

Practicing Catholic

James Carroll, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009, 322 pp., \$28.

Review by Dan Brent

This is an autobiographical work that outlines the faith journey that brought Carroll to where he is today as a writer, former priest, and committed, if radical, Catholic. “This book has the form of a personal and historical essay about the Catholic Church in my lifetime.” (p.1)

Carroll counts himself as a “practicing” Catholic – in the sense that sports require practice because “we are not perfect – not in faith, hope, or charity. Not in poverty, chastity, or obedience. Not in peace or justice.” (p.10)

His early memories are of mass when worshipers beat their chests to say, “Lord I am not worthy.” The events that shaped church and world in the latter half of the twentieth century impacted his life in ways that he reflectively chronicles. His father was director of the Defense Intelligence Agency during his childhood days. Carroll was an altar boy and eventually decided to enter the Paulist seminary.

As a seminarian in Washington DC, Carroll found himself demonstrating at the Lincoln Memorial for civil rights legislation. “The religious ideal of solitary interiority grounded in otherworldly holiness was no longer enough. If you want to find God, we heard Jesus saying, don’t go looking in the shadowy corners of church sacristies, or even monasteries. Find God in the streets, in the jails, in the antiwar movement, in the struggle for justice. Learn to read the life of Jesus in a new way.” (p.182)

Ordained in 1969, he made the decision to leave the priesthood in 1974. The events of the era presented him with the context in which to reflect on issues key to the religious experience of his contemporaries: Vatican II, political assassinations, Vietnam, birth control, clerical celibacy, church authority, and eventually the pedophile scandal.

The strand that holds the book together is Carroll’s quarrel with the church’s focus on protecting its authority. He tells the story of how Father Leonard Feeney surfaced as a controversial figure in Boston, defending the premise that “Outside the Church there is no salvation.” All non-Catholics are destined for hell. Boston’s Cardinal Richard Cushing became a hero to Carroll by rejecting Feeney’s position – even though it represented the mainstream Catholic theology of the day.

The young Carroll saw Vatican II as an enormous breakthrough. The faith of non-Catholics and Jews, the primacy of conscience, trusting the liturgy to the vernacular language of the people – all this was great news.

The author tells the story of how the Roman Curia attempted to preempt the council with pre-drafted conservative documents. The bishops rejected the ploy. Carroll was delighted. But after the death of John XXIII, his successor, Paul VI, unilaterally took the birth

control issue off the council table. This, of course, was followed by Paul's own *Humanae Vitae* which rejected any change in the Church's position on birth control.

Carroll documents his concern that the real issues for the Church are authority and control. The contraception issue provides control of married Catholics just as celibacy provides control of priests. Beyond even that, the church had, a century earlier, declared the pope to be infallible. To reverse the teaching on birth control would be to concede that our understanding of the gospel and its moral demands is indeed a work in progress.

Once ordained, Carroll was assigned to minister at the Newman Community at Boston University. He became deeply involved in anti-war activity and helped students who were seeking conscientious objector status. Eventually he left the priesthood, was dispensed, married, and he now has a family.

He identifies his heroes. Thomas Merton played a role in his attraction to the priesthood and later in his anti-Vietnam activity. William Sloane Coffin Jr. motivated and modeled Carroll's involvement in the civil rights movement in the 1960's. Hans Kung was the theologian who inspired Vatican II and Carroll appreciates his more recent thinking on the critical infallibility issue. Allen Tate mentored and encouraged Carroll's poetry talents.

In the first two centuries of our country's history, much of America viewed Catholics and the Catholic Church with suspicion. This was due partly to its foreign (Roman) allegiance and partly to prejudice against its immigrant (Irish, Italian, Polish) membership. For its part, the Roman Church was suspicious of America because it espoused "dangerous" freedoms like religion and speech. Author Carroll was thrilled when the election of John Kennedy put to rest much of the anti-Catholic American sentiment.

Carroll is critical of both John Paul II and of Benedict XVI. Each in turn has clung to the "control" devices of celibacy and the birth control prohibition. Both have attempted to use infallibility as the gate to foreclose even discussion of the ordination of women. As Paul VI and then John Paul II began to nudge back the theological leaps of Vatican II, Carroll began to become disillusioned. "When it became clear to me that I was expected to join in the thwarting of the movement that began with Vatican II, I simply refused. That was what leaving the priesthood meant. Thousands of us did it." (p.240)

Bishops, recognized by John XXIII as his colleagues in service and leadership, were being reduced to the role of managers in branch offices. "Replacing Vatican II's affirmation of the modern world was a spirit of negation and rejection. Replacing the new theological sophistication that the council had generated among laypeople was the old devotionism. Replacing hopes for reunion of the Christian denominations was a triumphalist assertion of Roman Catholic supremacy." (p.244)

It is a legacy that Carroll sees Benedict XVI continuing. He has offended Islam. "In pursuing his narrow agenda, Benedict was defending a hierarchy of truth. Faith is superior to reason. Christian faith is superior to other faiths (especially Islam). Roman

Catholicism is superior to other Christian faiths. And the pope is supreme among Catholics. . . . He is a man who enters dialogue knowing he already has the truth.” (p.274)

Carroll is not apologetic about raising problems – especially with leadership – that Catholics face. “From life to literature and back, the Catholic story celebrates our noblest impulses by lifting up the opposite inclinations that betray them.” And Catholics “come to understand that the main note of this community must be repentance, the main hope forgiveness.” (p.290)

So each of us is a “practicing Catholic”!