

*Being Catholic Now: Prominent Americans Talk About Change in the Church and the Quest for Meaning*  
by Kerry Kennedy  
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### Hasty Aggiornamento

Vatican II declared, “Christ summons the Church to continual reformation as she sojourns here on earth.” This updating, or what the Council called *aggiornamento*, occurs naturally with each successive generation as the Church considers what it means to be Catholic now. This is the burden of Kerry Kennedy’s book. She and thirty-seven contributors, many of them celebrities, speak candidly about change in the Church, their background in Catholicism, and personal quests for meaning. Together their essays redefine the ancient institution of Catholicism “in the most contemporary of terms.”

*Being Catholic* contains some devout voices. Take for instance Cardinal Theodore Edgar McCarrick who asserts, “What the Church needs today is faith,” which he defines as heartfelt repentance and belief centered on the Lord. There’s also Peggy Noonan’s contribution which describes her spiritual renaissance at age forty when she started studying the Bible. Reflecting on how her empty heart was filled with meaning she says, “It was a great experience for me to be brought back to Christ by Protestants. It gave me an admiration for them and their lovely personal relationship with Christ.”

Another theme of *Being Catholic* is exploitation. Several contributors speak candidly of having been sexually abused by the clergy during childhood. These stories elicit compassion for the victims and provoke anger toward their perpetrators. Equally disturbing are the accounts of those who have lost faith entirely. Author Frank McCourt stands out in this respect. He confesses, “Now I believe that when you die there’s nothing—oblivion and memories.... I admire people who have faith in God. It must be a great comfort to them, but I had to get out from under the fear and the guilt.” Anyone who has read McCourt’s autobiography, *Angela’s Ashes*, or seen the movie by the same title, will turn these pages with a measure of sorrow.

A few voices are downright blasphemous. The outstanding example here is Bill Maher who declares, “I hate religion. It’s the worst thing in the world....[Christianity’s] primary focus is your own salvation through Jesus Christ....you have to believe that this person was the son of God, came down here on a suicide mission, and then flew bodily back up to heaven where he rejoined his father who’s also him. OK. I respect people as human beings. I don’t wish them harm, but people who believe that can’t have my intellectual respect.” Ironically, Maher conveys more theological content in this statement than do most other essays, even if it’s a pagan interpretation.

Much of the book has the feel of a political platform disguised in Catholic garb. Often this involves arguing for a pro-choice position on abortion. So Donna Brazile asserts: “As the result of being a descendant of slaves, where my ancestors had no control over their reproductive health or even access to age-appropriate reproductive health information, I believe it’s essential for women to have a choice.” Little better is the apologetic tactic of Nancy Pelosi: “I’ve always been pro-choice. To me, it’s like saying, ‘Should we surrender our brains?’” These and other such arguments make you think of the old preacher who wrote in the margin of his sermon notes, “Weak point, pound the pulpit and shout.”

In its pursuit of fresh faith for today *Being Catholic* has an essential flaw: its penchant for defining Catholic faith in subjective terms without regard for the tenets of Christian orthodoxy. With few exceptions, it either ignores or revises objective truth claims of historic Christianity—basic concepts like creation, fall, redemption, and kingdom. As Kennedy says of her childhood catechism, “Now all that packaging has been subjected to criticism and found wanting.” The result is a leftist concoction of Christianity that is bereft of the crucified and risen Savior, a Catholic correlative to mainline Protestant liberalism. In Kennedy’s words: “Catholicism, in the end, is about creating a society based on shared vision of God as exemplified by Christ, his commitment to justice and peace, and, most of all, his love.”

Perhaps the biggest lesson of *Being Catholic* is a hermeneutical one. It reminds us that in order for the Church to succeed in *aggiornamento*, it must first journey backward in what Catholic theologians call *ressourcement*: a return to the biblical, patristic, and high-medieval sources of

faith. While Eastern Orthodox Christians focus attention on the first two of these sources, and Evangelical Protestants mainly on Scripture, all recognize God's revelation to be the eternal fountain which sharpens the Church's vision and enlivens her ministry. Drinking deeply from the source(s) not only imbibes deeper faith in the person of Christ, invigorates gospel proclamation, and inspires greater creativity in outreach; it also protects us from servile adaption to the world's agenda. Sure, stepping backward before moving forward is counter-intuitive, demanding, and at times paradoxical, but it's precisely what the Christian quest for meaning requires of us.

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