

7-31-08 - No exit from sadness in 'Faithful Departed', by Philip F. Lawler: A BOOK REVIEW

By Margaret Smith, GateHouse News Service, on the web page of MetroWest Daily News

Boston — 'The Faithful Departed: The Collapse of Boston's Catholic Culture,' by Philip F. Lawler. Encounter Books. Hardcover.

You might not think of a church history as any kind of page-turner.

You may have been disappointed by Garry Wills' s "Why I Am A Catholic" with its warmed-over litany of various incompetent and shady popes, (this ground was already covered in Russell Chamberlin's engaging book known aptly, as, "The Bad Popes,") and little of the soul-searching promised by the title.

You may have been irritated by Thomas Cahill's "Mysteries of the Middle Ages," full of its own cleverness with jabs against various historical church figures – and modern ones in the maelstrom of the sex abuse crisis.

Yes, a lot of people have a lot to say about what's wrong with the Catholic Church, and whether it can be repaired.

And even if you don't agree with everything Philip F. Lawler has to say, you will still find this book verifiable page-turner with great history, personal stories and more than occasional moral dudgeon.

As a former editor of Catholic World Report and of The Pilot -- the newspaper of the Archdiocese of Boston – editor of Catholic World News, Lawler isn't the person to go to for objectivity.

But, unlike some commentators, he does deliver an intense and passionate account of the apogee and now it seems, receding Catholic culture in the greater Boston area.

Before you even finish the introduction you'll get a good sense of where Lawler stands, and from that it would be too easy to conclude that Lawler thinks that everything would get better if Catholics stopped sleeping in late on Sunday and put more dough in the collection basket.

He does make those points, but also believes, as many critics do, that the real fault lies with church leadership's failure to hear the concerns of the laity.

The sex abuse scandal may be the most glaringly central tragedy in the church in recent years, but Lawler points to other precipitating factors.

Some of the people who disagree with Lawler's arguments are his fellow Catholics who respect church teachings but feel reform is not about merely bowing to the latest fashions, as Lawler and other self-described traditional Catholics assert. Indeed, Lawler all but comes out and says there are "good" Catholics and "bad" Catholics, and the "bad" ones are invariably the ones who might question church teachings on – well, anything.

Even the bygone folk Mass, felt banners and all, ends up singled by Lawler's scathings.

This is where Lawler verges on cranky and in danger of falling into the worst of conservative clichés. (Let's get this out of the way now, in case anyone sniffs "liberal bias" here -- there are plenty of liberal clichés – a staggering number, perhaps running to googol. )

Speaking of liberal bias, one has to wonder: Why did Lawler, who is down on the so-called "liberal" Boston newspapers, turn to them over and over as sources in his research?

Lawler's at his best when he refrains from the role of lay preacher and looks deep into the heart of Catholic Boston's past, and the figures at its epicenter.

It's a past peopled with vibrant characters, including religious leaders such as Cardinals William O'Connell and Richard James Cushing -- giants who molded Catholicism in the Boston area in the 20th century -- and secular political ones, such as John Francis Fitzgerald, also known as "Honey Fitz," Congresswoman Louise Day Hicks, and of course, James Michael Curley.

He also gives great and compassionate insight into the lives of ordinary Catholics past and present, and draws from his own personal experiences of growing up in this culture.

Regardless of what the reader believes is the root cause of the Catholic Church's problems, the clear message in this book comes from the heart: It's the sorrow felt by Lawler, no mere observer, but one who cares deeply about a religious and social institution that is a part of his daily life and not just an interruption on Sunday.

Catholics with opinions different from Lawler's care, too. After reading "The Faithful Departed," one wonders what Catholics of many viewpoints could do for the future of a church they love if they could work together.

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