

Why the Catholic Church Must Change: A Necessary Conversation. By Margaret Nutting Ralph. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013. Pp. vii + 209. \$34.

Ralph's title introduces an ambiguity that should be noted at the outset. The claim that the "Catholic Church must change" could be a simple moral imperative: certain current teachings and policies are unacceptable. It could also introduce a theological argument about the inevitability of change in an organization that is, after all, embedded in human history. In the first case, the "necessary conversation" turns on arguments for particular changes. In the second case, the conversation would be a more nuanced one about the nature of the Church itself, its authority to teach, and its role in history—topics likely to appeal more to specialists than to anyone else.

Opting firmly for the first approach, R. presents a general audience with an impassioned argument for rethinking Catholic teaching and policy on several of the fabled "non-negotiable issues" of the last 40 years. Emphasizing repeatedly that since *Divino afflante spiritu* (1943) "the Magisterium teaches Catholics to be contextualists" (5), R. argues that contemporary scriptural understanding, new scientific knowledge, and radically changed social situations call for doctrinal change with regard to contraception, women's ordination, and homosexuality. Using a similar method, she calls for greater humility and changes in pastoral practice regarding abortion, annulments, justice for church employees, ecumenical dialogue, and eucharistic hospitality. Her theological approach is generally sound (though not always subtle), her tone respectful even when urgent, and her sincerity beyond question. Those who agree with her perspectives on the focal issues will likely read with a strong sense of satisfaction at how issues are laid out and arguments for new approaches made.

Those disinclined to think that reform is needed will, of course, have a very different experience of the book. The difficulty, however, lies less in the actual arguments (problematic enough for some readers) than in the quality of conversation that the work is likely to promote. As a teacher of undergraduates, I was hoping to find that R.'s book demonstrates the very possibility of "conversation" within a church too often seen (as R. emphasizes) as a monarchical monolith, despite core documents from the New Testament to the revised Code of Canon Law encouraging responsibility and prayerful discernment among the faithful. Instead, some characteristics of her work make it likely to generate more of the same polarized monologues to which the Church has been treating itself for decades.

These characteristics include the "leading" nature of some end-of-chapter discussion questions; for example, "Do you believe that the teaching voice of the Magisterium can relieve you of your responsibility to make moral decisions?" (79). More important, though, is R.'s overemphasis of her own personal experience and reflection. This happens in two ways. In the introduction, she carefully indicates her direct involvement in some situations used as examples in the chapters on exclusion of women from ordained leadership and on justice to church employees. This admirable transparency is almost certain to make her arguments easily dismissible by those who do not already agree. It might have been better to find less personal examples of the problems she herself presents as "systemic, not local" (14).

A more general way in which R.'s personal thrust may undermine her own ideal of "conversation" is the minimal treatment of the discussion that has indeed been ongoing on each of these topics for decades. Assuredly, she makes general reference to the contemporary biblical scholarship that has made possible the new interpretations that she carefully presents in every chapter. She also makes extensive use of official church documents, especially illustrating the degree to which change has always been part of the Catholic relationship to doctrine. Despite some references to other authors, however, she is less diligent in acknowledging that her key arguments are generally common ones, raised and answered repeatedly by theologians and other scholars across the academic and ecclesial/political spectrum. The laudable goal of not overburdening the general audience with multiple references to scholarly debates helps explain this approach. Still, it is disappointing not to find in R.'s bibliography even previous works with an aim and audience quite similar to hers, such as Philip Kaufman's popular *Why You Can Disagree and Remain a Faithful Catholic*, or John Noonan's subtly argued and carefully documented *A Church That Can and Cannot Change*.

Throughout the book and in a most articulate conclusion, R. presents a well-structured summary of reasons why the Church, in the United States and elsewhere, continues to struggle to regain credible teaching authority among many of its people. On its own, this work is unlikely to advance the discussion much further, but R. and those longing with her for "necessary conversation" might take heart that, in the age of Pope Francis, *listening* may again become fashionable.

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Leo Strauss on Maimonides: The Complete Writings. Edited by Kenneth Hart Green. Chicago: University of Chicago, 2013. Pp. xxxv + 654. \$45.

Leo Strauss and the Rediscovery of Maimonides. By Kenneth Hart Green. Chicago: University of Chicago, 2013. Pp. ix + 207. \$35.

Moses Maimonides (1135–1204), the "Rambam," occupies a unique role in the history of Judaism, as both a revered codifier of Jewish law in his *Mishneh Torah* and as the author of the controversial (in its time) *Guide to the Perplexed*, which brought Judaism into direct confrontation with the teachings of Aristotle and the Islamic philosopher Farabi. Whereas the *Mishneh Torah* was written in clear and direct form, the *Guide*, by its author's acknowledgment, was composed in accord with a complex plan such that only the most acute and diligent reader could unlock its true meaning. The influence of the *Guide* transcended the Jewish world, most notably through Maimonides's contribution to Thomas Aquinas's endeavor to "synthesize" reason and revelation. Yet by the early twentieth century, Maimonides's reputation as both theologian and philosopher (as distinguished from legal commentator) had declined, owing largely to the "higher" biblical criticism initiated by Spinoza, which