

SENSE OF THE FAITHFUL: HOW AMERICAN CATHOLICS LIVE THEIR FAITH. By Jerome P. Baggett. New York: Oxford, 2009. Pp. xv + 285. \$29.95; \$19.95.

Baggett wastes no time in signaling his intention to produce an utterly fearless book, one that systematically refuses to avert its eyes from facts and trends that may make some readers uncomfortable. With over 300 intensive interviews of Catholics in the Bay Area of Northern California to choose from, he selects for the opening vignette the story of an openly gay parishioner who lost his partner to AIDS. When invited to reflect on his relationship with Catholicism today, “Bill” (the actual names of all the participants in this impressive and ambitious study have been disguised) hastens to voice his rejection of certain versions of the “intolerably dogmatic ‘Churchianity’” that he characterizes as “ossified and irrelevant” (4).

The volume provides a ground-level view of US Catholicism by employing a methodology adopted in recent decades by a number of sociologists (most prominently, Robert Bellah and his coauthors of *Habits of the Heart*, 1985) whose desire to study the influence of religion in US society has led them to pioneer new techniques. Because aggregate data from opinion surveys and other statistical instruments conceal as much as they reveal, researchers like B. have turned to intensive interviews, a method in line with the best of the long tradition of participant-observer anthropology and interpretive sociology. Talking at length with dozens of parishioners at each of six Bay Area parishes accomplishes a great deal. Not only does this method reveal intriguing features of faith narratives such as the idiosyncratic interaction of family and ethnicity with religious commitment, but it also models the kind of exemplary deep listening that is a crucial element of the way forward for fragile faith communities like US Catholicism. As B. shares brief segments of his interviews, the reader enjoys the rare privilege of eavesdropping on the musings of many highly thoughtful parishioners—ordinary folks who fashion a variety of creative ways to live out their faith amid the bewildering challenges presented by contemporary secular society. As illustrated by the narrative provided by Bill, who stumbled upon a gay-friendly parish at just the right moment, everyday life exhibits an informal logic of its own, one that a skilled sociologist can describe and share with theologians eager to be of service to contemporary church life.

Motivating this book is a series of profound questions regarding how a religion founded in a distant time and culture can provide a structure of transcendent meaning for people in the distinctive and sometimes hostile context of contemporary US society. B. does well to invite parishioners to comment on Gospel pericopes and to unpack the ethical guidance they find there. By employing this technique from time to time, B. flavors his chapters with a welcome grounding in tradition that supplements

his informants' tendency to focus almost exclusively on contemporary concerns as they cobble together a moral compass for their lives. At the same time, the pointed questions B. poses dredge up deep-seated issues regarding religious authority, church polity, and appropriate models for belonging to a community of faith. Looming in the background of the entire project are concerns about the proper meaning of adherence to official moral teachings of the Catholic Church on difficult topics such as contraception and sexual morality, including the stock image of "cafeteria Catholicism"—which some informants openly embrace and others decisively denounce.

It takes a bold and skilled author to record, organize, and present this range of styles prevalent among Catholics today, and B. is fully up to the task. Documenting how certain church teachings and practices continue to be sticking points for his informants sets up some rewarding, more strictly academic, treatment of issues involving the limits and possibilities of forging responsible personal agency and practicing genuine discernment within a faith context today. A concluding chapter proposes three motifs (negotiating, reframing, and innovating) that capture the patterns US Catholics commonly employ as they navigate their way through the maze of faith and public life. B.'s synthesis here builds on earlier chapters that highlighted the relevant themes of family life, personal development, institutions, and authority in church and society.

It is possible to fault B. for some minor flaws in this work. His exclusive focus on parish life leaves aside major loci of religious vitality today (e.g., college campuses, new ecclesial movements, and various institutions sponsored by religious orders). He chose a geographical area that is hardly fully representative of US culture. He engages in some awkward name-dropping to honor the literature that influences him. But these mere quibbles are far eclipsed by what B. has accomplished. With a lively prose style and fine wit, this volume describes and analyzes the lived experience of American Catholics without shying away from the messiness of living a life of faith in contemporary society.

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THOMAS AQUINAS ON GOD AND EVIL. By Brian Davies. New York: Oxford University, 2011. Pp. xvi + 172. \$99; \$29.95.

To the philosophically fashionable discussion of the problem of evil, Davies has added this most unfashionable volume. Unfashionable because his subject, Thomas Aquinas, does not endorse the broadly accepted premise that evil poses a problem for belief in God and in his goodness. Though many theists have in recent years undertaken to vindicate God