

***The Church Confronts Modernity: Catholicism since 1950 in the United States, Ireland, and Quebec.* Edited by Leslie Woodcock Tentler. Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2007. 302pp. \$29.95, pbk.**

A collection of papers from a 2003 conference, this book is divided into four sections: Two articles on each of the polities selected (United States, Ireland, Quebec), and a final section consisting of two comparative pieces covering all three regions. Leslie Tentler adds an Introduction.

Kevin J. Christiano and Michael Gauvreau try to explain the shockingly swift decline in measures of Catholic practice in Quebec during the 1960s. Christiano describes well the role of lay initiative in changing the complexion of the church in Quebec, while Gauvreau goes further toward supplying an explanatory framework, identifying the damage done by the conflict generated by widespread perception of a set of dichotomies (e.g., lay-clerical; traditional-reformist). Ultimately, one senses that a full explanation eludes us. Church establishments, when they finally falter, fall in spectacular fashion. In Quebec the failure was possibly more dramatic than any other in Church history.

A decline less precipitous yet perhaps more dismaying to American Catholics because of their many ethnic and emotional ties to its scene, took place in Ireland. Dermot Keough recreates that development in generous detail, and Lawrence Taylor analyzes it in sociological terms. Keough's account is well informed but suffers from some major deficiencies. His story is too simply one of "good guys versus bad guys," his writing is overly verbose (the meat of the sixty pages could have been packed into half that), and his scholarship is shoddy at times. For example, one footnote appeals to his having it "on good authority" (125). Allowing for the difficulties involved in doing short-term history, an academic treatment nonetheless calls for verifiable sources.

There are both significant similarities and striking differences between the post-Vatican II church in the United States and those previously examined. James D. Davidson plunges headlong into the thicket of harshly conflicting interpretations of post-Vatican II Catholicism, assigning the terms "Culture I" and "Culture II" Catholicism to the two major approaches to Catholicism in the twentieth century. Unfortunately, the distinction does not clarify what happened during the last forty years, because its criteria are not theologically or historically tenable. Culture I Catholicism, in Davidson's definition,

stresses “Catholic identity, sacraments, the Nicene creed, concern for the poor,” as well as “the legitimacy of episcopal authority,” and “the importance of knowing Church teaching” (182). Culture II Catholicism, meanwhile, inter alia, “emphasizes the individual’s relationship with God,” and has a “positive view of modern society” (190). These descriptions articulate either a) beliefs that are indisputably part of the deposit of faith and therefore cannot distinguish one “type” of Catholic from another (e.g., recognition of magisterial authority); or b) characteristics that are so unclear or imprecise that they leave enough latitude to place virtually anyone on one side or another of the dividing line.

R. Scott Appleby’s essay is the most sophisticated and suggestive in this volume. He accurately describes the way in which the late-twentieth-century crisis in American Catholicism both reflected the postmodernism of its surroundings and was rooted in the secularization of the 1950s, when Catholics sought “cultural legitimacy.”

The final set of essays, by Michele Dillon and Gregory Baum, is similarly uneven. Dillon’s reflections are thought-provoking and insightful, highlighting appropriately the challenge the Church faces in contemporary societies that tend to value principles and beliefs that are at odds with traditional Christian teaching.

Concerning Baum’s essay, a few quotations indicate the tenor of the piece, which is valuable chiefly as a sample of what has become an almost risibly simplistic view of post-Vatican II history, and which can only continue to find its way to publication because it has so many sympathetic readers. *Humane Vitae*, Baum writes without qualification, prohibited the use of “the famous pill that had made life easier and happier for many Catholic couples” (276). John Paul II “began to appoint conservative yes-men as bishops of the American Church and at the same time restore the monarchical regime of the papacy” (281). Baum quotes *Gaudium et spes*’s opening lines affirming the Church’s sharing of the “joys and the hopes, the griefs and anxieties” of modern men and women, and then asserts, “No Church Father, no medieval theologian, no witness of the Catholic tradition in the past has ever made an equivalent statement.” He is not one for modest claims.

For those seeking a general survey of the fortunes of Catholicism in the post-Vatican II period in the three regions treated, this book contains many valuable statistics, anecdotes, and accounts. For those trying to understand more profoundly the causes of decline in Catholic practice or to envision more productive ways of Church-world interaction in the decades ahead, the essays are by and large missed

opportunities. Too many common oversimplifications are at play. There are failures to make critical distinctions: for example, the citation of polling data with no reflection on the difference between a self-identifying Catholic and a practicing Catholic. There are problematic dichotomies: for example “authoritarian” versus “collegial” bishops. (“Authoritarian” is used as code for the author’s dislike of a bishop’s policies rather than any real distinction between ways in which authority is exercised.) There are careless generalizations that border on stereotype: For example, in pre-1960 American religion, we are told, “Protestant parents taught their children to think for themselves,” while “Catholic parents were more likely to stress the importance of obedience” (187). Stated without qualification, the assertion takes as a given the faulty premise that thinking for oneself and obedience are mutually exclusive.

As this last example indicates, many contemporary Catholic analysts have imbibed spurious assumptions that underpinned the charges leveled by non-Catholic critics of the Church in the pre-Vatican II period. This compromises their ability to sort valid from invalid criticisms and, therefore, to be entirely reliable guides to the history of Catholicism’s confrontation with modernity.

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