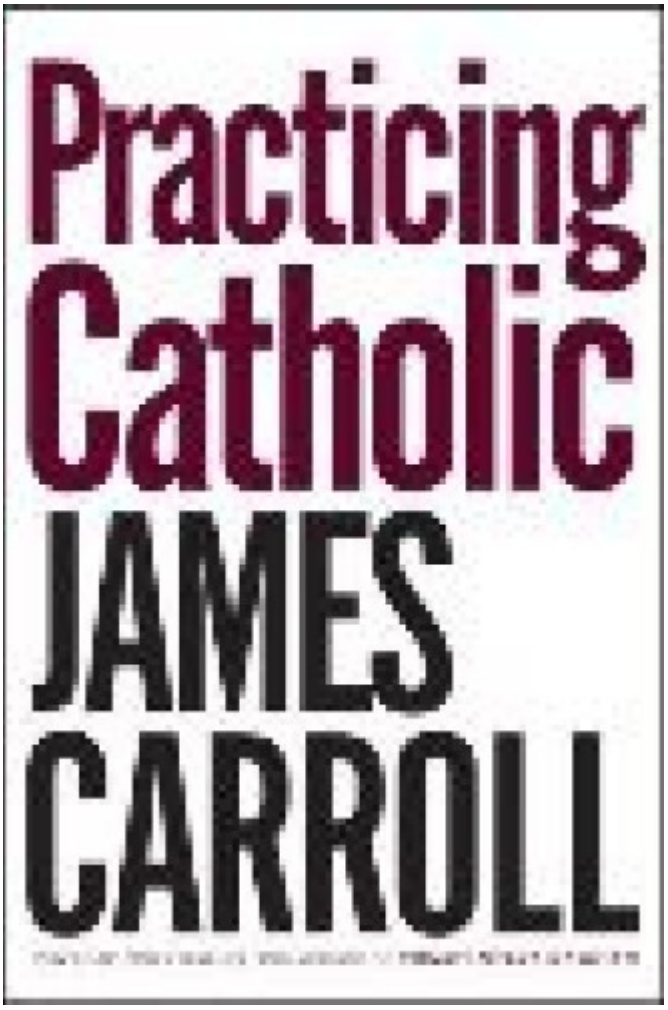
Ways of being Catholic

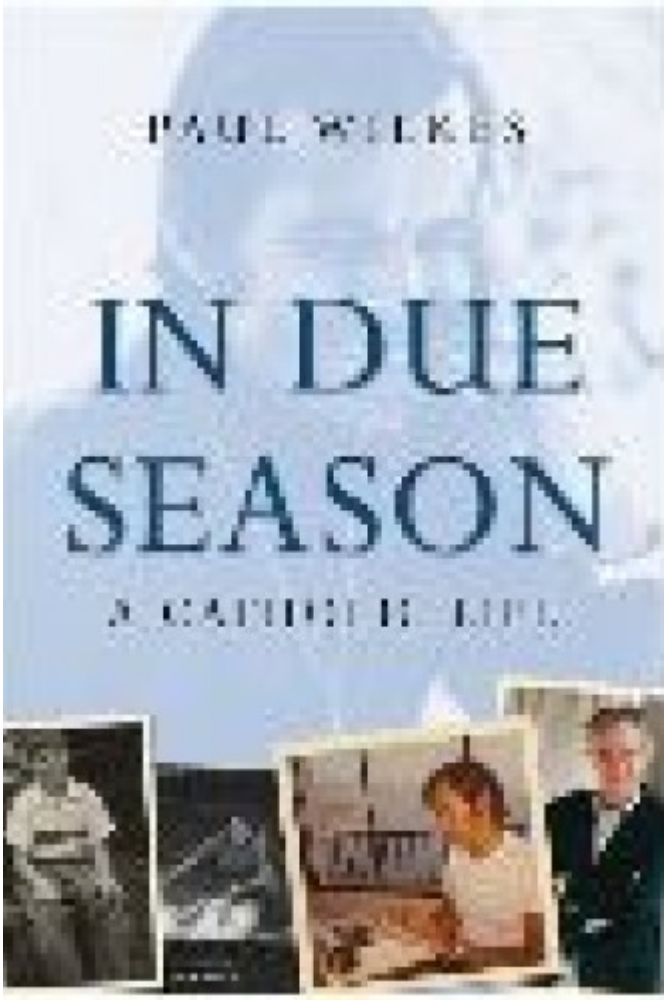
By Paul J. Contino in the December 29, 2009 issue

In Review



Practicing Catholic

James Carroll
Houghton-Mifflin Harcourt



In Due Season: A Catholic Life

Paul Wilkes
Jossey-Bass

Observers of American Catholicism can be alternately impressed and puzzled by its polyphony of public voices. Some, in the name of tradition, call for pulling back from change; others, under the banner of Vatican II, push against the boundaries of doctrine. How does the Catholic Church navigate the tension between closure and openness and sustain its unity? Two new books by James Carroll and Paul Wilkes exemplify calls for greater openness in the church. Each, in differing tones, reflects upon the blessings and challenges of Catholic experience.

“Experience” is the central theme running through Carroll’s *Practicing Catholic*, and unlike Wilkes’s memoir it presents a central argument: the reality of human experience is that things change, and the Catholic Church’s stance of unchanging

doctrine opposes this reality. He asks, “How does a church that claims to be unchanging change?”

Of course, as other students of church history, most notably Cardinal Newman, have observed, doctrine develops over time. However, for Carroll, who describes himself as an “extreme progressive,” a modernist who believes in the “primacy of experience over doctrine,” change cannot come soon enough.

For Carroll, Vatican II and the changes it brought “would define . . . nothing less than my entire life as a Catholic.” The most vivid and moving moments in his book describe his training as a seminarian and five-year experience as a Paulist priest during the years following the council. (He left the priesthood in 1974.) “Chastity was not the issue. Obedience was.” He memorably describes celebrating mass at a Boston University chapel, his first assignment as a freshly ordained priest. He tried to be “a steady source of kindness” to the college students in his charge, especially those who faced the imminence of being drafted.

Carroll’s pastoral gifts are especially evident when he describes his ministry to his teacher, the poet and critic Allen Tate. He counseled Tate after he suffered not only the death of his infant son but the cruel refusal of a parish priest to grant the child Catholic burial because Tate’s remarriage wasn’t approved by the church. Throughout his book, Carroll rightly celebrates the great contributions of Vatican II—its disavowal of past anti-Semitism, its recognition that God’s salvific grace extends to non-Catholics and non-Christians, its affirmations of religious liberty and the primacy of conscience.

However, the book is marred by a recurring strain of reductionism. Carroll’s description of Catholicism prior to Vatican II is almost unrelievedly dreary: parishioners were “all too aware of our ‘fallenness,’” and “almost no one presumed to approach the Communion rail.” According to Carroll, “All we ever heard from the pulpit was that we had better show up at Mass on Sundays or go straight to hell.” Nowhere does he mention the pastoral invitations, common at this time, to receive communion frequently. Nor does he explain how he knows that his fellow worshipers heard only the first part of the prayer recited before receiving the Eucharist, “Lord, I am not worthy,” and not its final part, “but only say the word and my soul will be healed.” Why characterize “prayers for the ‘grace of a happy death’” as “obsessive”? Carroll lacks an appreciation for complexity exhibited, for example, by Eamon Duffy, who can point to the limitations of his preconciliar Catholic experience

yet acknowledge his “growing appreciation of just how much of the essence of Catholicism my provincial Irish childhood transmitted to me” (*Faith of Our Fathers*).

Reductionism also blights Carroll’s treatment of the contemporary church. For Carroll, those church doctrines with which he disagrees—the requirement of priestly celibacy, the ban on birth control—are simply expressions of the church hierarchy’s self-interested desire to retain power. But in accepting the requirement for celibacy are clergy necessarily being “subservient”? Was *Humanae Vitae* promulgated “for no better reason than to protect papal primacy”?

The roots of Carroll’s resistance to the Catholic Church’s teaching lies in his modernist understanding of the primacy of experience over revelation and doctrine: “The starting point of experience is not God’s existence (‘In the beginning God’) but the person’s (‘I think, therefore I am’). How do I know I exist? Not because God tells me (‘God said . . .’) but because I can experience myself asking the question.” Thus “Here I am”—the biblical, saintly avowal of full availability and obedience to God’s revelation – gives way to the Cartesian assertion of self.

One can join Carroll in appreciating how Cardinal Richard Cushing’s love for his Jewish brother-in-law fostered his decision to excommunicate Father Joseph Feeney for his public anti-Semitic harangue that there is “no salvation outside the church.” But that does not necessarily mean one agrees that the cardinal’s decision was rooted simply in “a conflict between reason and faith, [in which] he changed the faith.” Cushing’s own faith, revealed to him through scripture and tradition, told him that God is love, that his grace extends to all, and that anti-Semitism is intolerable—a teaching of the Catholic Church that would, thankfully, be forthrightly proclaimed in the documents of Vatican II, to which Cushing contributed.

The implications of Carroll’s emphasis on personal experience over doctrine become evident as one notes the elements of faith he would dilute or perhaps drop: the divinity of Christ; Christ’s miracles (“[which] were less acts of magic than transformations in the meaning of harsh experience”); Christ’s atoning death (“We are all already saved by virtue of existing”); Christ’s resurrection (“the symbol pointing beyond itself to the intuition that, as his friends could not give up their affection for Jesus, neither could God”); heaven as the home to which we make our pilgrim way (“*It happens here*. Not in some afterlife”), and the Eucharist (“If Jesus was to be ‘real presence’ [in the chapel with his students], it had to be in the people’s interactions with each other, in community, more than in any wafer,

however much revered"). We come to God less by receptivity to his word than through our own "inventing . . . and, yes, projecting." Carroll avows his love for Pope John XXIII but nowhere suggests that the papacy might be an indispensable sign of unity for the church. He acknowledges in passing Pope John Paul II's opposition to recent wars, but his overall assessment is bitterly critical, even to the point of linking the pontiff to religious terror. His treatment of Pope Benedict XVI is entirely negative, chastising him for "maintaining orthodoxy in theology and discipline in religious practice" and for putting in place "the structures of cruelty that have come to define so much of Catholic life."

Carroll's insistence upon the primacy of individual experience shapes not only his content but his insistently judgmental tone. He treats the late, revered theologian Avery Dulles especially unfairly, imputing guilt by his early, passing association with Joseph Feeney and dismissing him as "Ratzinger's ally in seeking to roll back the spirit of Vatican II." And although he elsewhere has little use for the doctrine of hell, in his final pages he seems to take some delight as he observes popes and cardinals "being consigned to hell" in Michelangelo's painting *The Last Judgment*. He notes in the fresco the artist's self-portrait on the skin of St. Bartholomew and reads its message as his own: "Of everything I presume to accuse the Church in this painting, I first accuse myself." But Carroll's self-accusations are rare.

A note of humility is more evident in Paul Wilkes's memoir. He shares Carroll's liberal Catholicism (both puff each other's books), his love for Thomas Merton and Pope John XXIII and his frustration with the hierarchy. But Wilkes, while acknowledging the limitations of his pre–Vatican II upbringing, is more generous in his account of growing up in a working-class parish in Cleveland: "Cath olicism of this time is so easy to parody, but to a child like me it made perfect mythic sense."

The strong, quiet faith of his parents made a deep impression upon him. He recalls kneeling uncomfortably on the furnace grate, imitating Christ in his suffering, aspiring to be a saint. "From an early age I understood that God was the proper center of our lives, all life, in good times and bad." He praises his teachers, including the Notre Dame sisters who were "superb teachers in their fifty-student classrooms"; the Marian priests who taught him at Cathedral Latin School, especially the unkempt Brother Adolph who introduced him to the work of Thomas Merton (in 1956 he took a road trip with a friend to Gethsemane monastery in the hope of meeting the famous monk); and the Maryknoll missionary who briefly inspired him to follow suit, until Wilkes was seduced by the lures of a fellow student whom he calls

“the gypsy girl.”

Never a star student, he managed to be admitted to Marquette University, where—despite working long hours in a factory and enjoying hard drinking with his fellow laborers—he completed a journalism degree. Wilkes portrays his life as journalist with flair. During a stint as a navy officer (which included a close encounter with the enemy during the Cuban missile crisis) he met the woman he would marry, who was a Methodist. He worshiped as a Protestant for ten years. These years were marked by increasing successes as a writer: a graduate degree from Columbia and brushes with such luminaries as Dustin Hoffman, Tom Wolfe, Kurt Vonnegut and Betty Friedan. However, his marriage failed to thrive. He describes their life together as “a nice-looking, middle-class shell.” And each Sunday he would leave Park Slope Methodist Church in Brooklyn hungry for something and not knowing why. In the 1970s he was assigned to write a magazine article on Father Ronald Petrowski, a Catholic priest working with the poor. He began to realize what he had been missing:

> Years in Protestant churches had given me a new appreciation of the Word of God. . . . But ultimately there was not enough *there* there. . . . It was not all the trappings of Catholicism that constituted ‘there.’ It was, quite simply, the Eucharist. The presence of Christ, that powerful intersection of the human and the divine that takes place at every Catholic mass, no matter how well or poorly said. Looking back over my years away from the Church, there was not a Sunday I did not feel that something was lacking, like a perfect smile with a tooth missing.

After a divorce, Wilkes returned to Catholicism in a radical way. Inspired by people like Dorothy Day—whom he later met, and whose sense of being “present” to the moment he longed to imitate—he took up voluntary poverty, living with a small community of mentally afflicted men in a roach-infested apartment. He made pilgrimages to various monasteries trying to discern whether his vocation lay there.

But his success as an author lured him away from poverty and the monastic discipline of *ora et labora*. Offered a television series based on his first book, *Trying Out the Dream*: *A Year in the Life of an American Family*, he was soon reveling in the fleshpots of the Hamptons and Greenwich Village. But, like Augustine, his heart remained restless. To his surprise, he did not find God by returning to the monastery but in a far more ordinary way—through marriage with Tracy, “the woman who

saved [his] life," in fatherhood and in continued writing. His authorial focus became increasingly religious, and his long list of publications over the past 20 years includes portraits of a good parish priest in Boston, of a priest guilty of sexual abuse, and of thriving Catholic parishes and Protestant congregations.

The closing chapters of Wilkes's book suggest the peace that he has now found in love, prayer and work. In his account of his work as a layperson sanctioned to bring Holy Communion to the sick, Wilkes describes his mediation of Christ's real presence through his own being fully "present" to each person he visits, free of any cramped inquisition as to whether that person is "worthy" to receive: "I want those I visit to experience the presence that is so palpable each time I open the pyx. I want them to know the abiding trust that washes over me in my lowest moments that somehow, someway, everything will be all right. He is with us; we are not alone." This chapter brings to mind Carroll's story of ministering to Allen Tate in his own hour of need.

The Catholic Church has always experienced a tension between the open and the closed, between the centrifugal energies that push the church toward change and reform, and the centripetal energies that pull it toward continuing unity. It's often said that Catholicism is marked by a "both/and" sensibility, and surely the church is nourished by both the sacramental presence of its saints and the prophetic energies of its critics (and some of its worthiest saints have been its critics).

In the penultimate chapter of his book, Wilkes offers an image that suggests the Catholic Church's capacious both/and quality. He describes being interviewed by Larry King in 2005 during Benedict's investiture as pope and feeling irritated by the pomp and "high-priest trappings" he beheld. But his mood lifted when he realized that the church cannot be reduced to the stones of St. Peter's Basilica, but must rather be imagined as a "vast tent":

> In one corner of the tent, I could hear a feverish African drum Mass, in another, a Mass in Latin for those who would have it in no other way. There, a great pipe organ; beyond, guitars and marimbas. In jungles and high-rise office buildings, this was a Church presided over and attended by saints and scoundrels. All under this vast tent. Theologians debating the fine points of the Incarnation; a peasant in a field of maize, kneeling at the sound of the Angelus bell. And those men in lace, Curia officials, going about their work. The saints, the molesters. This all-too-human Church, gathered under the great tent of God's love.

It is an image of hope: “an unruly, imperfect family” yet simultaneously “the Mystical Body of Christ, each of us linked, unknowingly but surely contributing to the whole,” sustained individually and communally as we make our pilgrim way.