American Catholics and the Quest for Equality in the Civil War Era

David Endres
Athenaeum of Ohio/Mount St. Mary’s Seminary, dendres@athenaeum.edu

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Review

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Endres, David


In *American Catholics and the Quest for Equality in the Civil War Era*, Robert Emmett Curran argues that nineteenth-century America did not offer equal opportunities for Blacks, Native Americans, Jews, Catholics, and women. Curran, a professor emeritus of history at Georgetown University, focuses on Catholics’ pursuit of equality from 1846 to 1877, showcasing their transformation from “internal aliens” to full-fledged citizens, which did not prevent them from seeking to deprive others, especially African Americans, of the same.

Curran, a prolific scholar in early and nineteenth-century U.S. Catholic history, has authored what may be his most significant work yet. He skillfully narrates the Catholic community’s experiences during the Civil War era, a subject not thoroughly explored previously, aside from sectionally-focused histories by William Kurtz and Gracjan Kraszewski. *American Catholics and the Quest for Equality* takes a long view of Catholics in the nineteenth century with the Civil War experience as the pivotal point. The book covers the period from the Mexican American War through Reconstruction, organized chronologically with some chapters focusing on specific geographic regions.

The narrative meticulously details Catholics’ involvement in the war, featuring various voices, such as politicians, generals, soldiers, priest chaplains, sister nurses, and civilians on the home front. Curran draws from secondary sources, published primary materials, and manuscript collections to provide a well-rounded representation. Catholic contributions to this history are
woven seamlessly into the narrative, so much so that it can be difficult to distinguish between Catholic and non-Catholic subjects in the story—which may well be the author’s intent to avoid the ghettoization of the Catholic story typical in historical studies.

The chapters on the war offer a detailed narration of Catholic engagement in and response to the conflict, exploring Catholic intersections with topics as diverse as John Brown’s raid, Rose O’Neal Greenhow’s spy ring, and Lincoln’s assassination, as well as careful analysis of each of the war’s significant military engagements, from Antietam and Chancellorsville to Gettysburg and Stones River. The work shows a keen awareness of political and military developments in addition to its expected engagement with religious and social aspects. While the concentration on military history is mostly welcome, some readers might be overwhelmed by the detailed descriptions of troop movements and casualty numbers. However, others may appreciate the attention to military strategy and vivid battle depictions.

The theme of Catholics’ pursuit of equality and their denial of it to others serves as a framework for the narrative and is particularly evident in the chapters on Reconstruction. The discussion of Catholics and Reconstructions is particularly important since scholars have largely neglected it. Here, the author’s thesis comes more clearly into view, and he reveals the way Catholics stood against Black and Native American rights using intimidation and violence or, in at least a few cases, furthered a more just restructuring of the nation through support for congressional Reconstruction.

This “unvarnished history”—to use the author’s phrase—is a sad testimony to Catholics’ successful realization of citizenship’s benefits while failing to support others’ liberty and equality. As Curran concludes, “Catholics, as a community, had known for generations the consequences of being treated inequitably. But when the moment came to be part of a revolution
to right the historic imbalance for everyone, most white Catholics could not rise above their tribal interests” (380).

This reviewer has one quibble with the volume’s final pages: The sweeping epilogue—from John F. Kennedy to Donald Trump to Pope Francis—seems disconnected from the book’s purpose of understanding the place of Catholics in the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, *American Catholics and the Quest for Equality* stands as a meticulously researched and engagingly written monograph, offering valuable insights into Catholic contributions to nineteenth-century America, the intersection of political, social, and religious dynamics during the Civil War, and the enduring impact of the nation’s racial and ethnic prejudices. This work is a triumph that will not soon be surpassed.

David J. Endres is academic dean and professor of church history at Mount St. Mary’s Seminary and School of Theology/The Athenaeum of Ohio in Cincinnati. His recent works include several edited volumes, among them *Slavery and the Catholic Church in the United States* (2023), the *Black Catholic Studies Reader* (2021), and *Soldiers of the Cross: The Heroism of Catholic Chaplains and Sisters in the American Civil War* (2019).