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All Good Books are Catholic Books

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Early 20th century Catholics in America attempted to engage a modernizing culture while also respecting the doctrines of a church whose methods dated back to the middle ages, including a list of forbidden books, according to a new book from a University of Dayton history professor.

In All Good Books are Catholic Books, Una Cadegan explores the little-known literary history of American Catholicism in the context of the rise of "modernism." The book argues the literary work of Catholics in the 20th century — both serious literature and popular culture — is crucial to understanding the century's intellectual history. A key piece of that history is the debate over censorship and artistic freedom.

"Until the 1960s, Catholics had a role in movie censorship, and the index of forbidden books had been in force since the 17th century," Cadegan said. "How did American scholars who thought of themselves as committed to academic and intellectual freedom also respect the truth of the faith?"

By the 1960s, Cadegan said, movie censorship faded and the index was replaced by individual conscience.

"Catholics found creative ways to relate to modernity on their own terms and greatly affected not only their own history, but that of U.S. culture in the 20th century," she said.

The title of the book comes from the church's desire to remove limits on what was considered "Catholic" beyond works with Catholic settings or characters, and to emphasize an essential harmony among elements that made a work "good" that also made it "Catholic" in some real sense, Cadegan said in an interview with the University of Notre Dame's Cushwa Center for the Study of American Catholicism.

The book is the eighth in a series from the Cushwa Center Studies of Catholicism in 20th Century America, a joint venture between the Cushwa Center and Cornell University Press. The series welcomes books by senior and junior scholars that illuminate interactions between Catholics and other Americans. Books in the series explore the ways in which Catholics and their church have responded to, shaped and been influenced by developments in American society, culture, politics, and religion throughout the 20th century.

Cadegan studies Catholic history in the U.S., especially in the 20th century, and is chairperson of the University of Dayton's Forum on the Catholic Intellectual Tradition Today.

All Good Books are Catholic Books is available from Cornell Press and on Amazon.com.

For more information, contact Cameron Fullam, assistant director of media relations, at 937-229-3256 or fullam@udayton.edu.