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Catholic Activism Today: Individual Transformation and the Struggle for Social Justice

Maureen K. Day

New York, NY: New York University Press, 2020. 311 pp.

Catholic moral theology is based on Jesus' exhortation to love God and to love one's neighbour. Throughout American history, Catholics from different sociohistorical circumstances have responded to this ethical imperative by adopting different approaches to caring for the poor. In *Catholic Activism Today*, sociologist and theologian Maureen K. Day argues that influential organizations within contemporary American Catholicism have adopted a new model for civic engagement that she terms the "discipleship style." To illustrate this new paradigm for social activism, Day provides a detailed case study of JustFaith Ministries (JFM), a Catholic organization that has enrolled over 50,000 program participants in more than 1,500 churches throughout the United States. Day draws upon an impressive wealth of interviews, surveys, and observation data to study the effectiveness of this new approach to social change that focuses exclusively on transforming individuals, rather than mobilizing collectives. More than a narrow study of one faith-based organization, Day effectively uses JFM to draw some important conclusions about the strengths and weaknesses of this new discipleship style and the implications that it has for the contemporary Catholic Church.

Catholic Activism Today's most important contribution to scholars of religion is that it builds upon David J. O'Brien's influential *Public Catholicism* (1996). O'Brien categorized Catholic civic engagement in the United States as evolving through three distinct periods: Republican (1750–1820) that privatized religion; Immigrant Style (1820–1920) that rejected non-Catholic America and created a subculture with parallel institutions; and Evangelical (1920–1960) that sought to replace secular structures with faith-based ones. As Day points out, these historical models no longer work for contemporary Catholics due to increased geographic mobility, greater individual moral authority, and rising socioeconomic status. Updating O'Brien's work, she introduces a new fourth style of public Catholicism, Discipleship (1965–Present). Unlike the previous styles that built institutions or mobilized collective associations, this new paradigm forms individual

actors, who in turn bring Catholicism to public life (creating a ripple effect). Examples of these “ripple groups” include JustFaith Ministries, Opus Dei, Sant’Egidio, and Catholic Christian Outreach. The advantage of this personalist style of activism is that it gives Catholics a new integrated way to enter public life and it revivifies their faith with a new sense of purpose. Yet, as Day ultimately concludes, the disadvantage of this approach is that the solutions proposed for social change remain at the individual-level (such as personal lifestyle changes) and, thus, fail to address the systemic inequalities that JFM and the graduates seek to affect in the world (the work of social justice).

The heart of the book is a critical assessment of the five core values of JustFaith Ministries. (1) Transformation. JustFaith Ministries was founded in 1989 by Jack Jezreel in Louisville, KY as a faith-based approach to alleviating poverty. Jezreel adopted the effective pedagogy of RCIA (small group community building, speakers, readings, discussion, prayer and ritual, and retreats) to holistically transform participants and make them enthusiastic about caring for the poor. JFM participants encounter vulnerable populations to make previously abstract suffering more personal. Graduates of this program emerge with a fundamentally altered worldview that demands a change in their lifestyle and prompts them to act. (2) Christ-centered. Catholic identity is paramount to JFM. Its programming—based on the Catholic intellectual tradition—is designed to create a “theology of pragmatic reverence” that intentionally applies abstract religious concepts to the concrete everyday life of its participants. Discipleship style Catholics understand all spheres of their life—social, political, economic, and familial—through a religious lens that frames the world with new moral meaning. (3) Community. Small groups of like-minded people help sustain the personal transformations through study, worship, friendship, and ongoing spiritual formation (gathering). These small groups also orient members outward to improve the communities around them (sending). (4) Justice. Based on the Hebrew *Shalom* (to be in right relationship with God, one another, and creation), justice is the measure for a community to examine its own righteousness. Specifically, social justice calls upon Catholics to make the state (politics) and the market (economy) more just. In addition to addressing immediate needs (charity), justice seeks systemic change to address the root cause of inequalities. (5) Compassion. More than pity, compassion is entering so deeply into a situation that another’s pain becomes your own. This affective response to suffering is fostered through immersion experiences and personal stories. Feeling this pain becomes a desire to care for others and to challenge unjust structures.

Day also provides fascinating insights into the sophisticated ways that JFM graduates seek to reconcile inherent tensions within this style of Catholic activism. The “dilemma of resistance” refers to the challenge of being in the world enough to change it, but not letting the ills of the world change the actor. The “dilemma of efficacy” questions whether it is preferable for JFM grads to abandon the unjust market and embrace voluntary poverty or to use their power to reform social and economic structures from within. The “dilemma of volunteerism” asks whether individual acts of charity are more effective than corporate acts of justice.

In summary *Catholic Activism Today* provides an enlightening study of how Catholic organizations, like JustFaith Ministries, are transforming individuals to engage American public life in creative new ways. Day does an exceptional job of weaving

insightful quotations from JFM graduates throughout her analysis to illuminate the strategies and dilemmas associated with this new personalist style of Catholic activism. One important question that needs further study is how representative is this movement within the American Catholic community? Is JFM an outlier or more representative of a broader trend? Also, her argument for how this emphasis on the individual has shifted the locus of moral authority away from the hierarchy, which in turn undermines the institutional authority and strength of the Catholic Church, remains underdeveloped and needs more evidence. Despite these criticisms, Day's thought-provoking study of the emergent discipleship style of American public Catholicism is most helpful to scholars seeking to understand contemporary Catholic life and the newest wave of Catholic civic engagement.

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