

The future of American Catholicism

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Abstract

A review of William F. Murphy's *Social Catholicism for the Twenty-First Century?* together with a commentary on the surprising appointment of Pope Leo.

Keywords

American Catholicism, Archbishop Vigano, conservatism, economic, integralism, polarization, Pope Francis, Pope Leo, social Catholicism, synodality

William F. Murphy Jr (ed.), *Social Catholicism for the Twenty-First Century? Volume 1: Historical Perspectives and Constitutional Democracy in Peril* (Eugene OR: Pickwick Publications, 2024); 450 pp.: 9781666788600, \$76/£57 (hbk); 9781666788594, \$56/£43 (pbk)

William F. Murphy Jr (ed.), *Social Catholicism for the Twenty-First Century? Volume 2: New Hope for Ecclesial and Societal Renewal* (Eugene OR: Pickwick Publications, 2024); 414 pp.: 9781666788631, \$72/£56 (hbk); 9781666788624, \$52/£39 (pbk)

The election of Cardinal Robert Prevost in May 2025 as Pope Leo XIV was not only the election of the first pope from the USA, even though it should be noted that Prevost has chosen to have dual nationality with Peru, where he has worked for many years, but it also was a decisive move in the future of Catholicism (both Roman and Eastern) in the United States, which is in many ways one of the most distinctive nations within the worldwide Catholic family, for the USA is not only by far and away the best-resourced country in

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terms of university and college departments of theology, but it also is the most polarized national church in the Catholic world, where culture warriors can be found in abundance both on the right and on the left. It is striking how little the American Catholic bishops responded to Pope Francis's call for active discussion, or synodality, at every level of church life. I will return to this point later, since this is my major criticism of these two volumes: they ignore the issue in relationship to how the Church should decide its social policy.

What is of crucial importance is that Prevost is an insider in the American Catholic family, who knows intimately the squabbles but also the creativity and intensity of this vibrant but fractious Church, and he also understands and has read much of the richness of contemporary American Catholic theology, while being under no illusions whatsoever as to the impact of American free-market capitalism both on the poor (predominantly but not entirely Black and Latino) in his home city of Chicago and in his adopted country of Peru. The complexity of American investment in the Peruvian economy, which is heavily dependent on the export of raw materials such as copper and gold, has led to intense inequality and political instability.¹ Prevost is also well aware that 59 per cent of American Catholics, including Latinos, voted for Donald Trump in the 2024 US presidential election, and that many Catholic bishops placed abortion as their number one concern in the election, thus implicitly supporting Trump against Kamala Harris. Prevost also knows that simply reiterating a social programme while ignoring how ordinary church members think and feel is directly contrary to the practice of synodality, to which he is committed.

All this sets the review of the two volumes edited by William Murphy on *Social Catholicism for the Twenty-First Century?* in a particular context, because when I initially finished the first draft of this review at the beginning of May, Pope Francis was still alive, and there was an article in *The Tablet*, a British weekly journal of Catholic news, theology and the arts, speculating on the way in which Francis would replace the many deeply conservative Catholic American archbishops who were retiring in 2025.² Very shortly afterwards, however, Francis died, and the retiring editor of *Theology* suggested that the review could be expanded into a review article, with a reference to who the next pope was, and how that would affect the topics discussed in this book, but with neither of us expecting an American to be chosen. (I had him as a possible outside candidate at best.)

Much could be written on both the outstanding excellence of American Catholic theology departments, encompassing both deeply conservative and socially highly progressive views (there are almost no departments that could be considered theologically liberal in the sense of denying either the magisterium or Christian orthodoxy, but their attitudes to church reform, synodality and the political life of the nation vary enormously), and also much could be written on the polarization within not only the Catholic laity but even, and especially, within the Catholic hierarchy. In no country could bishops disagree more with each other, even if discreetly and behind closed doors; this is the legacy of Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI.

Pope Benedict chose as his nuncio in the USA (who has huge power in selecting future bishops) Archbishop Carlo Vigano, a diplomat who had previously reformed the finance

of the Vatican with remarkable success. However, once he was in the US in 2011, he was active in covering up abuse scandals and selecting the most conservative clergy to be bishops and archbishops. After his retirement as papal nuncio in 2016, Vigano launched extraordinary personal attacks on Pope Francis, which led to him being excommunicated in 2024; he has also spread conspiracy theories about the Covid vaccine, which Donald Trump supported in 2020. Nevertheless, from 2011 to 2016, Vigano chose many deeply conservative leaders of the American Catholic Church, many of whom are still in post. Pope Francis chose another diplomat, Christophe Pierre, who is now a cardinal, as Vigano's successor as nuncio to the USA, which resulted in many far more moderate and even liberal appointments, including most of all the excellent appointment this year of Robert McElroy as Cardinal Archbishop of Washington, McElroy being the leading intellectual among the bishops, whose magisterial book on John Courtney Murray I bought in Princeton in 1991.³ However, Pierre is now 79, and even with his great sympathy for Francis's outlook, he must be due to retire as a nuncio soon.

Given this extraordinary background, the books under review are an immensely interesting couple of volumes, and they are invaluable reading for understanding the Catholic Church in the US over the last 60 years. The editor, who has contributed several chapters in each volume, was an executive with IBM before becoming a lay moral theologian. After graduate work at the Pontifical John Paul II Institute in Washington DC, which itself is moderately conservative in its theology, Murphy collaborated with the Swiss theologian Fr Martin Rhonheimer (who has written in defence of *Veritatis Splendor*, the papal encyclical that condemned liberal moral theology in 1993). Murphy taught for many years at Pontifical College Josephinum, in Columbus Ohio, which is the only pontifical seminary in the USA; there, he taught and wrote as a moderate conservative who supported the Republican Party, but saw no conflict with his strong advocacy of Catholic social teaching, and who followed the leadership and teaching of John Paul II and Benedict as popes.

What changed this standpoint to one of great alarm for Murphy was two things. First, the Republican Party moved further and further to the right, and intellectual conservatism became polemical, anti-liberal and authoritarian. At the same time, many in the Catholic Church in the US not only became critical of Pope Francis, but they also began to flirt with integralism, which is the doctrine that Church and state form an integral whole, with secular law being subservient to the teaching of the Church and canon law. If this seems today an impossible dream, it should be noted that its exponents include Thomas Pink, a professor of philosophy at King's College, London; Adrian Vermeule, the professor of law at Harvard; and Patrick Deneen, a professor of politics at Notre Dame. Their intellectual firepower is enormous, but this should be seen in the context of the immense intellectual richness of American Catholic theology.

Pink has written recently that 'integralism cannot be dismissed. It is magisterial teaching about God's will for legal authority. It explains the true nature of legal authority in general, that of the state as well as of the Church.'⁴ Vermeule is far more strident, writing that 'the problem is the relentless aggression of liberalism, driven by an internal mechanism that causes ever more radical demands for political conformism, particularly targeting the Church'.⁵ In its place, Vermeule seeks the values of the Catholic Church as the arbiter

of what is good for society, which is a position far beyond John Finnis's conservatism in New Natural Law, since that sought to bind only Roman Catholics to the (strict and unchanging) teaching of the Church. Vermeule, Pink and Deneen seek a moral revolution for the whole of society. One chapter in the volumes under review by Bernard Prusak is an excellent challenge to John Finnis's interpretation of 'negative absolute moral norms' and his 'deflationary' (the word is from the chapter) account of Catholic social teaching.

At this point I should declare my interest as the only British Anglican member for the last six years (from 2019 to 2025) of the Anglican Roman Catholic International Commission (apart from Bishop Christopher Hill, the distinguished ecumenist, as a consultant), and as a member of ARCIC III with the British, Anglican, theologian Nicholas Sagovsky since it began work in 2011. Conservative Catholic moral theologians are familiar to me, and often deeply courteous to opponents. Integralism and a Trump-like political conservatism are something else again. This book is therefore a call to arms by Murphy, so that the moderate/conservative Catholic position in politics and moral theology does not veer out of control to the far right.

What of the content of these volumes? They follow a strict order and are very easy to follow. Volume 1 covers past Catholic intellectual history, including the well-known names of Mgr John Ryan in the USA, who influenced Franklin Roosevelt as he developed the political, economic and social reforms of the New Deal in the 1930s, and the layman Maurice Blondel in France, who criticized integralism in the same febrile period of the 1930s. Other articles critique John Finnis, modern integralists, including Vermeule, and trace the path of US political conservatism to what is called the 'hard right'.

Volume 2 is more discursive. There are a few European articles, including a careful assessment of Christian humanism by a Dutch lay theologian; a helpful survey of Catholicism's interweaving with human rights; an excellent and moving (but quite cautious) essay on Marian ecclesiology after Christendom by Bauerschmidt; several articles on what a 'New Economics' would look like; another penetrating essay on Pope Francis's vision by Clemens Sedmak; and much on pastoral leadership in a global world. The final essay, which is superb, is by the English lay theologian Paul Vallely. It focuses on the rise of populism, the discrediting of traditional politics, and the psychological concomitants of 'distrust and de-alignment' caused by a fear of losing out in the competitive society we now live in.⁶

Will this publication affect the rise of religious and political conservatism in the US? The one significant omission in these volumes is any discussion of how synodality can be a way of handling deep polarization within the Church, including in congregations and among the clergy, of all those holding conflictual views on economic issues. It is striking that the chapter on pastoral leadership by Thomas Hennen has much on social psychology, which can subvert moral reasoning by subordinating it to individual or group emotion, but never mentions synodality.⁷ The veteran writer John A. Coleman, SJ, also argues that the future of Catholic social teaching will depend on the vigour of Catholic social movements, and again no one could deny this, but synodality (which in this case means active discussion and participation in parish and diocese, not to mention schools and youth clubs) is yet again ignored.⁸

Lacking this emphasis on active participation at all levels of the Church (synodality), as set out beautifully by Kristin Colberg and Jos Moons, SJ, in their recent book,⁹ many of the essays in these volumes are much more about sustaining courage in those in the moderate centre or on the left of the Catholic Church, rather than developing a new model of active participation, which is what synodality can deliver. What is needed is much more analysis describing and attacking the reasons why such hierarchical conservatism remains so attractive – and especially its attraction to the familiar spectacle of the young, deeply conservative, Christian, whether Catholic priest or committed layperson. I remember in 2015 during a dinner celebrating ARCIC in Rome asking a young Catholic ordinand, as we sat together making polite conversation in the elite English College, what issue most divided the students, and equally what most troubled him about the Church. ‘The vision of the Holy Father, Francis,’ was the swift and deeply sombre reply.¹⁰ He did not want more discussion on the nature of family life, for he knew what it meant to discern right ethical teaching, or moral truth, and he only wished the Church to enforce it. For him, the advocacy of synodality was anathema.¹¹

So where will the American Catholic Church go now, given that it has an American pope, committed at the same time to a ‘gospel for the poor’, synodality and courteous listening, but also to a healing of the divisions and polarization so that the Church can regain the sense of communion and living together (the theological word would be *koinonia*) which it has lost in recent years? Can the demands for the recognition of women, and the inclusion of different minorities, be reconciled with those who long for hierarchy, rootedness and tradition? My concern is that these volumes have much on social policy, economic change, the danger of populism and a Marian ecclesiology, but little on synodality or how the exclusion of many groups could be rectified. Despite this omission, for I have no wish to be churlish, I greatly admire the articles here, and strongly commend these volumes, as well written, clear and authoritative – but (and this is an important caveat) much depends on how Pope Leo responds to the turmoil in the Church in which he was raised.

Notes

1. Jan Lust, *Capitalism, Class, and Revolution in Peru: 1980–2016* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).
2. Michael Sean Winters, ‘American detox’, *The Tablet*, 1 March 2025.
3. Robert W. McElroy, *The Search for an American Public Theology: the contribution of John Courtney Murray* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989). This was his doctoral dissertation at the Gregorian University in Rome.
4. Thomas Pink, ‘The Church as potestas for faith’, *The Josias*, 12 January 2024 <<https://thejosias.com/2024/01/12/the-church-as-potestas-for-faith/>>.
5. Adrian Vermeule, ‘A Christian strategy’, *First Things*, 1 November 2017 <<https://firstthings.com/a-christian-strategy/>>.
6. Paul Valley, ‘Epilogue’ in Murphy, *Social Catholicism*, Volume 2, p. 346.
7. Thomas J. Hennen, ‘Bridging the gap: pastoral leadership in a time of tribalism and polarization’ in Murphy, *Social Catholicism*, Volume 2, pp. 303–20.

8. John A. Coleman, SJ, 'The future of Catholic social teaching' in Murphy, *Social Catholicism*, Volume 2, p. 337.
9. Kristin Colberg and Jos Moons, *The Future of Synodality* (Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press), 2025.
10. The objection was to the discussions that eventually resulted in the publication of *Amoris Laetitia* in 2016, which in some cases allowed the admission of the divorced and re-married to receive the sacraments at Mass.
11. The phrase 'discerning right ethical teaching' refers to the mandate given to ARCIC III by Pope Benedict and Archbishop Rowan Williams.

Author biography

Peter Sedgwick is a retired Anglican ethicist, who was Principal of St Michael's College, Llandaff, Cardiff, and a lecturer at Cardiff University, until 2014. He has been a member of the Anglican Roman Catholic International Commission III since 2011.