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Running the Ancient Ark by Steam: Catholic Publishing, 1880-1950

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In an 1868 *Atlantic Monthly* sketch of prolific Catholic publisher Isaac Hecker, biographer James Parton noted that Catholics were “adopting, one after another, all our Protestant plans and expedients . . . putting American machinery into the ancient ark, and getting ready to run her by steam.” U.S. Catholics wholeheartedly embraced some aspects of modernity but defiantly rejected others. Parton’s metaphor captures the spirit of Catholic publishing that extended far beyond Hecker’s efforts.

In 1880 the Roman Catholic Church in the United States was still mission territory and would be until 1908. Its membership, estimated to have been more than 6 million in 1880, had risen to 10 million by 1900 and 21.5 million by 1940. In 1880 many Catholics had little formal education; these immigrants and their children scrabbled for access to prosperity and respectability. The Roman Catholic Church had only begun to develop a national self-consciousness. Yet, despite the increasing Protestant-Catholic hostilities of the mid-nineteenth century, the eighty U.S. bishops and a handful of other church leaders attending the Third Plenary Council, held in Baltimore from 9 November to 7 December 1884, emphasized their hope that there could be “no antagonism” between American and Catholic identity, for nowhere else could a Catholic “breathe more freely that atmosphere of Divine truth which alone can make him free.” By 1940, after more than a century of nativist opposition, defensive self-definition, and upward mobility, Roman Catholics in the United States were on the verge of being the most affluent American subgroup, confident in the compatibility of their Catholic and American identities.

Changes in Catholic publishing over the course of this period both contributed to and exemplified U.S. Catholicism’s movement from an immigrant mission church to a substantially assimilated subculture. The history of Catholic publishing in these years sounds in many ways like the broader story of American publishing—expansion, consolidation, capitalization, and professionalization. Understanding the distinctiveness of this particular story, however, re-
quires looking both at the places where it overlaps with dominant trends and at the institutional and ideological factors that shape its interaction with those trends.

This essay highlights two aspects of Catholic culture related to books and reading between 1880 and 1940: the connection between material objects and the printed word, and the role of authority in shaping both the institutional aspects and the content of Catholic publishing. It also emphasizes how, in their tumultuous but thriving print culture, U.S. Catholics adopted technically and organizationally advanced processes in the pursuit of religious and cultural goals that were, in the eyes of their contemporaries, perceived as largely anti-modern.

The dramatic growth of the Catholic community between 1880 and 1940 was coupled with a constant need to define and defend itself as both Catholic and American. Consequently, Catholicism was understood both as a religion—that is, a set of ideas or beliefs and practices—and as a way of life, a culture characterized by its sacramentality, which maintained the belief that everything in the world was potentially revelatory of God’s grace. Books and print culture more generally were enmeshed in a densely sacramental fabric of which they were both producer and product. Books were ritual objects and means of grace (the Word made flesh) and were thus sacramental artifacts. Simultaneously, as means of instruction and dissemination, they helped create the culture that produced them (see figure 20.1). Print culture reinforced the clear structure of Catholic authority while giving believers road maps to navigate the individualizing landscape of contemporary American culture. Catholic print culture reflected the heterogeneity of a multiethnic, rapidly growing church; at the same time, its shared elements revealed the community’s perceived obligations across the generations.

The Declining Mission Church: 1880–1908

Many landmarks in Catholic publishing history antedate the Civil War—the founding of newspapers, periodicals, and tract societies; Catholic versions of the Bible; and the recognition of Catholic devotional markets by religious and secular publishers alike. Until nearly the end of the nineteenth century, however, newspapers dominated the print culture of Catholic readers.

Catholic newspapers both proliferated and consolidated between 1880 and 1920, spurred in part by the decree of the Third Plenary Council that each diocese should have its own newspaper. As the Catholic population grew and new dioceses were established, the number of Catholic newspapers, mostly weeklies, thereby increased steadily for more than half a century. Other factors re-
FIGURE 20.1. The gilded binding suggests the elegant production of this elaborate volume of more than one thousand pages. Richly illustrated in color, it contains chapters on Catholic doctrine, the life and teaching of Christ, devotions to the blessed mother Mary, and historical material about the church, including portraits and biographies of Catholic bishops in the United States and Canada. Francis DeLigney, S.J., the Abbé Orsinia, and John Gilmary Shea, Catholic Gems; or, Treasures of the Church: A Repository of Catholic Instruction and Devotion (New York: Office of Catholic Publications, 1887). 26 by 21.6 cm. College of the Holy Cross.
inforced the consolidation and nationalization of Catholic newspapers. After 1920, when American Catholicism began to lose its immigrant orientation, Catholic papers whose primary appeal had been to audiences eager for political news of a home country (particularly Ireland) were no longer as popular as they once had been. Failing Catholic newspapers were often purchased (either outright or with controlling interest) by individual dioceses, both to document diocesan activities and to present "the Catholic position" on issues about which the faithful needed to be informed.

By about 1920, then, newspapers were increasingly likely to be under the direct control of the diocesan hierarchy, which underwrote the cost of production and the means of distribution. For these reasons, the survival of these periodicals was ensured, but not without a price. Some Catholic journalists lamented that freedom of the press was curtailed,4 but others recast the argument and lauded the distinctive contribution of the Catholic press to American Catholic freedom. From this perspective, the aim of newspapers was not "to compete with the secular dailies" but "to offset the worldliness of the general press and at the same time to acquaint their readers with the great amount of the news of their Church that is entirely lacking or dealt with only summarily in the general papers."5 Newspapers thus evolved from being perhaps the most unfettered of Catholic print media to the one most religiously partisan, charged primarily with protection and communication of orthodoxy.

Magazines and other periodicals grew in relative importance during this period, while newspapers, with some important exceptions, diminished.6 In 1880 forty-six Catholic newspapers and ten Catholic magazines existed; in 1900, seventy-three newspapers and eighty-two magazines existed. As with other elements of the Catholic press, many of its magazines were intended to be Catholic versions of secular or Protestant efforts. The best known of these was Isaac Hecker's Catholic World (figure 20.2). Intended as the Catholic equivalent of Harper's or the Atlantic, Catholic World was a review of art and culture, targeted at a middle-class audience with leisure and money to spare (when the first issue appeared in April 1865, the price of a subscription was five dollars). Catholic World, published by the Paulist Fathers continuously until the 1970s, was one of several periodicals (including Ave Maria and Messenger of the Sacred Heart) that established the "successful formula" of family appeal and religious devotions.7 This appeal was directed to the middle-class family, the ideal toward which many Catholics aspired in late Victorian America.8

Magazines were more likely than newspapers to be published by religious orders and congregations, for whom publishing was an apostolate—that is, a part of their religious mission rather than a profit-making venture. As a result, funding and sustaining their ventures were constant struggles, particularly in
Here is no religious question which has excited more comment in our day than that of the relation of the Catholic faith to the teachings of modern science. Unfortunately, too many of the professional scientists of to-day either do not believe in Revelation or are hostile to it; and they have sought rather to find discrepancies between the teachings of the church and the facts of science than harmony between these different orders of truth. Their work is negative and destructive. Our work shall be positive and constructive. On this account we must begin with the principles upon which our comparison is based.

In the first place, for the right understanding of the relation of natural to supernatural knowledge, we must always bear in mind that totally distinct spheres. I do not mean by this that the same truths may not belong to both spheres, but it must always be borne in mind that if God has made a revelation to men, it must contain besides many truths which may be known and demonstrated by natural reason, truths which are above and unattainable by reason; otherwise there would be no need of revelation. Unfortunately, because this principle has been lost sight of by many, and because they have presumed that reason and revelation are on an equality, and that theology and philosophy must be treated in the same manner, they have fallen into the deepest errors. It must also be remembered that revelation is necessary if we are to know any truth at all. Since revelation raises man to a supernatural state, and on this account God illumines with

Figure 20.2. Catholic World was launched to compete with secular publications. The contents of volume 71, no. 421 (1900) included articles on religious subjects or general topics from a Catholic perspective, as well as notices of new books, dominated by, but not limited to Catholic studies. The frontispiece portrait of John Henry, Cardinal Newman points to an article in the middle of the volume; a discussion of "Modern Science and the Catholic Faith" opens the issue of April 1900.

view of the practice of giving away publications. The study of Catholic publishing is complicated by the general practice of counting both the number of paid subscriptions and the number of free copies when reporting the circulation of magazines and other religious literature. For example, the highest-volume Catholic publishers in the nineteenth century were the Catholic Publications Society, which gave away thousands of pamphlets, and the publishers of the magazine Columbia, a copy of which was sent (and still is) to every member of the Knights of Columbus.9

At the end of the nineteenth century and in the early twentieth century, both newspapers and magazines demonstrated a distinctively Catholic configuration of social relations that affected Catholic print culture. Many, if not most, publishing enterprises involved both lay people and members of religious orders or
congregations; any officially Catholic enterprise was also subject to hierarchical authority. The influence of the hierarchy was undoubtedly real and inescapable; the nineteenth-century church was more centralized and more sensitive to Vatican influence than it had been for centuries. However, close control—of the press or almost anything else—was simply impossible in the United States, even had it been considered desirable by all members of the hierarchy. The existence of an identifiable central authority offers such a clear point of contrast with other American religious subcultures that it is easy to overestimate the efficiency of such control.

That said, bishops greatly influenced what was published by and for Catholics. Several of the decrees promulgated by the Third Plenary Council would stimulate new opportunities for Catholic publishing. For example, on the subject “Of books and newspapers,” it was stated that “While objectionable writings are to be condemned, Catholics should oppose them also by orthodox newspapers and books.” New markets were stimulated by reaffirming the decree of the 1866 council requiring each parish to establish a school (thus expanding the market for textbooks), and calling for the creation of a uniform catechism for religious instruction and emphasizing the importance of “Good Reading” and “The Catholic Press” for “The Christian Home.” However, the influence of bishops was not a simple matter of decree and obedience; it interacted with lay cooperation, initiative, and resistance.

Most major Catholic book publishers of the late nineteenth century were owned by families of European descent—immigrants with some experience in printing, bookbinding, or bookselling who established their own firm in the United States, such as Dennis and James Sadlier, or were branches of European firms like that of Benziger Brothers and F. Pustet. By 1880 the largest concentration of Catholic publishers in the country was housed on Barclay Street in New York City.

Lay-owned Catholic publishers produced a variety of printed religious material—Bibles, prayer books, spiritual reading, devotional guides, catechisms, missals, official liturgical texts, and textbooks as well as histories, poetry, and fiction. For example, an 1893 bibliography of Catholic publishing includes a translation of *The Secret of Sanctity according to St. Francis de Sales*, a gynecological handbook, manuals for members of devotional societies, books on the mass, and the fifth edition of *May Blossoms in Honor of the Blessed Mother of God*, by an S.J. This array suggests the variety of contexts in which print was believed to be crucial to Catholic life and worship. Official liturgical rites were translated and duplicated in missals that allowed the laity to follow the Latin of the mass in their own languages and to supplement it with other prayers. In his 1863 *Guide to Young Catholic Women* (in its twenty-ninth printing in 1893),
Paulist George Deshon wrote: “It is a simple matter to attend at Mass. You come to worship God and to pray. No particular way of doing so is laid down. . . . Some say the Rosary, and occupy their minds with good thoughts while they do so. Others have a book with prayers for Mass, which they follow; all this is very well.” All aspects of life, from worship and private prayer to professional practice, were supported and supplemented with Catholic print materials.

Throughout the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, devotional literature was a mainstay of Catholic publishing. These materials were published for use in prayer outside the official worship of the Roman Catholic Church, for either private individual prayer or devotional practice. Catholic publishers capitalized on the sustained success of titles like Thomas à Kempis’s *Imitation of Christ*, Francis de Sales’s *Introduction to a Devout Life*, and Butler’s *Lives of the Saints.*

Ann Taves’s study, *The Household of Faith: Roman Catholic Devotions in Mid-Nineteenth Century America,* examines with great methodological astuteness the role of devotional publications in the mid-nineteenth century, identifying important changes in mass-printing techniques, increasing educational levels among Catholic laity, and a focus on the household as the most important locus of religious faith. Such factors only intensified after 1880, as the Catholic middle class expanded.

Devotional literature demonstrates the distinctive interplay of religious authority, market forces, and individual readers’ preferences within Catholic print culture. The large quantities published reflect high demand among readers. At the same time, devotional publication was subject to forces other than the market. The contrast between clerical ownership of diocesan newspapers and lay publishing houses might suggest that one was thoroughly under ecclesiastical control and the other entirely free of it. For publishers actively seeking a Catholic audience or market, however, whether for the purpose of evangelization or profit, ecclesiastical authority was nonetheless a consideration. Canon law required that any religious text or sacred image directed at a Catholic audience be reviewed by “competent ecclesiastical authority” and found to be free of any conflict with Catholic doctrine. This procedure, referred to as *censura praevia* because the review took place before publication, was denoted by the *imprimatur* (Latin for “it may be printed”) of a bishop on the obverse of the title page. The Counter-Reformation Catholic Church, fearful of the rapid spread of Protestant ideas made possible by the printing press, originally sought to censor and approve of all works for public use. That ambition, not surprisingly, had evaporated by the mid-sixteenth century; nineteenth-century American bishops had no way of *requiring* publishers to obtain such approval. However, because Catholics were forbidden to read certain categories of text published without the imprimatur, one presumes that publishers actively sought the good-
will of this large market and complied with censorship procedures accordingly (see figure 20.3). Advertisements often touted ecclesiastical approval of a particular text as a selling point.

As with most legal aspects of Catholic polity, use of the imprimatur was neater in the pages of canon law than in practice. The spread of new devotions usually outpaced the process of approval; bishops often waited to see the impact of a particular devotion before approving either its practice or its associated printed materials. 19 This variable application of prior censorship demonstrates the frequent fluctuations in ecclesiastical authority. Catholic print culture was in a constant, distinctive process of renegotiation, sometimes coerced, sometimes freely engaged.

Equally distinctive was the Catholic cultural configuration of the relationship between printed texts and material objects. Virtually every devotion had both material and print components. The best known was the rosary, in which the string of beads was accompanied by a meditation on a series of fifteen "Mysteries," incidents from the lives of Christ and Mary that were elaborated in hundreds of publications (see figure 20.4). Other devotions included the same combination of ritual object and printed prayers or directions: statues, pictures, or medals could be supplemented by specially written and approved prayers and meditations. 20 The connection between the word and the object was, for Catholic worship, organic and inextricable.

The majority of leading Catholic publishers also manufactured or distributed religious goods, including altar furnishings and linen, rosaries, scapulars, communion wafers, statues, medals, prints of religious images, and other objects of the extensive paraphernalia that bespoke and reinforced the devotionalism, domesticity, and consumerism of late nineteenth-century Catholic life. The assets of his father's business listed by P. J. Kenedy on 17 January 1866 included gilt prayer books, plain prayer books, slate pencils, catechisms, scapulars, religious pictures, stationery, and beads. 21

This association derived partly from financial necessity, with sales of religious goods supplementing less-profitable publishing enterprises. A publishing venture that attempted to survive on its own was greeted with sympathy and skepticism. The connection between print and religious goods was more than merely pragmatic, however. As Colleen McDannell has pointed out, nineteenth-century Catholic piety differed from Protestant piety primarily in its dependence on material artifacts and visual images: "What the Protestants did through reading, the Catholics did through seeing." 22 Protestant print culture focused primarily on the Bible; for Catholics, the Bible was always part of a constellation that included an altar, bread and wine, and probably also an assortment of candles, bells, oil, ashes, incense, water, a crucifix, or palm branches.
This book falls under the ban of the INDEX OF FORBIDDEN BOOKS.
Catholic students are reminded of their obligation to seek proper permission to read it.

FIGURE 20.5. A mimeographed notice pasted inside the front cover of the 1902 edition of The Downfall by Emile Zola (New York: P. F. Collier and Son, © 1902) reminded Catholic students that the title was on the Index of Forbidden Books and permission was required to read it. Roesch (formerly Albert Emmanuel) Library, University of Dayton.
The Rosary

The Rosary is one of the most beautiful and popular devotions practiced by the clients of the Blessed Virgin.

It consists of fifteen decades. Each decade is made up of one Our Father and ten Hail Mary’s, and one Glory be to the Father. During the recitation of these prayers we meditate upon an event in the life of Our Lord or of His Holy Mother. The subject of this meditation is called a Mystery.

The fifteen decades of the Rosary are divided into three groups of five Mysteries each, namely, the Joyful, the Sorrowful and the Glorious Mysteries.

At the end of each group of the five Mysteries we may recite the prayer, “Salve Regina,” as found on page 5.

Sometimes the association between word and object is strikingly explicit: in his widely reprinted advice book for young women in domestic service, Deshon insists that even if a young woman cannot read, she should “not be cast down on that account. . . . There is one beautiful book, at least, we can read; and that is the Crucifix,” which contains “fountains of knowledge and true wisdom.” In addition, the rosary is “another lovely book you have that you can read, though you never learned a letter of the alphabet.”

In The Mainstream, Not of It: 1908–1940

The first two decades of the twentieth century were a genuine turning point in U.S. Catholic history. The removal of the U.S. church from mission status in 1908 foregrounded a sense of national identity that was intensified by the experience of the First World War. Extensive participation in the war effort validated Catholics’ legitimacy as Americans, as did rising educational and economic status. Not only did a significant number of Catholic Americans serve in
the armed forces in the Great War, but to coordinate its participation in the war effort the church organized the National Catholic War Council. Reorganized and made permanent after the war as the National Catholic Welfare Conference, it did more than any other structure to establish a national Catholic presence and self-awareness in an increasingly corporate, highly organized society.24

Postwar restrictions on immigration stabilized the Catholic population, promoting nationalism and the growth of an increasingly assimilated, educated, and professional laity. Before 1880, Catholic publishing efforts tended to focus on poor and uneducated recent immigrants; by the late nineteenth century, Catholic family publications had a more middle-class tone. After World War I the audience for Catholic publishing consisted increasingly of economically successful, native-born Americans. The press thus shifted focus from the protection of an immigrant faith to a conscious awareness of the varying needs of a maturing community.25

The sense of solidity and confidence that came from economic prosperity and from manifest patriotism was nonetheless accompanied by a persistent sense of difference, sometimes proud, sometimes defensive. Significant numbers of U.S. Catholics remained antagonistic to American culture, either because they perceived persistent attacks on the church or because they sought salvation from a degraded modern American society in the stability and teachings of the church.

Historian Philip Gleason characterizes the middle years of the twentieth century as a time when U.S. Catholics were actively engaged in “the search for unity.” This notion resonates with the apparent ideological unity of the Catholic press. While historians of U.S. Catholicism have exposed the limits of such unity, it was an explicitly articulated goal between 1920 and 1960.26 This is not to say that divisions among Catholics did not exist—far from it. Rather, Catholic cultural work was centrally concerned with wresting unity out of disagreement, disharmony, dissonance, and disarray. The press was a major contributor to this work.27

Old Wine in New Bottles

In the early decades of the twentieth century, the Catholic press adopted most of the centralizing and professionalizing strategies of the general press. Attrition rates for new periodicals, for example, declined dramatically between 1900 and 1936.28 A Catholic Press Association was formally established in 1911 to facilitate communication nationally. The National Catholic Welfare Conference, the policy agency of the American bishops, established a news service in 1919 to provide wire reports on national and global Catholic news items to Catholic
publications. In addition, Catholic universities began to include journalism among the professional courses and programs that proliferated after 1900. These efforts to formalize standards and centralize organizations reflect the growing national self-consciousness of increasingly well-educated Catholics, as well as national trends beyond the Catholic community.

This self-consciousness was not seeking mere assimilation, however. The Catholic press adopted increasingly modern methods to achieve seemingly premodern goals. Catholic publishing espoused both the need for resources to prevail against the antireligious and dehumanizing aspects of modernity and the need for Catholicism to engage the modern world, proclaiming the sacredness of reality and the existence of eternal truth. The self-conscious use of modern, professionalized methods to achieve at least partially countermodern ends is visible in two major publishing efforts of the early twentieth century: the catechism and the Catholic Encyclopedia.

At the turn of the century, most existing catechisms had been prepared hurriedly to meet the Third Plenary Council’s call for a uniform national explication of doctrine, to be used in religious education. After 1894, though, the catechism market began to change, especially after Pope Pius X’s Quam singulari, the 1910 decree that lowered the approved age for first communion (previously between twelve and fourteen) to the “age of reason,” somewhere around age seven. The 1884 catechism, even in subsequent editions, was an impractical tool. Its questions and answers about doctrine and practice were far too difficult for the seven-year-olds preparing for first communion. The 1910 papal decree promoted a stronger market awareness that resulted in a proliferation of catechism texts. Innovations included not only cosmetic changes such as cover color and illustrations but also pedagogical changes—glossaries for each chapter, graded texts, simpler language for younger children—and theological considerations such as topic arrangement based on the liturgical year or the addition of scriptural support and justification for the catechism’s doctrinal content. The U.S. bishops, still committed to the goal of a universal text, in the mid-1930s once again authorized a revision; this five year, widely consultative process was conducted with an eye to professional expertise, not just theological and ecclesiastical authority. The resulting 1941 Baltimore Catechism was informed by a growing awareness of contemporary pedagogical research and cognitive psychology. Central to the folklore of Catholic childhood in post–World War II America, it was seen by many in the generation after the Second Vatican Council as theologically conservative. Originally, however, it reflected the appropriation of techniques and ideas very much in the contemporary publishing mainstream.

A similar interplay of modern forms for traditional purposes characterized
the production of the fifteen-volume *Catholic Encyclopedia* between 1907 and 1914. Born out of dissatisfaction with the treatment of Catholic subjects in secular encyclopedias, it sought to rectify errors and explain Catholic doctrine and history while presenting Catholic views on contemporary topics such as socialism and psychotherapy. Reflecting the simultaneously confident and yet defensive posture of American Catholics, the editors stated that they were “fully aware that there is no specifically Catholic science, that mathematics, chemistry, physiology and other branches of human knowledge are neither Catholic, Jewish, nor Protestant; but, when it is commonly asserted that Catholic principles are an obstacle to scientific research, it seems not only proper but needful to register what and how much Catholics have contributed to every department of knowledge.”

Examining relatively discrete enterprises such as the catechism and the *Encyclopedia* reveals crucial aspects of Catholic publishing in this period, but it can obscure some of the tensions the “search for unity” generated. A number of fault lines existed: liberal-conservative, lay-clerical, Eastern-Midwestern, Irish-German, male-female, religious order-diocesan hierarchy. Each was reflected in some dimension of the press. Devotional literature, for example, reveals that the more demonstrative and emotional aspects of Catholic piety were associated with recent immigrants, the working class, and women; assimilation and the pursuit of success fostered a more upper-class, more “Protestant” demeanor and aesthetic.

Theology, taste, and class are deeply intertwined here. While sentimental piety and emotional excess were often deplored, even the most Brahmin of Catholics would not dismiss devotions entirely. At the same time, much of Catholic publishing—magazines, elementary school textbooks, scholarly periodicals, and weekly newspapers—aimed at “elevating” the taste of the Catholic reading public by presenting European traditions of high culture as the rightful heritage of American Catholics. The fourth in a series of *Ideal Catholic Readers*, for example, by “A Sister of St. Joseph,” included reproductions of works by Michelangelo, Raphael, and Doré. Textbooks also reconstructed U.S. history to include Catholic contributions and introduced the particularities of Catholic theological and material culture. The *Ideal Catholic Reader*’s first lesson, “The Young Missionaries,” was followed by a new-word list that included “Xavier” and “cassock” along with “delightful,” “interesting,” and “astonishment.”

Catholic magazines of the period also reflect the desire to educate Catholics in European culture while seeking respect for Catholics as a group. Although the varying styles and cultural messages of different periodicals revealed the class distinctions among American Catholics, the editors also worked diligently to overcome these barriers through religion.
This desire to “Catholicize” high culture and make it available and attractive to Catholics is evident in a series of efforts to launch “quality” journals. Catholic World was joined in the twentieth century by two influential publications, America and Commonweal, the names of which do not reveal their religious affiliation. Founded in 1909 by a group of Jesuits, America was explicitly a review of politics, art, and culture from “the” Catholic perspective, notwithstanding the secular reach of its title. “The object . . . of this Review,” the editors wrote in the first issue, is “to supply in one central publication a record of Catholic achievement and a defense of Catholic doctrine, built up by skilful hands in every region of the globe.” Its mission was not solely intramural; non-Catholics, the editors asserted, “are . . . eager to have us exert our proper influence in the national and social life” by contributing to public discussion of important contemporary issues.35

Fifteen years later, editor Michael Williams and a group of lay people displayed similar confidence in launching Commonweal, asserting that “the conserving and regenerative forces of the fountain head of Christian tradition, experience and culture” could address “the problems that today all men of good will are seeking to solve.” They viewed this duty as not only spiritual and moral but patriotic; the aim was not the advancement of the church but “the betterment, the happiness, and the peace of the American people.”36

The ambitions of America and Commonweal reflect the growing confidence of the Catholic community. The theological imperative of sustaining Catholicism by providing Catholics with abundant information now widened to a cultural imperative to make the Catholic voice heard in the public realm. They knew that the world was modern and modernizing; America was launched as a weekly to replace its predecessor, the monthly Messenger, arguing that “The march of events is too rapid”37 to be covered only monthly.

Apparently, some readers used the magazines to broach Catholic questions with non-Catholic neighbors. The editor of America received a letter in 1928 asking him to refrain from criticizing U.S. policy in Mexico, because the correspondent’s “Protestant friends will read America but won’t read the Messenger of the Sacred Heart.”38 The Messenger of the Sacred Heart was aimed at a popular audience, more explicitly devotional, and thus presumably less attractive to a Protestant reader. The contrast between America and the Messenger exemplifies a divide between high-culture Catholic journals and popular Catholic magazines. The latter, aimed at families and emphasizing devotion and pastoral concerns over cultural ones, circulated more widely than the former. One of the most popular twentieth-century devotional magazines is Our Sunday Visitor, founded in 1912. At first glance, Our Sunday Visitor’s differences from America and Commonweal are more apparent than its similarities to them. Its
tone was sectarian and populist rather than urbane, and it focused intensely on antisocialism and on answering anti-Catholic attacks and misunderstandings. The first issue included headlines announcing “The Church Law of Annual Confession and Communion Strongest Basis of Society,” “A Whole Army of Protestants Think That the Blessed Virgin Mary Should be Honored” and “Socialism’s Foundation Shattered.” Despite the belligerent tone and the absence of a smooth East Coast cosmopolitan veneer, the magazine’s subtitle for years was “The Harmonizer.”

The differences in style and taste between Our Sunday Visitor on the one hand and America and Commonweal on the other reflect real class differences within U.S. Catholicism. However, the missions of the high-culture and the more pastoral periodicals overlap in ways that might at first be unclear. For example, each of these periodicals aimed to “create a taste for Catholic reading,” but while Our Sunday Visitor did so by cultivating wholesomeness, America’s editors pursued artistic complexity. Nonetheless, despite striving to be “cosmopolitan,” America’s “animating principle” remained “loyalty to the Holy See and profound respect for the wishes and views of the Catholic Hierarchy.” Even if this was a gesture of goodwill or preemptive defense, it reflects an awareness that America’s readers belonged to a larger whole. Culturally, the Catholic press often melded various brow levels. Simultaneously divided and longing for unity, Catholic leadership lamented both the taste of the Catholic reading public and the failure of the laity to read the Catholic books being provided for them.

This imperative of unity is visible also in Catholic scholarly enterprises, particularly during the first half of the twentieth century. The outpouring of historical scholarship on American Catholicism owes its existence largely to one person, John Gilmary Shea (1826–92), a layman who dedicated his life to documenting early American Catholic history before the records of its existence disappeared. He produced, among hundreds of other works, a massive History of the Catholic Church in the United States, by far the most ambitious such effort in the nineteenth century. The succeeding generation of scholars often invoked Shea’s legacy as they pursued the history of U.S. Catholicism with the same zeal for both unearthing sources and honoring the Church.

Catholic publishing sought to demonstrate and advance Catholic unity not only within the United States but internationally as well. The first half of the twentieth century marked the “Catholic Revival” or “renaissance,” a resurgence of scholarly and artistic activity in Europe that demonstrated to American Catholics the power and responsibility of Catholicism to speak to the modern world. Usually dated from the work of John Henry Newman, the revival encompassed writers from England (Hillaire Belloc and G. K. Chesterton), France
(Georges Bernanos, Leon Bloy, Paul Claudel, Jacques Maritain, and François Mauriac), and Spain (José María Gironella).

The revival’s presence in the United States was established largely through the efforts of the English publishing house of Sheed and Ward, which opened a U.S. branch in 1933. The 1930s generally were an era of renewed vigor for Catholic book publishing—Bruce Publishing in Milwaukee and Newman Press were both established, while Prentice-Hall and McGraw-Hill added “Catholic lines.” Like so many other Catholic publishers, Sheed and Ward’s profits were rather shaky, but the operation had its greatest success in the United States, publishing works by Bloy, Mauriac, and Claudel in its first year. Other major figures of the revival, such as philosopher Jacques Maritain and medieval philosopher-historian Etienne Gilson, were published by secular presses.

The philosophical and historical work of writers like Maritain and Gilson might seem to belie claims about the negotiation of unity within and through Catholic publishing efforts. On the contrary, the achievements of the Catholic Revival generated a distinctive sense of group pride and solidarity across class lines. Pastoral periodicals such as Our Sunday Visitor and Ave Maria claimed writers such as Chesterton and Maritain with at least as much glee as America and Commonweal did. Although the percentage of readers reading any of the authors of the revival cannot be determined, they nonetheless represented an ideal for U.S. Catholic achievement. If contemporary European Catholic authors could produce great literature, then the tradition could speak to the modern world. American Catholicism was thus challenged to nurture authors who could speak with equal skill and authority.

The Legacy

Culturally, Catholic publishing from 1880 to 1940 appears as it did to many of its contemporaries—foreign, premodern, and un-American. Financially, technologically, and organizationally, on the other hand, it was rather mainstream—technologically innovative, pragmatically commercial. Most successful Catholic publishers congratulated themselves and were regularly congratulated not only on the content and quality of their publications but also on the business savvy with which they were produced. The knowledge of advertising and marketing of John Noll, founder of Our Sunday Visitor, as well as his ability to seize the advantageous moment, ensured the success of that magazine as much as Noll’s ability at religious commentary.

The Catholic Encyclopedia was published independently and funded through subscriptions and lay investments. This fact is remarked on in virtually every account of the Encyclopedia’s genesis, with a satisfaction that seems to match that
taken in the work's scholarly quality. Several decades later, writers and media figures such as Daniel A. Lord, S.J. (1888–1955) and Fulton J. Sheen (1895–1979) were running the ancient ark, no longer by steam, but by rocket fuel. They used modern technology and public relations—Sheen is more famous for his television show than his writing; Lord wrote prodigiously and produced public pageants, musical plays, and radio broadcasts. One contemporary lauded Lord as “a Shakespeare gone Chautauqua”; another as the “Flo Ziegfeld of the cloister.” Despite the surface of Romanità apparent in their midcentury clerical garb, Catholic literary entrepreneurs like Lord, Sheen, Noll, or Francis X. Talbot of America had at least as much in common with Americans like Louis B. Mayer or Henry Ford as they did with Pius XI.

Recognizing both aspects of Catholic publishing is difficult but necessary if we wish to understand the details in their full complexity. This essay has highlighted multiple cases; many more remain. For example, Catholic women formed reading circles in the late nineteenth century. Recognizing the benefits of the Chautauqua system, they established a Catholic version to provide young Catholics with a “more advanced plan of Catholic reading.” Catholics published Catholic Digest in order to capitalize on the popularity of the Reader’s Digest with accessible excerpts from Catholic periodicals. A group of Catholics with very different politics followed similar instincts in founding the Catholic Worker. They infused the passion for economic and social justice that characterized the Daily Worker with transcendent devotion, simultaneously developing within the upwardly mobile Catholic community an awareness of the suffering of the poor. Catholics also established a separate Book-of-the-Month Club, through which they hoped to supply books that “are cultural and artistic, that have a popular appeal, and that are, above all, expressive of the Catholic ideal, tradition and philosophy.” Through a complicated dance of imitation and appropriation, Catholic publishers sought to bring all aspects of life within the religiocultural boundaries of Catholicism. This interplay of confidence and vigilance distinctively configured the most transcendent and the most mundane of Catholic publishing ventures.