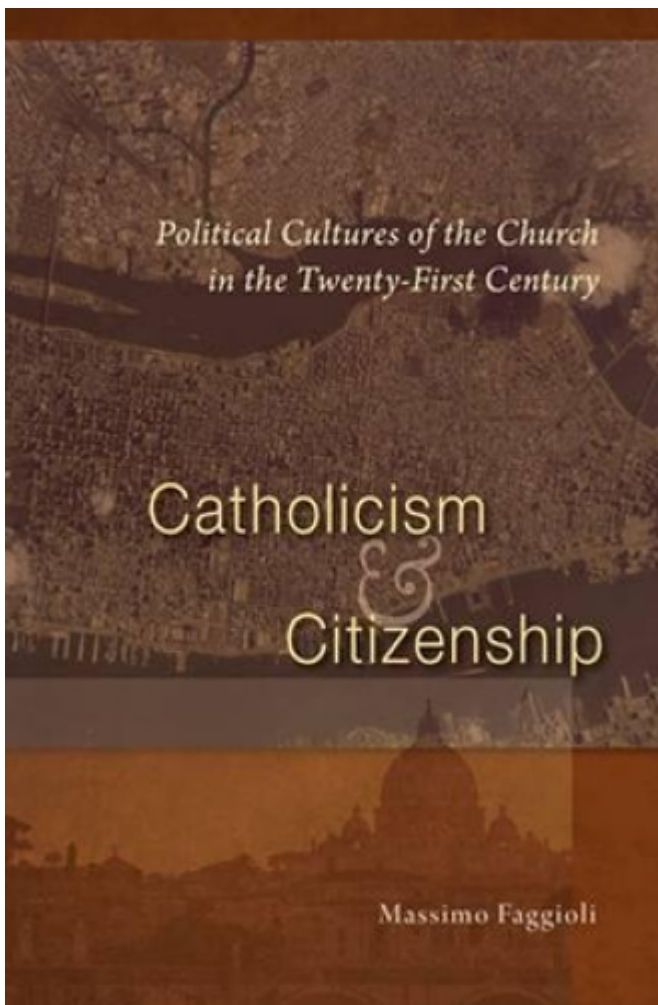


Crisis and opportunity in the American Catholic Church

Massimo Faggioli is the most articulate interpreter of U.S. Catholicism today.

by [Jon Sweeney](#) in the [December 20, 2017](#) issue

In Review



Catholicism and Citizenship

Political Cultures of the Church in the Twenty-First Century

By Massimo Faggioli

Liturgical Press

Although Massimo Faggioli was born in Italy and did his doctoral work in Tübingen, he has become the most important Catholic political thinker in the United States today. The founding director of the Institute for Catholicism and Citizenship at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, he now teaches theology and religious studies at Villanova. Above all, Faggioli seeks to spark Catholic leaders to new ways of engaging with a world in crisis by reminding them of the promises of Vatican II.

This book takes on new urgency given the collapse of moral authority in our government at the highest levels. Faggioli finished writing it two weeks after the presidential election last year, and he mentions Trump only once. That election might add a third “seismic shift” to the post-Vatican II church beyond the two he mentions: 9/11 and the church’s sexual abuse scandal. The first redefined the boundaries between church and state, leaving an opportunity for the pope and others to become more influential world figures. The second, in contrast, “had a christening and humiliating effect on the self-awareness of the Catholic Church,” not unlike occasions in past centuries when the world insisted that the church reform itself and be held accountable by its standards.

The primary focus of the book is on *Gaudium et spes*, the most important Vatican II document on the church’s identity. This emphasis is timely since Pope Francis repeatedly evokes *Gaudium et spes* as a “manifesto of a new theological method and a new ecclesiological orientation,” to use Faggioli’s words.

Faggioli’s mastery of the conciliar and postconciliar documents is second to none, but his writing is dense. His applications sometimes seem to be exclusively for ecclesiologists. I often had trouble following the sweep and speed of his analysis. Consider, for example, this single-sentence paragraph in his second chapter:

The term *movement* in this context connects well the two meanings of Catholic movimentism in the last century and half: a Catholic movement with the political connotations of a social-political movement vis-à-vis the institutional status quo and political power (which is relevant for the political role of Catholic movimentism in political history, especially in Europe and in the Americas), and a Catholic movement moved by the spiritual-theological idea of the church of Christ as a movement as

opposed to the ecclesial and theological status quo (which is important to understand how the Second Vatican Council came about and how it was not an operation made possible only by a few hundred bishops and theologians gathered in Rome between 1962 and 1965).

He seems to be saying here that Catholics are adept at starting, and overwhelmed with continuing, movements in the church. Among other things.

Nevertheless, Faggioli is the most articulate interpreter of American Catholicism today. Conversant with Italian, German, and English sources and scholars, he understands the American situation in its complexities as perhaps only a nonnative could.

He states, for instance, that the American Catholic Church has become “more plural but less pluralistic,” and he explains: “There are many different ways of being Catholic today, but Catholics (especially those who consider themselves true believers, especially the new inquisition called Catholic bloggers) have become less able to accept these different ways.” He urges Catholics to move beyond old paradigms such as “hegemony or persecution” and toward the challenges of “church as community versus church in society” as they come to terms with what sort of relationship they want to have with their non-Catholic neighbors.

Faggioli sounds alarms better than anyone today, not simply in his books but also on social media. He warns of the effects of our current era of “a liberal-progressive Catholic Americanism [that] exists side-by-side with and yet opposed to a traditionalist-conservative Catholic Americanism.” An advocate for the liberal-progressive understanding of both Vatican II and the purpose of the church, Faggioli makes clear that the tug-of-war between liberals and traditionalists has led to confusion and worse.

The hierarchy of American Catholicism has, since at least the 1980s, become “overwhelmed by the challenge of biopolitics (the ‘life issues’ in particular) much more than by [our] . . . rapidly collapsing social fabric,” he argues. Not since 1986 have the U.S. bishops clearly addressed injustices in the economy.

The Americanist “nonreception” of Vatican II has also defined how leaders in the U.S. church interpret Pope John Paul II’s magisterium: as supportive of neoconservative politics and the market economy. This reading differs greatly from the reception of those same teachings in most other parts of the world. American bishops have also

neglected to build on what began at Vatican II by demonstrating after 9/11 a “moral failure of large sectors of the American Catholic hierarchy and Catholic academia to address the hypocrisies of neo-militarism within American military culture.”

At each turn, Faggioli urges, Catholics can do better. They can understand history better, and they can be better stewards of the principles of their church.

Throughout, *Catholicism and Citizenship* is an instructive and sobering call to action. As the book’s opening quotation, from *Gaudium et spes*, puts it: “They are mistaken who, knowing that we have here no abiding city but seek one which is to come, think that they may therefore shirk their earthly responsibilities.”