controversy that begot it. This valuable and serious guide to Strauss’s thought, relevance, and impact should be read by all who wish to deepen their understanding of the intellectual crisis of the West and the estimable twentieth-century scholar who devoted his life to its diagnosis.

Michael P. Foley
Baylor University


For more than 2,000 years, the Catholic Church has done more to shape history than any other institution in the world. Yet, as those of us who teach Catholic Studies know well, it has been difficult to find an accessible, comprehensive history of the Church itself. And, it is becoming even harder to find a history that both acknowledges the contributions of the Church to society and focuses on the controversies.

Joseph A. Varacalli’s *The Catholic Experience in America* is that history. It is an affirmative look at the social history of the Church, yet it does not back away from some of the challenges that the Church has faced—including the clergy abuse crisis of the past decade, the growing secularization of her colleges and universities, and the negative response of many progressive Catholics to her teachings on birth control, abortion and homosexuality. In all areas, Varacalli assumes that the normative standard is defined by the Church’s magisterium, her official teaching authority—yet he points out that “millions of Catholics in the United States have been either supremely indifferent, hostile, or selectively accepting of that authority” (xx).

While acknowledging these controversies, Varacalli focuses on identifying the events, issues, philosophical positions, and the trends that have made up the experience of being Catholic in America. A cheerful Catholic, he writes with a genuine affection for the Church—yet avoids a facile triumphalism. While Varacalli, a founder of the Society for Catholic Social Scientists, is steadfast in his loyal support for the magisterium, he is also fair in presenting the not-so-loyal opposition.
Still, he does not hesitate to point out the failure of reason for many progressives on such contentious issues as abortion rights and gay marriage.

Varacalli maintains that the true Catholic vision "enriches both world civilization and American culture primarily in two overlapping ways: "The first is as the standard bearer and ultimate interpreter of the natural law—conceptions of right and wrong that are embedded into the very constitution of the human being or, as Saint Paul put it, written into the human heart." Second, "the Church contributes culturally to civilization through her constant presentation and organic development of Catholic social doctrine, or more commonly referred to as Catholic social teachings" (60).

A sociologist and Director of the Center for Catholic Studies at Nassau Community College of the S.U.N.Y. system, Varacalli chooses to direct his attention to what sociologists call the "unit ideas" of social analysis instead of discussing the particularities of individual actors in the history of the Church. Rather than "naming names," Varacalli's is a broader framework—one that moves beyond "the controversial, colorful, idiosyncratic, and singular individuals who are such an essential part of American Catholic history." As a result, it is a more comprehensive and objective approach to describing the Catholic experience in the United States than many of the others.

Dividing his history into six major parts reflecting important themes and issues in Catholic history, Varacalli opens with an introduction to the Catholic theological and philosophical worldview. An excellent overview of the structural and organizational aspects of the Church and her authority, it is invaluable to the introductory student of Catholic Studies. But, in many ways, this first section is equally valuable to those of us who need to be reminded of the beauty of the "Catholic vision" and the origins of the legitimate authority of the papacy: "Catholics believe that Jesus Christ founded the Catholic Church as the Church of Christ, headed by a pope, who as the 'Vicar of Christ,' is guided and protected by the Holy Spirit through the exercise of 'magisterial authority,' the decision making authority of the pope and those bishops in loyal communion with him" (3).

Part II provides a chronological overview of Catholicism in the United States, concluding with what Varacalli calls the "Catholic Restorationist Movement" begun by Pope John Paul II and continued by Pope Benedict XVI. Ever the sociologist, Varacalli points out that by the middle of the twentieth century, the Catholic Church had established a coherent and impressive set of institutional arrangements (a plausibility structure), that afforded its members an effective break from and
alternative to the dominant social message. However, Varacalli also argues that this plausibility structure, which reached its maximum effectiveness during the post World War II period, "is now in a state of severe disarray—damaged by the widespread internal dissent allowed to fester in the post-Vatican II period" (46).

In subsequent sections, Varacalli demonstrates that the beneficiaries of this weakening of the plausibility structure are the progressive Catholics who "see the weakening as something quite positive...They assert that the destruction of what they invidiously refer to as the 'Catholic ghetto' was both necessary and inevitable." More traditional Catholics argue that the construction of an intact and internally consistent plausibility structure is a necessary, although not sufficient, condition to keep an authentic Catholicism alive in the hearts and minds of the Catholic population and to evangelize throughout the rest of American civilization (47).

Providing ample evidence, Varacalli demonstrates that the restorationist movement that began with Pope John Paul II, is now in a battle with liberal Catholicism over who controls the infrastructure of Catholic organizational life and Catholic teachings. The birth control controversy, the ordination of women, divorce, abortion and homosexuality are all a part of this power struggle between the restorationists and the progressives. Varacalli treats each issue fairly and thoroughly, but always with reference to the normative stance of the Magisterium.

How this battle will end is not neatly resolved in The Catholic Experience in America. Unlike the typical progressivist perspective which continues to predict a democratic Church of the future in which teachings emerge from the "bottom up" rather than from the hierarchy, Varacalli writes that "the future is open and theoretically speaking, just about anything can happen" (243). While readers might have hoped for some reassurance about the future, Varacalli offers instead something even more valuable. He has provided us with a sociological perspective on how to understand our current dilemma, and ways to begin to initiate intelligent discussions of the issues involved in an analysis of the state of the Church.

Anne Hendershott
University of San Diego