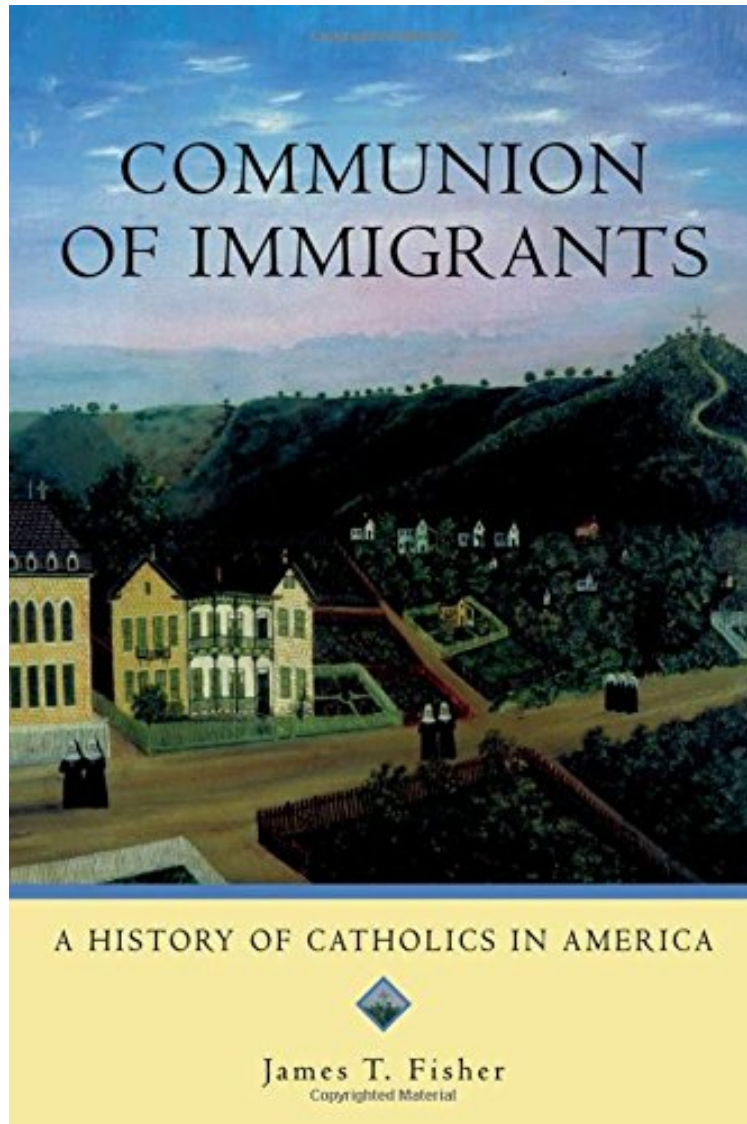


Communion of Immigrants: A History of Catholics in America (Religion in American Life)

James T. Fisher

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COMPREHENSIVE (YET COMPACT) SURVEY OF THE HISTORY OF AMERICAN CATHOLICIS
By Steven H Propp
James T. Fisher is professor of history and theological studies at Saint Louis University; he has also written books such as *Catholics in America*, *On the Irish Waterfront: The Crusader, the Movie, and the Soul of the Port of New York*, *Catholic Counterculture in America, 1933-62*, etc. He wrote in the Preface to this 2002 book, "The Catholic church grew enormously as a result of the mass immigration of European peoples to America between the 1840s and early 1920s... America is a nation of immigrants and the story of Catholics in America is largely the story of an immigrant church. The influx of an extraordinarily diverse population of newcomers since the 1960s has reinvigorated the church. The devotion of these immigrants and their families has shown once again that the Catholic experience is an integral force in the life of the nation." He notes, "Puritans were zealous Protestants determined to eliminate all remnants of 'popery' or Catholic practice, in England as well as in her colonies... In 1654... Puritan zealots repealed the Act of Religious Toleration and ushered in an era of intolerance toward Catholics that would persist until the American Revolution." (Pg. 18) He adds, "In the early years of the nation, the great majority of American Catholics, like most of their fellow citizens, were more concerned with pursuing opportunities for themselves and their families than with issues of church governance.." (Pg. 31) He says, "In 1832 a young woman named Rebecca Reed began telling tales [see: *Veil of Fear: Nineteenth-Century Convent Tales*] of her alleged 'escape' from a convent school... though she had actually been expelled from the school for dishonesty... The best-known example of this literary form, Maria Monk's *Awful Disclosures of the Hotel Dieu Nunnery of Montreal*... It was the best-selling work of literature in America prior to the publication in 1852 of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*... Monk's fabricated tales of illicit relations between priests and nuns appealed no only to rabid anti-Catholics but to many Americans who believed that such secretive organizations ... did not properly belong in an open and democratic society. Catholicism was viewed by many as both foreign and mysterious, themes that provoked highly mixed feelings in mid-19th century America." (Pg. 46) He admits, "American Catholicism's treatment of African Americans did not differ notably from that of other Christian denominations in the decades prior to the Civil War. Until the 1830s, Jesuits in Maryland owned slaves, though many younger members of the community wished to see them freed... Because the great majority of American Catholics lived in the north, the Union's triumph enhanced the confidence of the immigrant church as well." (Pg. 53, 57) He states, "Like other Catholic immigrant groups, Italians settled primarily in the larger industrialized cities... In New York, Philadelphia, and other eastern cities, the overwhelmingly Catholic Italians were often scorned by Irish and German American priests in whose territorial parishes they had settled; Italians were sometimes even relegated to attending separate masses in church basements." (Pg. 73) He adds, "The new Catholic communities of the late 19th century differed from each other in important respects, but they each experienced a tension akin to that of the Polish Americans' struggle between those who defined their identity primarily in terms of a new commitment to the church in America and those who wished to maintain a stronger connection to the spiritual and cultural traditions of the homeland." (Pg. 77) This is an excellent, very informative, and quite readable survey of American Catholicism, that will be of great help to anyone interested in such an overview.

Catholicism has grown from a suppressed and persecuted outsiders' religion in the American colonies to become the nation's single largest denomination. James Fisher surveys more than four centuries of Catholics' involvement in American history, starting his narrative with one of the first Spanish expeditions to Florida, in 1528. He follows the transformation of Catholicism into one of America's most culturally and ethnically diverse religions, including the English Catholics' early settlement in Maryland, the Spanish missions to the Native Americans, the Irish and German poor who came in search of work and farmland, the proliferation of Polish and Italian communities, and the growing influx of Catholics from Latin America. The book discusses Catholic involvement in politics and conflict, from New York's Tammany Hall to the Vietnam War and abortion. Fisher highlights the critical role of women in American Catholicism--from St. Elizabeth Seton and Dorothy Day to Mother Cabrini, the first American citizen to be canonized a saint--and describes the influence of prominent American Catholics such as Cardinal John J. O'Connor, 1930s radio personality Father Charles Coughlin, President John F. Kennedy, pacifists Daniel and Philip Berrigan, activist Cesar Chavez, and author Flannery O'Connor. For this new edition, Fisher has brought the story up to date, including the latest struggles within the American church leadership.

"An outstandingly accessible and up-to-date brief history of American Catholicism... ideally suited for classroom use, study groups, or the general reader." -- *American Catholic Studies*
"The chapters cover very salient events and historical figures, giving students enough of a sense of 'who' and 'what' to question and analyze related primary sources." -- Professor Cecilia Moore, University of Dayton
About the Author
James T. Fisher is Professor of Theology and Co-Director at The Curran Center for American Catholic Studies at Fordham University.