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# The Catholic Experience in America, by Joseph A. Varacalli

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## BOOK REVIEWS

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### THE CATHOLIC EXPERIENCE IN AMERICA

JOSEPH A. VARACALLI  
GREENWOOD PRESS, 2006  
\$55.00, 364 PAGES

*Reviewed by Erin E. Whalen*

*The Catholic Experience in America* gives a detailed account of the history and tradition of Catholicism in the United States. The book is divided into six parts that discuss Catholic beliefs, history, culture, diversity, social thought, and the future of the Church. At the end of the book are eight appendices with information about Church documents, demographics, Church organizations, and Internet resources as well as a timeline and glossary.

The author begins with an overview of Catholicism worldwide including the beliefs and the organization of the Church. Varacalli also includes a personal perspective of how Catholicism, or any religion, is affected by the culture in which it is practiced. The American Catholic experience may be much different than the Catholic experience in another part of the world. As the author states, “both globally and historically, the Catholic Church simultaneously has both shaped and been shaped by the culture and civilization in which it is embedded” (p. 16).

Part two of the book gives a chronological history of the Church divided into four stages. The first stage discusses the humble beginnings of the Church in an already Protestant-dominant America from the country’s origin to the mid-1800s. The second stage moves into the development of a Catholic subculture through the construction of parishes, schools, seminaries, universities, and hospitals. In this stage, from the mid-1800s to the beginning of the Second Vatican Council, there was mass immigration, especially Irish immigration, at the same time that the infrastructure of the Catholic Church was being developed. The third stage is post-Vatican II which saw a lot of decomposition and domestication. Decomposition, according to Varacalli, is the change in the members of the Church that leads them to pick and choose what they want to believe or to leave the Church altogether. Domestication is a result of decomposition and is “the process by which a church starts less to challenge the host culture and society and more and more mirror its values and accept its activities” (p. 43). The fourth stage

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in part two is from 1978 forward, more specifically from the election of Pope John Paul II to the present day. This stage questions whether or not Pope John Paul II did enough to bring the Church back from the decomposition in stage three and speculates on the papacy of Benedict XVI.

The third part of *The Catholic Experience in America* is about Catholic social thought, or as the author states, “America’s Best Kept Secret” (p. 55). The author states that Catholic social thought has the right idea but has not made much of an impact in America due to external factors. This reviewer does not fully agree with Varacalli’s statement but sees the need to keep working. This part of the book also talks about the four general responses of American Catholics to Church teaching: indifference, rejection, acceptance, or taking the middle ground by picking and choosing what to believe and what to reject.

In part four, the author delves into diversity and unity speaking on topics such as ethnicity, socioeconomic status, age, race, gender, geography/regional differences, religious orders, and differing theological and philosophical worldviews. While Varacalli covers many topics in this section none of the topics receives more than a dozen pages.

Varacalli’s next section, “Controversies and Turning Points in American Catholic History,” spans nearly 100 pages divided into two chapters: pre and post Vatican II. In the chapter on “Historical Events before Vatican II” the author covers “the controversy over trusteeism, nativism and immigration, the provincial and plenary councils of Baltimore, 1828-84, the American culture war and the school controversy...and finally, the presidential election of John F. Kennedy” (p. 145). The chapter titled, “Contemporary Issues After Vatican II,” discusses numerous topics as well, ranging from the significance of Vatican II to recent topics such as Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ*.

The final section of the main part of the book is about the future of the Catholic Church in America. The author discusses six possible scenarios, beginning with the disclaimer that “the future is open and, theoretically speaking, just about anything can happen” (p. 243).

This reviewer found the book to be a thorough, accurate, and mostly unbiased account of the history of the Catholic Church in the United States. One complaint is that the title and front cover lead one to believe the book would give a more personal account of growing up as a Catholic in America, including the rich tradition that goes with that upbringing. However, for the author’s purpose the book was a thorough source of mostly factual information about American Catholicism for anyone, Catholic or non-Catholic, wanting to know more about the history and beliefs of the Church.

*Erin E. Whalen teaches sixth grade and serves as a mentor teacher at Holy Spirit Catholic School in Indianapolis, IN.*