

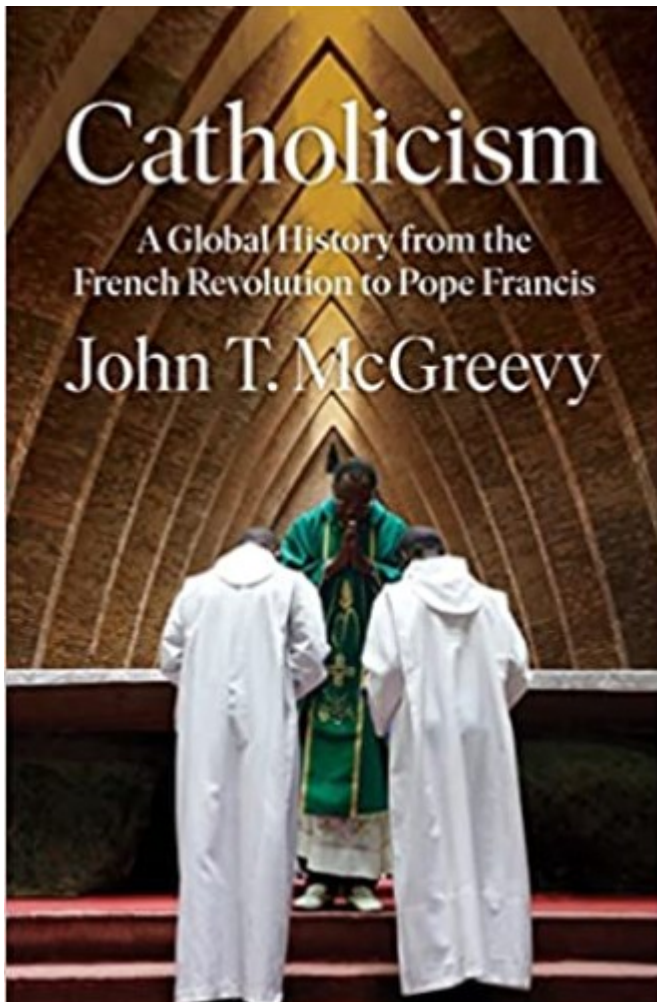
From a Western phenomenon to a truly global church

**John McGreevy makes what could have become a dull textbook into a riveting narrative of Catholicism's modern history.**

by [Thomas Albert Howard](#) in the [May 2023](#) issue

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**In Review**



**Catholicism**

## A Global History from the French Revolution to Pope Francis

By John T. McGreevy

W. W. Norton

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In medieval and Renaissance frescoes depicting the cardinal virtues, artists regularly portray prudence with a Janus face: a youthful face facing the future and an elderly one gazing backward into the past. This symbolism suggests that to judge and act wisely, one must know the past—how the theater of action we call the present came to be. Philosophers and theologians, not surprisingly, often regarded prudence as *the* essential virtue for leaders.

Whether decision-makers at the University of Notre Dame had all of this in mind when they elevated the historian John McGreevy to the office of provost last year is beside the point, for they appear to have chosen wisely. He has written a remarkable book on Catholicism's modern history, which positions him well for leadership at the nation's (and arguably the world's) flagship Catholic university.

In taking on a work of this scope, the author must know what to leave out, how to condense, and how to pick choice quotes, events, and people to illustrate larger trends and forces. McGreevy succeeds on practically all counts, making what could have become a dull textbook survey into a riveting narrative. Most of the 15 chapters and the conclusion, entitled "Pope Francis and Beyond," are in fact page-turners, each beginning with a particular vignette or profile of an individual before the camera widens to explore the bigger picture.

As the subtitle suggests, the book's big story is how Catholicism went from being a mostly Western European phenomenon in the late 18th century to a truly global one in the 21st. "No institution [today] is as multicultural or multilingual, few touch as many people . . . a majority of whom are people of color living in the Global South," McGreevy writes on page 1. McGreevy performs for Catholicism what Philip Jenkins did for Christianity as a whole in his celebrated 2002 book *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*.

Delicious bits of detail, not incidental to the larger story, distinguish *Catholicism*. McGreevy observes, for instance, that at the end of each day's session at the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), African bishops piled into a single bus to return

to their lodgings, while each West German bishop hopped into an individual Mercedes. As late as 1952, he notes, Notre Dame's students and faculty had to request permission to read books on the List of Prohibited Books, which were locked in a cage in the basement of the library. (The list was not formally abolished until 1966 by Pope Paul VI.) And then there's the fact that when it was still a temporal power in the 19th century, the papacy actually possessed a small navy—with one ship named the *Immaculate Conception*!

Trained as an Americanist, McGreevy impressively cites works in French, German, and Italian, giving the book an international flair. The chapters on empire, decolonization, and liberation theology are especially well crafted, with the latter two charting the church's gradual indigenization in the non-Western world even as it regularly found itself caught up in the complexities of cold war geopolitics. McGreevy nicely covers the conflict in the late 18th and 19th centuries between Reform Catholicism (on friendlier terms with the Enlightenment) and the more conservative Ultramontane movement. The latter triumphed at the First Vatican Council (1869–1870), resulting in the controversial teachings of papal infallibility and the universal jurisdiction of the pope.

Books of this scope inevitably invite some scholarly kvetching. More could have been said about the ecumenical movement in the 20th century and the Catholic Church's relationship to it. The chapter on the papacy of John Paul II gives too little attention to the production of the Catechism of the Catholic Church in 1992—a landmark event, the first catechism since the Council of Trent. The same goes for the pope's summit with other world religious leaders in Assisi in 1986—a major moment in the now-global interfaith movement. Much more could also have been written about the persecution endured by Catholics under 20th-century communist regimes. Alas, this story continues—in China, North Korea, Cuba, Laos, Vietnam, and elsewhere—as ably documented by a number of recent books.

Insofar as *Catholicism* has a hero, it appears to be the French philosopher Jacques Maritain (1882–1973), who is cited copiously. Not a bad choice, given his pioneering role in nudging the church toward a more profound and generous engagement with modernity at the Second Vatican Council and the influence that his personalist-Thomist philosophy—or “integral humanism”—exercised throughout the world in the middle decades of the 20th century. John Henry Newman, Yves Congar, Henri de Lubac, John Courtney Murray, and Augustin Bea also receive their due, along with many less known, non-Western figures, such as Josephine Bakhita, a formerly

enslaved Sudanese nun; Chinese statesman Ma Xiaobang; and Vietnamese bishop Ngo Dinh Thuc.

McGreevy evenhandedly tells the painful story of the recent sexual abuse crisis and its sordid cover-up, set within the larger context of the massive exodus from the church that has taken place in the last several decades. This same period has also witnessed a crisis in the priesthood, the decline and fall of many religious orders, the falling off of some practices (such as confession), and ever-deepening internecine battles in both the Catholic hierarchy and the laity over a range of topics—many having to do with human sexuality and women’s role in the church. These chapters make for sober reading. At points they’re even Dantesque in their willingness—simply by allowing the facts about the abuse crisis to speak for themselves—to castigate a morally obtuse hierarchy, presumably in the name of a deeper fidelity to the faith.

If the Catholic Church—and all who look to it for moral leadership—is to find its bearings again and live fully into its global vocation, Catholic education must no doubt play a major role. The stakes are high. Let’s hope McGreevy leads Notre Dame as well as he writes history.