

American and Catholic: U.S. History Shows the Legacy of Religious Identity

Book Pick: *Catholics in America*

Father C. John McCloskey

CATHOLICS IN AMERICA

Religious Identity and Cultural Assimilation From John Carroll to Flannery O'Connor-By Russell Shaw -Ignatius Press, 2016

Russell Shaw is one of the best Catholic writers and historians in the Catholic world.

In his new book, *Catholics in America*, he offers the reader the opportunity to go from the very beginnings of Catholicism in the United States up to our own times, through a series of 15 portraits of important American Catholics.

He describes these major Catholic players, the influence that they had, their understanding of the congeniality or uncongeniality of the American project to Catholicism, and the difference they made — for better or worse — in the Church in the United States today. He then takes a look at how the situation of the Church in America may look in the future.

This book will greatly aid those who are history-challenged in general and Catholic students in particular.

It could also help in evangelizing relatives and friends interested in venturing deeper into the truth of Catholicism and its impact in this country. My own doctorate is in history, and I recommend this book strongly.

Shaw opens with the first archbishop of the United States, John Carroll, the cousin of Declaration of Independence signer Charles Carroll, and concludes with the brilliant Southern short-story writer and novelist Flannery O'Connor.

In between are St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, Orestes Brownson, Isaac Hecker, Cardinal James Gibbons, Al Smith, Dorothy Day, Cardinal Francis Spellman, John F. Kennedy and others.

As you can see from the list, some are saints, some are near-saints, and some are quite a ways from sanctity.

All, however, were important figures in our history, and all helped define what it means to be American and Catholic.

For some of those Shaw portrays, such as Hecker, the American experiment in ordered liberty, democracy and a lack of an established church seemed a natural fit — perhaps the best possible condition — for the flourishing of Catholicism.

And some, like New York Gov. Al Smith, achieved great secular success, but also experienced strong pushback from anti-Catholic bigotry.

The portraits of 15 Catholics from U.S. history offer vivid incarnations of the paradoxes, dilemmas, travails and triumphs of the Catholic Church in the United States.

Shaw presents the changes in American society over many generations in achieving the broad-based recognition that Catholics can be and are full-fledged, loyal citizens.

He also discusses the temptations for Catholics to concede too much in pursuit of complete cultural assimilation.

The best may lie ahead for Catholicism in United States, but that will only be true if American Catholics are serious about their faith.

Opus Dei Father C. John McCloskey is a Church historian.