

## Editor's Choice

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

Stephen M. Koeth, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2025 (ISBN 9780226842202), xii + 316 pp., pb \$30

Among many other things, MAGA—the 'Make America Great Again' movement—appeals to a bucolic vision of what the United States of America was like before 'the fall', that is, the 1960s. In this (white) vision, the United States was a wholesome, coherent, gentle world, one inhabited by kind people who shared genuine values, believed themselves to be chosen in some way for a unique destiny and blessed with many gifts that they treasured, realized and handed on to their children. It was a magical time, a fabled era of drive-ins, family diners, bible studies and picket fences: everything in this vision made for good neighbours because these good neighbours were made by and for God.

What was that post-war era really like for Christians, however? That question is arguably too great for any one volume, but Stephen M. Koeth's *Crabgrass Catholicism* is a brilliant, illuminating study of the suburban transformation of one part of American Christianity in the 1940s and 1950s, how people in the churches and parishes of Long Island responded to the developing challenges of their times and how the Church sought to maintain its commitment to its divine, eucharistic and resurrected identity. *Crabgrass Catholicism* is brilliant because of the extraordinary detail it contains and addresses. It is illuminating for wider reasons, of which I will highlight two.

First, Koeth demonstrates very clearly that whatever the successes and failures of these newly suburban Christians, they did not turn their backs on the poor, the immigrant, the homeless, the other. Yes, they struggled with what was happening to their country and their communities, but they did not forget that that same country was made up of people, people who though they were different were still human beings made in God's image. Perhaps this commitment to social Christianity had something to do with the Catholic, Irish and Italian societies that made up large parts of Long Island in the post-war decades, but to refer solely to the sociological context is to miss the larger point. Many (not all, certainly) of these Christians remained human beings as the practice of their faith grew into a new world. If it was a time of profound, sometimes shattering change, therefore, it was not one in which people turned to false idols; at least, not in large numbers, and not for many years.

Second, these same Christians expected that their ecclesial institutions, from parish to school to archdiocese, remain established in those same gospel values. They regarded these institutions as venues for inclusion and forces for outreach, and they contributed to them financially and resourcefully as they experienced such profound challenges as deindustrialization, Vietnam, Reaganomics, the end of the Cold War and eventually the arrival of the brief unipolar moment and the endless wars that upturned it. Koeth reveals not only the nuts and bolts of how Catholic communities achieved these goals but also something of why they did so and the forces that ultimately did so much to damage the Church in the 1990s and 2000s. Although

not a book of theology, therefore, *Crabgrass Catholicism* is theologically significant in 2026 and should be read with insight and appreciation.

It was not, is not, all plain sailing: failure is Christianity's constant companion. Suburbanization was a revolution, argues Koeth, and as in all revolutions much was damaged and some things were broken. The Catholic Church in 2026 is nothing like the force it was in 1946, in configuration as much as in existence. I came away from reading *Crabgrass Catholicism*, however, with something like renewed hope in parish life. Yes, suburbanization framed a deadly combination with American individualism in the world of late-modern consumerism, and much was lost. But something deeply human remains, and it may grow again. We are not a univocal faith, and Stephen Koeth has revealed something of why that character abides in our churches, however battered by the last 80 years.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Duane Schultz, *The Dahlgren Affair: Terror and Conspiracy in the Civil War*, New York, Norton, 1998, p. 35. The poem was written by Confederate prisoners of the Federal Government held in the POW camp on Johnson's Island, Lake Erie. Said enlisted men had eaten the camp commander's dog, largely because of the colonel's enforced starvation of the prisoners.