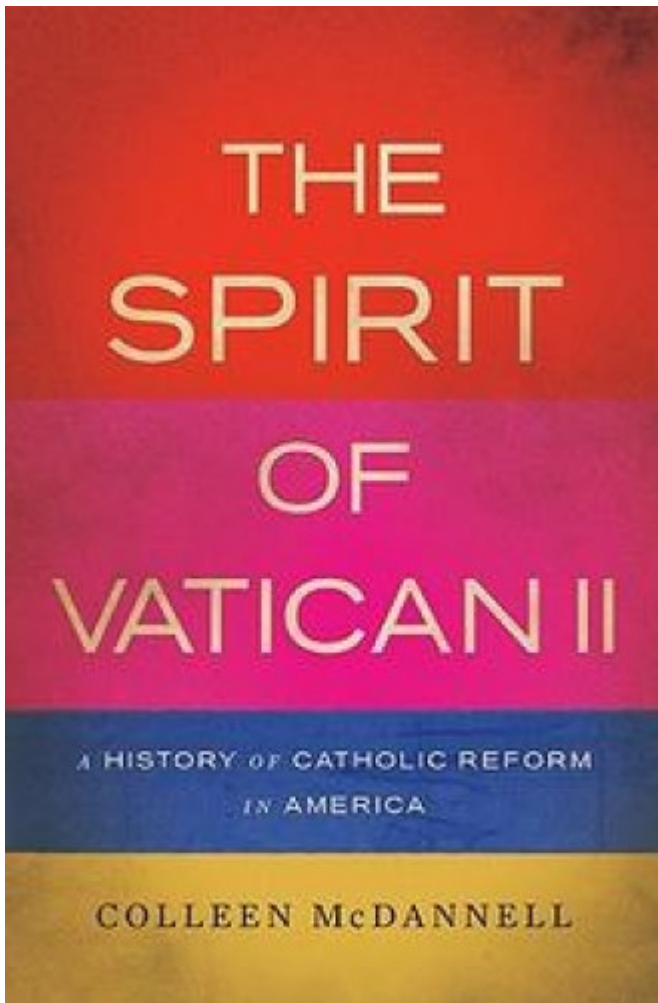


The Spirit of Vatican II, by Colleen McDannell

reviewed by [Lawrence S. Cunningham](#) in the [May 17, 2011](#) issue

In Review



The Spirit of Vatican II

By Colleen McDannell
Basic Books

Colleen McDannell confesses that integrating family history with scholarship is not for the faint of heart. In this valiant attempt McDannell tells the story of her Catholic parents in tandem with a discussion of the changes that were played out in the 20th century in the Catholic Church as a whole.

Because of her father's work requirements, McDannell's parents moved frequently. She traces their marriage from the suburbs of Toledo to California to Colorado to West Virginia, and finally to retirement in Florida, and she reconstructs the parochial culture of the various Catholic parishes along the way. She learned that the Catholic passion for the parochial school was a key part of what was called the "parish plant" and that as people became more mobile and the post-World War II suburbs accommodated more diverse populations, the old paradigm of the Catholic neighborhood gave way to a more porous sociological picture.

McDannell also discusses how the structure and iconography of the parish church morphed in response to liturgical changes, especially in light of Vatican II. In passing, she takes account of the slow diminution of the number of priests in parishes and the near disappearance of nuns from school staffs. In a particularly interesting chapter on her parents' life in Los Angeles, McDannell rehearses the titanic struggle in the mid-1960s between Cardinal James Francis McIntyre and the Immaculate Heart Sisters over the sisters' attempt to modernize their way of life. (The cardinal won a pyrrhic victory.)

In the middle of her narrative McDannell turns from the story of her parents to give us a potted history of both Vatican I and Vatican II, and these middle chapters are the weakest in the book. Drawing on standard works, she reduces the history to tired tales of struggles between White Hats and Black Hats—between conservative reactionaries and liberal reformers. When Vatican II was over, McDannell concludes, the core tenets of the faith remained, so "many journalists were left wondering: what changes, then, did occur?" What exactly Vatican II did and meant is a hotly contested and extremely complex theological question that still engages Catholic intellectuals today, just as there were similar discussions after the Council of Trent in the 16th century and Vatican I in the late 19th and early 20th century.

While it certainly was not the case with everyone who lived through this tumultuous period, McDannell's mother seemed to gracefully internalize the changes that were a fluctuating part of her Catholic life. Some of the practices that fell out of favor

immediately after the council have had a second life in her mother's Florida parish, which has installed more artwork in the church and has built a chapel for eucharistic adoration. This recuperation is not peculiar to her mother's parish; we see it played out, for example, on the campus of my university.

McDannell rightly points out that the Catholic Church is not a monolith. It has always had various shades of practice. Mexican Catholicism is not Irish Catholicism and never has been. McDannell's telling of the American story is graceful and reveals a sharp eye for detail, but when she enlarges the picture to Catholicism as a whole, her telling is only adequate.