

Excommunicated From the Union: How the Civil War Created a Separate Catholic America

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Recommended Citation

Endres, David J. (2016) "Excommunicated From the Union: How the Civil War Created a Separate Catholic America," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 18 : Iss. 1 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.18.1.11

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol18/iss1/10>

Review

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Winter 2016

Kurtz, William B. *Excommunicated from the Union: How the Civil War Created a Separate Catholic America*. Fordham University Press, \$120.00 ISBN 9780823267538

A Catholic Communion Forged by War

Scholars of U.S. Catholic history have long lamented the absence of Catholics from historians' narratives of the Civil War. If this is so, it is not for lack of involvement with more than 200,000 Catholic soldiers, at least fifty priest chaplains, and over six hundred religious sisters serving as nurses. Yet a dearth of monographs on this subject remains, making the recent contribution of William B. Kurtz all the more important and welcome. Kurtz, Digital Historian at the John L. Nau III Center for Civil War History at the University of Virginia, began the research that informs this volume as a doctoral student at the University of Virginia writing his dissertation under Civil War historian Gary W. Gallagher.

Kurtz's research attempts to answer the question: "Did the Civil War help promote Catholics' acceptance into the broader American society and culture, or did it merely reinforce existing prejudice?" (p. 6). He offers a mostly negative response to the first part of the question and a qualified affirmative to the second. Beginning with the Mexican War and ending with the construction of the war's memory in the 1870s-1880s and beyond, Kurtz documents how Catholics tried and largely failed to win acceptance.

In developing his study, he admits the limitations of his source material. By relying on period newspapers and extant manuscript collections, Kurtz confesses that his study privileges the views of elite Catholic laity and clergy often to the exclusion of the poor, female, and non-Irish Catholics (though there is evidence in his research that he attempted to give voice to lay women and German Catholics in particular). His engagement with these sources, despite their limitations, provides a compelling argument and ultimately a new way of

understanding the U.S. Catholic community during and after the war. If as Kurtz's title suggests, Catholics were "excommunicated" from the Union, an allusion to the strength of the nativism and anti-Catholicism that drove their lack of acceptance in American society, then it must also be true that the war helped forge a new or at least strengthened communal identity – a Catholic subculture.

Kurtz's careful scholarship provides important distinctions regarding Catholic engagement with the war, noting that Catholics' approaches were not static; they evolved over the months and years of the conflict. The reaction of Catholics on April 12, 1861 (at the time of the Confederate firing on Fort Sumter) was very different from January 1, 1863 (the date of the issuing of the Emancipation Proclamation) and still further distinct from April 15, 1865 (Lincoln's assassination).

The author informs his readers that initially Catholics were enthusiastic about supporting the war – at least through 1861-1862 and with the limited aim of reuniting the nation, not ending slavery. The result was that "the war initially helped Catholics, Protestants, and nativists put aside old prejudices to work together toward the common goal of restoring the Union" (p. 42). But even in 1861 there were signs that Catholic support for the war, especially in the border regions, was limited with many supporting peace even if it resulted in a permanent Confederacy. This "skin deep" patriotism would not convince Protestants and nativists of the importance of Catholic contributions during and after the conflict.

Kurtz then turns to Catholic participation and accomplishments during the war. He dedicates a chapter each to the contributions of Catholic soldiers and clergy and religious sisters – groups often not appreciated even in discussions of the war and religion. Here he highlights the work of the religious sisters who "did more to rehabilitate the church in the eyes of Protestant Americans than did the actions of Catholic chaplains or soldiers" (p. 68). Kurtz argues that despite their often exemplary service, the war fostered resentment for soldiers, chaplains, and sister nurses, especially as their sacrifices were not always valued.

In his final chapters, Kurtz turns more specifically to the causes of Catholics' marginalization in the postwar North, including their opposition to the Emancipation Proclamation and what they viewed as more radical war aims. By 1863, Catholics' increasingly saw the war as "unholy" and gruesomely bloody, waged by an "activist federal government seemingly bent on disrupting their

lives and infringing on their civil liberties, religious freedoms, and local ways of life" (p. 110). Here the author charts a resurgent anti-Catholicism in the 1870s and 1880s, especially Catholics' conflict over school funding and Bible reading. In the final chapter, Kurtz dissects the creation of Catholic memory of the war, which was ultimately a failed project: "The service of Catholics alongside their Protestant neighbors during the war had not united Catholic and non-Catholic alike in 'the same baptism of precious blood'" (p. 128).

Excommunicated from the Union is a carefully researched monograph, drawing from a wide array of archival sources. It is a concise, engaging volume that deserves to be read widely, among scholars of nineteenth century U.S. religion and Civil War historians, but also students in college and graduate seminar courses that delve into religious identity and the war. This superb study of the U.S. Catholic community in the Civil War era should remind scholars, students, and armchair historians alike of the important role Catholics played in the war and how the war in turn shaped Catholics' communion of faith.

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