

Sense of the Faithful: How American Catholics Live Their Faith

reviewed by [Lawrence S. Cunningham](#) in the [December 29, 2009](#) issue

In Review



Sense of the Faithful: How American Catholics Live Their Faith

Jerome P. Baggett
Oxford University Press

Jerome Baggett wanted to know how Catholics live their faith, how they interact in their worship community and how they relate to the larger church and their civic community. So he visited six Catholic parishes in the San Francisco Bay area and interviewed or reviewed questionnaires filled out by 300 parishioners. He selected interviewees from a wide spectrum of ages, ethnic backgrounds and educational levels, and he sought out people who were active in their congregations. The parishes he chose to study were also diverse: one parish was predominantly made up of gay people, and another made regular Sunday use of the Latin mass (but not the Tridentine version). He looked at working-class and affluent parishes, and at congregations that offered mass in Vietnamese, Tagalog and Spanish, with devotional practices to match. At the largely gay parish the closing hymn one Sunday was the decidedly noncanonical "Over the Rainbow."

Sociology, it has been said, is just slow journalism. That gibe has a grain of truth. I did not have to read this book to know that the predominantly gay parish had problems with the teaching authority of the official church on sexual matters or that the most traditional parish saw itself as a countercultural fortress against a largely decadent culture. Nor was it a surprise that the various ethnic communities honored their native religious customs as a way of sustaining their ethnic identities or that the more affluent parishioners were almost uniformly negative about the church's teaching on contraception. Nor, finally, was it big news that the Catholics Baggett spoke to did not have fully orthodox views on doctrinal matters or sacramental theology despite their passionate participation in church life.

Parish priests and their staffs might be encouraged to find out from this book how much people love their parishes and how much parish participation means to their congregants both as individuals and as groups. Bishops and those at the Vatican would also benefit from reading this book. The interviewees express little hostility toward the church hierarchy, but they see the bishops as remote figures whose pronouncements individuals and congregations genially (and sometimes not so genially) ignore. What is true of episcopal pronouncements is doubly true of what comes out of Rome.

Some conservative religious commentators have complained that American Catholicism has developed a congregational ecclesiology. Their critique is not totally off the mark. Baggett agrees that his interviewees are "likely to locate their commitment to the institutional church within their local parish" rather than with

“the wider church bureaucracy.”

All that being said, it is clear that the vast majority of those interviewed are well attached to their congregations and are pleased to be Catholic. Though from a theological perspective their grasp of doctrine is not always orthodox, it is startling to see the seriousness with which they take their faith. They generally express the sense that they belong to a long tradition and that what that tradition has sustained is both nourishing and important.

The disjunction between episcopal leadership and the people in the pews may be explained in various ways. Surely the bishops’ lamentable handling of the sexual abuse crisis has not helped. The sense, right or wrong, that bishops are simply delegates of papal authority plays a part, too. One wonders whether there is also a crisis of communication; bishops issue pastoral letters in Vatican-speak while most Americans get their news in bite-sized pieces of electronic communication.

Baggett’s detailed study gives us a look at how ordinary Catholics in one part of the country live their religious lives. If this book accomplishes anything, it is to show that Nancy Pelosi is not the only Catholic from the Bay Area who claims her Catholicity while giving the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops reason for dyspepsia.