

*Roman Catholicism in America*, by Chester Gillis

reviewed by [Jon Nilson](#) in the [October 25, 2000](#) issue

Chester Gillis, the lead-off batter in the new Columbia Contemporary Religion series, has made a solid hit into left center field with this clear, engaging and reliable introduction to U.S. Catholicism. Columbia University Press wants to provide "well-crafted, thoughtful portraits of the country's major religious groups" for nonspecialists. If the rest of the books in this series meet the standard set by Gillis, they will be an invaluable resource for interfaith understanding and harmony in this religious smorgasbord of a country.

Chapters surveying the history, teachings and beliefs of American Catholicism form the book's backbone. Gillis does not highlight those teachings and beliefs officially defined as central and foundational, but those that most affect the Catholic in the pew, such as the role of Mary and the saints. Similarly, the chapter on "Institutions, Roles, and Organizations" does not explicate the flow charts of the Vatican bureaucracy and the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, but explores the Catholic school system, hospitals and charitable works, as well as the tensions and challenges these are now facing.

Gillis rightly identifies the heart of Catholicism as the weekly celebration of the Eucharist that nourishes the life of the local parish. Yet he is also sensitive to Catholicism as Roman. Despite some disagreements between U.S. Catholics and the pope and Vatican officialdom, there are no serious initiatives toward a congregational system or a national church. Catholics still want to belong to the universal church. Yet we are also a diverse and argumentative lot. Gillis's account of the differences--even harsh disagreements--within the American church destroys any notion of a monolithic Catholicism.

He shows that the church today is the product of two forces: First, Vatican Council II (1961-1965), along with the civil rights movement, the Vietnam war and Watergate, left a substantial residue of suspicion of authority, even church authority; second, as the descendants of the past century's immigrant Catholic hordes have climbed the social ladder, they have made the church predominantly white, middle-to-upper-class and well educated. This means that it must struggle to integrate fully its

African-American members, as well as its new, predominantly immigrant Hispanic members. And bishops must now persuade their flocks, since they can no longer command adherence to church teachings.

But their efforts have not succeeded when it comes to contraception, homosexuality, abortion and the role of women in the church. Many Catholics disagree with official teachings on these matters and act accordingly, while still considering themselves good Catholics. To conservatives, this situation proves that a hedonistic, materialistic, secular culture has gutted genuine Catholicism. To Gillis, however, this situation simply constitutes a new challenge for the church's leadership. Thus, his analytical perspective is left of center, more progressive than conservative.

In covering so much ground, some minor missteps are inevitable. For example, when Gillis speaks of "the Church" he often refers to its institutional leadership, not its full membership, though he stresses the many ways in which the Catholic laity will continue to be more prominent in the church; *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* is not a Vatican document but a papal one; Loyola University Press has no connection with Chicago's Loyola University. (This is certainly a forgivable mistake, since Gillis teaches theology at Georgetown University, which does have a press.) But enough quibbling. Extensive notes, a glossary, a chronology, photos, graphs, biographical sketches and a list of Internet resources on Catholicism magnify the book's usefulness. It belongs in every public, academic and ministerial library.