomen, now command a place in the larger histories of their church and their nation. It is our hope that this volume not only provides a foundation for those seeking to further their knowledge of the Catholic Church in the United States but also contributes to this effort to place American Catholicism within larger histories.

⁸ See "Writing Catholic History After the Sex Abuse Crisis," *American Catholic Studies* 127 (Summer 2016), 1–27.

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-47265-4 — The Cambridge Companion to American Catholicism
Edited by Margaret M. McGuinness , Thomas F. Rzeznik
Excerpt
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Part I

Historical Overview