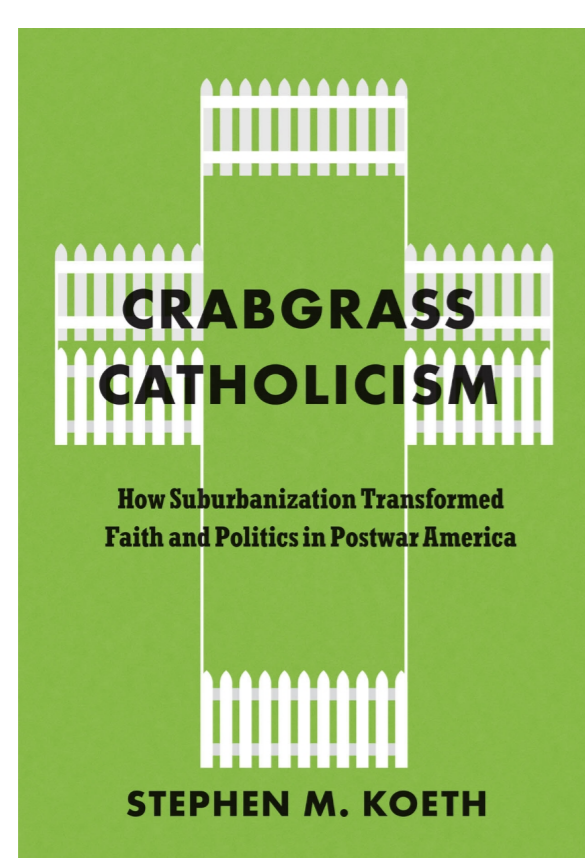




# Family Homes and Drive-in Churches

Nov 30, 2025



*Crabgrass Catholicism: How Suburbanization Transformed Faith and Politics in Postwar America*

By Stephen M. Koeth, CSC.  
University of Chicago Press, 2025.  
Paperback, 328 pages, \$30.

Reviewed by **Jacob Akey**.

This September, the cardinal archbishop of New York unveiled a mural, the largest art commission in the history of the most famous Catholic church in America, Saint Patrick’s Cathedral. This mural, which surrounds the entrance doors, depicts the Immigrant Church: the waves of Irish, Italians, Germans, Poles, and other nationals who brought their Catholic faith to the United States. In its subject, the mural declares that the immigrant church is the most important chapter of the American Catholic story. And who would disagree?

The overwhelming majority of American Catholics are Catholic immigrants and their descendants. And while the Immigrant Church might have lost some of its immediacy, as a matter of historical perspective it was the most formative chapter of American Catholicism. Fr. Stephen M. Koeth, CSC, does not seek to revise this assessment—he wants to add a runner-up.

Koeth’s debut monograph, *Crabgrass Catholicism: How Suburbanization Transformed Faith and Politics in Postwar America*, presents the Suburban Church as the second most important experience in American Catholicism. It was, he argues, both normative and transformative. The numbers support this claim:

“Between 1950 and 1970 American suburbs gained a total of 85 million residents” and “whereas in 1952 half of the nation’s Catholics lived in central cities and only one-third in suburbs, by 1980 only a quarter of Catholics lived in cities.” This gels with the cultural narrative of suburbanization—white urbanites, upwardly mobile young couples, perhaps WW2 veterans, trading walk-ups for picket fences. The process of emptying cities and burgeoning suburbs is illustrated by Koeth through the Dioceses of New York and Brooklyn (urban) and the Diocese of Rockville Centre (suburban Long Island, split from Brooklyn in 1957). Throughout the middle of the twentieth century, New York and Brooklyn’s populations stagnated as residents of the cities’ urban centers fled to the suburbs. Meanwhile, Rockville Centre’s growth was unmanageable. Hamlets were transformed overnight and small parish plants were suddenly home to thousands of parishioners.

Parishes of the boom era existed in a state of constant financial crisis as they tried to accommodate their new parishioners. In the four years after Rockville Centre was separated from the Diocese of Brooklyn, it built twenty-eight new elementary schools, eighteen convents, seven rectories, twenty-two parish auditoriums, and much more. Despite the construction boom, for years many parishes used warehouses, tents, and even drive-in theaters for Sunday Masses. One Long Island parish hopped from the local Republican Club to the Democratic Club to a warehouse as it grew. Another celebrated Mass in a casket factory. And another used a chicken house. Existing facilities were everywhere expanded. New financial realities demanded innovations in parish management; the parish council and finance committee, now enshrined in canon law, were born in suburbia.

“[S]uburbanization accelerated and diversified lay participation in the ministries and administration of the Church and led to a gradual transfer of power from clergy to laity,” writes Koeth. “[P]ower structures were ‘often completely open and flexible.’” Lay participation in the suburbs was made necessary by unique circumstances. In the diocese of Rockville Centre, parishes served six times the number of families as the average American parish. A 1967 study ranked the diocese as having the second lowest priest-to-parishioner ratio in the country. Worse still, the suburban boom came just as the American priesthood began collapsing. Following the Second Vatican Council, one in ten priests left the priesthood. In Rockville Centre, it was two in ten. Fewer men entered seminaries and still fewer stayed. Vocations to religious life also declined in the suburban era. In the decade following the Second Vatican Council, the number of women religious in America was reduced by one quarter, and, during that period, “the number of women entering religious life declined by 81 percent.”

Perhaps more distressing than the vocations story is the brief rise and long, grinding fall of parochial education. With the postwar, “substantially suburban” baby boom and the movement of millions into the suburbs, pastors, bishops, and diocesan officials faced immense pressure to build new schools. In its first five years, Rockville Centre added 40,000 desks through the construction and expansion of sixty-four schools. However, once these schools were built, they were unaffordable to run. Prior to the suburban era, women religious made up a majority of teachers in Catholic schools—in Rockville Centre, 82 percent of teachers were priests or religious. And women religious, often under a vow of poverty and with their basic needs provided for by their order, could be paid much less than lay employees. But after the Second Vatican Council, as women left religious life and vocations dried up, there were not enough women religious to staff new suburban schools. In Rockville Centre, the proportion of women religious teachers fell by a quarter in the diocese’s first decade. Expensive lay employees became needed and the cost of tuition rose beyond the means of many parents—especially those with multiple children. Financial strain and declining vocations had the effect of killing parochial education. According to ex-Jesuit Niel McCluskey, “Almost no Catholic schools were built in the United States from the mid-1960s to almost 1990.”

As the percentage of Catholic children attending Catholic schools declined, parishes sought to fill in the gap with religious education centers: para-school operations that supplemented missing catechesis. At one point, the largest parishes in Rockville Centre had more students in religious education than entire dioceses. Buildings built for schools were requisitioned for these classes. And, as priests and religious became fewer, lay employees and volunteers stepped in to fill the gaps. But there was a problem: para-school education didn’t work, and three quarters of American Catholics agreed. Fr. Andrew Greeley wrote that religious education programs “did not even begin to be an adequate replacement for Catholic schools.” The failures of religious education were certainly a factor in the decline of American Catholicism.

After the optimism of the suburban boom, it all went bust. Mass attendance fell by 70 percent. Women’s religious life died out. Parochial education was crippled. And the priests ordained during the height of the Suburban Church sexually abused young men at rates incomparable to those before or after. The green grass of suburbia was starved into a desiccated, brown waste.

*Crabgrass Catholicism* is the first book to have been written on Catholic suburbanization since Fr. Greeley’s 1959 *The Church and the Suburbs*. It’s banal to praise an author for addressing an understudied topic, for opening the door to further study, but Koeth makes such a wildly convincing case for the Suburban Church’s importance that the cliché is unavoidable. May he and others go further. On that note, *Crabgrass Catholicism* does provoke, without answering, some fascinating questions: To what extent was the sex-abuse crisis a suburban phenomenon? What role did the mobility of suburbanites play in degrading the parish as an ecclesial unit? Were the suburbs especially harmful to women’s vocations? Did non-traditional Church buildings—the auditoriums, chicken houses, and theaters—affect practice?

The book isn’t perfect. Koeth adopts the unfortunate convention of analyzing how any given phenomenon affected minority groups. He too obviously stitches together a number of prior projects: local parish histories, intellectual history, a meta-commentary on the Second Vatican Council, and an ill-fitting narrative of evolving suburban politics. But stylistic complaints aside, the book’s mission, established in its subtitle—*Suburbanization Transformed Faith and Politics in Postwar America*—demands a roving ambition. And Koeth certainly succeeds in convincing the reader that the Suburban Church deserves to be on the podium with the Immigrant Church.

**Jacob Akey** is an associate editor at *First Things*.

## Support the University Bookman

The *Bookman* is provided free of charge and without ads to all readers. Would you please consider supporting the work of the *Bookman* with a gift of \$5? [Contributions of any amount are needed and appreciated!](#)

## The University Bookman

[Bookman Home](#)

[About](#)

[Departments](#)

[Archives](#)

Search

## Subscribe

Subscribe and receive the **Bookman** weekly in your inbox.

\* indicates required

Subscribe

## Search

Search

## Categories

## Explore Past Articles



**The University Bookman**

Follow



**The University Bookman**

@ubookman · 24 Mar

For America250, @lsheahan enters the fray: What the American Revolution Secured: Order, Justice, and Freedom  
A "revolution not made, but prevented." Russell Kirk fondly and frequently quoted E. J. Payne’s pithy summary of Burke’s view of the Glorious Revolution.

1 Twitter

The University Bookman Retweeted



**Luke C. Sheahan, PhD**

@lsheahan · 24 Mar

"So yes, Lord Alfred, perhaps you are right after all. 'Tis not too late to seek a newer world! Perhaps one last Ulyssean adventure remains beyond the sunset, and perhaps some work of noble note may yet be done."

1 Twitter

Load More

## Connect with RKC



## Contact RKC

The Russell Kirk Center  
P.O. Box 4  
Mecosta, Michigan 49332

616-726-0195

info@kirkcenter.org

## Get in Touch

SEND US A MESSAGE