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*Crabgrass Catholicism: How Suburbanization Transformed Faith and Politics in Post-war America* by Stephen M. Koeth  
(review)

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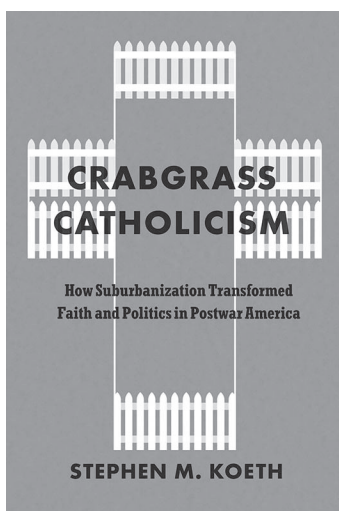


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of Father Charles Coughlin. Burke remembered that Roosevelt did not mind that Coughlin called him a liar but was upset that Coughlin implied that Roosevelt's father did not respect him. Burke remarked, "Roosevelt's soul was suffering, and in his suffering he asked me to come" (638). Slawson weaves together these moments of Burke's life, from intimate and spiritual to calculated and savvy, and in the process makes a compelling case for the centrality of Father John Burke not just in American Catholic history but in the wider history of the United States.

JEANNE PETIT  
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***Crabgrass Catholicism: How Suburbanization Transformed Faith and Politics in Postwar America.*** By Stephen M. Koeth. University of Chicago Press, 2025. 328 pp. \$30.00.

In this lively and provocative book, Stephen Koeth examines the impact of post-World War II suburbanization on American Catholicism. In 1957, the Vatican established the Diocese of Rockville Centre to administer the rapidly growing suburbs of Long Island, making it the first entirely suburban diocese in the United States. Using Long Island as a case study, Koeth traces how the immigrant church of the early twentieth century—with its close ties between parish and neighborhood and its communal rituals infused with the language and ethnic traditions of parishioners—gave way to a suburban church organized around automobiles, shopping centers, and single-family homes. As a result of these transformations, Koeth argues, Catholic life shifted “from the parish plant to the family home and from public and communal expressions of piety to domestic and private forms of prayer” (6). In the suburbs, Catholicism became more private, more individualistic, and ultimately less durable.

Combining the methods of urban history and religious history, *Crabgrass Catholicism* analyzes both how religion organized suburban space and how religious leaders adapted to the suburban environment. Catholics joined the suburban migration with particular enthusiasm. By the 1960s, nearly half the residents of Nassau County (one of Long Island's two counties) identified as Catholic. Rapid growth swelled

congregations and coffers, but it also created many practical challenges. Parishes needed to construct entirely new infrastructures of churches, convents, rectories, auditoriums, and parochial schools. With soaring enrollment and insufficient space, congregations often worshiped in improvised settings such as tents and firehouses. One parish celebrated its first Masses in a former airplane hangar. Another conducted services in a drive-in movie theater for thirteen years, with liturgies echoing from car speakers. Religious education classes were frequently moved into single-family homes. Koeth convincingly argues that these makeshift arrangements eroded a sense of community and weakened the parish as a sacred space. Instead of gathering in pews, Catholics increasingly encountered one another in living rooms and parking lots.

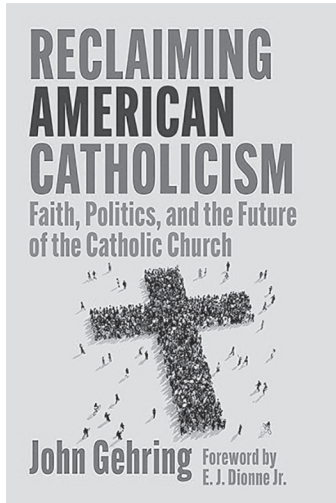
If suburbanization undermined sacred space, it also created new leadership opportunities. Expanding congregations required greater participation from the laity, whether through fundraising campaigns or service on parochial school boards. Chronic shortages of priests and religious sisters led to the elevation of lay teachers, particularly for home-based religion classes. Crucially, Koeth shows that this shift in authority from clergy to laity began nearly a decade before the Second Vatican Council and its call for greater lay participation in church affairs.

These suburban transformations also contributed to declining religious participation. By the 1970s, church leaders noted with alarm a sharp drop in Mass attendance. As Koeth demonstrates, this decline stemmed in part from changing conceptions of race and ethnicity. At the height of the immigrant church, most parishioners lived in ethnic enclaves and identified as Irish, Polish, or Italian Catholics. Yet in the segregated world of suburbia, they increasingly identified as white. The hardening of racial boundaries alienated Black Catholics and posed obstacles for Latino immigrants who sought Mass in Spanish. Meanwhile, white Catholics, like other middle-class suburbanites, struggled with rising mortgage payments and property taxes, which drew them toward conservative politicians promising tax relief and state aid for parochial schools.

In a solemn coda to this story, the Diocese of Rockville Centre filed for bankruptcy in 2020 after hundreds of lawsuits alleging clerical sexual abuse. It would be tempting to attribute its collapse solely to the sexual abuse scandal, but *Crabgrass Catholicism* shows that the decline had been decades in the making. The social transformations of suburbanization had been unraveling the fabric of Catholic life since the 1950s. Amid cul-de-sacs and white picket fences, Koeth observes that “the life of faith became one more commodity to choose, or not” (221). While meticulous in documenting the weakening of religious affiliation, Koeth offers few prescriptions for revitalizing the Catholic

Church. Still, the implication is clear: without renewed forms of community and sacred space, Catholicism risks continued fragmentation in the suburban landscape.

MICHAEL R. GLASS  
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***Reclaiming American Catholicism: Faith, Politics, and the Future of the Catholic Church.*** By John Gehring. Georgetown University Press, 2025. 395 pp. \$29.95.

Washington University political scientist Ryan Burge, whose statistical work on the relationship between politics and religious belief has become indispensable, concluded in the months leading to the 2024 presidential election that, “If you’re a white person and religious, you’re almost Republican by default” (*National Catholic Reporter*, June 4, 2024). John Gehring uses Burge’s work and many others’ in *Reclaiming American Catholicism* not just to tell the story of how

“the conflation of religion with conservative politics has turned a generation of Americans away from institutional religion” (377), but also to begin imagining how Roman Catholicism contains the resources it needs to reclaim its voice for peace and justice in the public arena.

John Gehring has been a reporter for a long time. Most recently, he wrote for *Faith in Public Life*, and he has had bylines in the range of mainstream US Catholic media including *America*, the *National Catholic Reporter*, and *U.S. Catholic*. He also is the author of *The Francis Effect: A Radical Pope’s Challenge to the American Catholic Church* (Bloomsbury, 2015). It is worth noting that, like his first book, *Reclaiming American Catholicism* is published by a reputable, peer-reviewed press that would flatter most scholars’ vitae. Academic readers can take Gehring’s work seriously, and the book should be assigned in upper-level undergraduate courses that touch on Catholicism and the culture wars in the United States. The book also can be useful for graduate bibliographies.

Gehring’s work to recount the long string of events that brought Catholicism in the United States to this low situation is a story that has been told in other places (including by this reviewer). The telling is paced crisply and Gehring touches all the necessary waypoints. One important contribution Gehring makes is to bring that narrative current up to the Biden administration, seeming to take Biden’s presidency