Popular Catholicism in the United States

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It first struck me as a possible research project when I heard of the appearance of Mary, refracted in the glass siding of a business tower in Florida. A few days later I was told of her apparition in a bowl of spaghetti on a Pizza Hut advertisement somewhere in New Jersey. Why not pack up laptop and cooler, I asked myself, and tour the pulsing centre of North American civilization, mapping Marian apparition sites and documenting the social intercourse at them? At last there was a chance to join the growing number of academics turning from texts to the anthropological study of religion. Perhaps I too might soon have a paper fit for reading at an American Academy of Religion session, I thought. My study was to be qualitative, of course; quantitative research requires far too great a time commitment and the unfashionableness of the topic by the time of its completion.

Alas, the project is no longer possible. Mark Garvey, a journalist, beat me to the punch, writes in a smoother style than I can master, and manages to hold the reader’s attention with a 230-page tour of nine apparition sites from Georgia via Kentucky to Wisconsin and from New York through Illinois to California. Holding one’s attention on a topic...
such as this is no easy matter: the more the location, climate, and time of day change, the more the apparitions and the gathering crowds remain the same.

It takes a good writer to keep a thoughtful reader on board, and Garvey manages it well. There are times in the mud and rain-soaked fields of Nancy Fowler’s farm in Conyers, Georgia, we are prepared to turn aside from the commonplace comments of the visionary. Cold Spring and Falmouth, Kentucky, offer little more, Garvey’s own attempt at theological summation in his fourth chapter is light, and the thirty pages he devotes to the affable and engaging visionary, Ray Doiron of Belleville, Illinois, might well have been abbreviated. But one continues to read, partly because of Garvey’s blend of honest scepticism and straight-forward respect for the devotees he meets. He doesn’t scoff at Polaroid photographs of the open door of heaven, although he recognizes that they are the result of pointing the camera’s lens toward the sun and finding the image of the aperture refracted back at the centre of the film. And at Scottsdale, Arizona, while praying the Rosary in a contemporary parish church (‘normal’ except for its associations with an apparition), Garvey has “no trouble curbing the critical faculties” and is delivered into “a mental space in which the traditional ends of Catholic devotion seem inevitable, desirable, and attainable. It is no small thing to feel, if only for a moment, the warming effect of a God who cares and to realize that the search for holiness really might be the only thing that matters” (116-117).

Thus prepared, the reader is introduced to more unsettling gatherings. When Garvey leaves the backyard shrine of the Ruiz’s home in Phoenix (where he self-consciously and not without some sense of hypocrisy joins the line to the altar and is not slain in the spirit), he is still among those for whom the Blessed Virgin’s appearance calls them to love and blessing. At Bayside, Queens, New York, Veronica Lueken’s visions (first received in 1970) tell a different tale, resulting in conflict with the local neighbourhood and the church authorities, prophesying world decline, the expansion of communism, charging that all authorities introducing non-Tridentine masses are heretical and insisting on a world-wide Masonic plot (associated somehow with UFOs) and a communist conspiracy so clever that it pretended its own demise in 1989 to better corrupt and overtake the West.

The simple Spanish visionary, Maria Paula, is treated far more gently.
Even though the site of her visions at California City in the Mojave desert is introduced with the moans of a pornographic television channel in the author’s motel room and is closed with Maria’s warning regarding satanists, the chapter describing her experiences is well entitled “Beautiful Water, Birds Singing.” Not so the last chapter in which Garvey treats “one of the most unnerving religious attractions in the United States,” (201) the group which grew up around the visions of Mary Ann Van Hoof of Necedah, Wisconsin, in the early 1950s. (With the exception of the Lueken and Van Hoof visions, the others all began in the last ten years.) There the Marian apparitions direct attention again to communist conspiracies, schism, suffering, and pain, “the reflection of a gibbering, chaotic figment crouched in deepest shadow within the walls of one pitiable human mind. After that, it felt OK to turn my back on the scene and return, through the darkness, to my car” (230).


However one understands the significance of Marian phenomena for interpreting contemporary Catholicism, Garvey unwittingly provides in his own person a good description of Catholic life. He wears his Catholic faith with ease and lightly, like an accustomed suit of clothes. He is attracted to the highly tendentious Freudian analysis of Marian devotion by Michael Carroll (Princeton, 1986) but the effect, thankfully, is limited. His likes and dislikes are patent; his theological reflections in the epilogue and elsewhere are straightforward – his heart, and his mind, are on his sleeve, and when we are finished his study, we have a good sense in his honest self-disclosure and in the characters he describes of Catholicism in contemporary America.

The essays gathered in the Ferraro collection, in spite of their breadth, offer less. Originally published in a special issue of the *South Atlantic*
Quarterly, there is a sort of grating self-satisfaction in many of the papers. Readers unaccustomed to the acronym SAQ need to do careful study to work out what the letters represent and what issue they appeared in. (It was 93/3, although no date is given.)

One of the best pieces, “The Intertextual Politics of Cultural Catholicism: Tiepolo, Madonna, Scorsese,” by Paul Giles, is placed at the very centre of the work. Giles, reader at the University of Nottingham and perhaps best known for his American Catholic Arts and Fiction (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), unwittingly points to the weakness of the volume as a whole:

...[A]utobiography, the traditional genre for expressions of ethnic and religious difference, is generally an unsatisfactory medium for this kind of intellectual debate, because it tends to refer conceptual questions inward, to the upbringing of the writer or subsequent issues of personal belief, rather than outward to the more complex business of how such variations become disseminated and inflected within the larger, amorphous structures of culture and society. This subjectivist romanticizing of the differential self also helps to account for the frequently tedious intertwining of ethnic discourse with ethical or pedagogical concerns (122-123).

And “subjective tedious intertwining” there is in abundance by writers who should know better: the academic students of religion Robert A. Orsi on suffering in mid-twentieth century Catholicism (19-64), James T. Fisher on the Lost Generation (76-103), Frank Lentricchia on a retreat to Mepkin Abbey (104-119), Kathy Rudy on abortion and proportionism (205-221); the splendid novelists Mary Gordon on Going My Way and other Catholic films (65-76) and David Plante on “My Parents, My Religion, and My Family,” (222-226; italics mine). In “Homage to Mary and to the University called Notre Dame” by Protestant Stanley Hauerwas, the person offering homage, not the object of that homage, is ever in the forefront (227-237). By the close of the book autobiography gains full victory in printed interviews with Camille Paglia (238-258) and Richard Rodriguez (259-265). There is a greater sense of the individual believer and less of ideological cant in Andrew Sullivan's struggles with the fate of being Catholic and gay (171-186), but one has a sense on reading the pieces – all of which serve their own ends – that none but disgruntled, lapsed, or non-Catholics were invited to write. Patrick Allitt, an Episcopalian, is a welcome relief with his survey of Catholic conservative intellectuals from 1988-1993 (114-170).
At the end the puzzle remains: where are the millions of believing men and women for whom faith offers directions in its own way through the swirl of doubts, questions, and turmoil we are accustomed to refer to as the post-modern world? Were it not for Mary Jo Weaver and her optimistic reevaluation of a broader orthodoxy (as suggested by Rowan Williams, the Anglican Bishop of Wales), a reader of this collection might give up hope in the Catholic intellectual. But her “Feminists and Patriarchs in the Catholic Church: Orthodoxy and its Discontents” (187-204) wins through. It is not fully consistent, it is not always to the point, and like each of us as persons, it is not always fully integrated. But it is direct and it is clear. At the end Weaver accepts “her own complicity in patriarchy” in light of “the Augustinian notion that Christianity is an endless journey of the imagination and intellect propelled by desire.” She recognizes herself as a person of two sensibilities (as surely we all are), the old Catholic and the feminist. And thus she concludes:

The only way I can see to hold both my sensibilities and my new consciousness to the demands of dialogue is to invoke a reading of orthodoxy or catholicity that knows when to bow to paradox and believes that it can find, in the ironies of human fallibility, a more capacious language and a more graceful vision of the divine/human interaction than either patriarchy or feminism, alone, dares to imagine (200).

The hope here expressed may be fuzzy, the oppositions not the only ones before us, but there remains hope and the refusal to collapse into late-twentieth century gnostic simplicity.