

**REVIEW OF *POSITIVELY CATHOLIC: 25 REALLY GOOD REASONS TO LOVE THE FAITH, LIVE THE FAITH, AND SHARE THE FAITH* BY MICHAEL LEACH**  
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In my years of priestly ministry and teaching, I've come to favor the monikers *Team Inclusion* and *Team Clarity* in place of the hackneyed political terms *liberal* and *conservative* to describe two distinct Catholic viewpoints. The terms usually elicit a chuckle from my students and coworkers, but they have the advantage of expressing their respective points of view positively. Team Clarity seeks above all to articulate the Gospel message clearly, even at the expense of some Catholics feeling alienated by its heavy demands, and tends to emphasize the objective content of faith—what scholastic theologians call the *fides quae creditur* (the truths of faith that a person believes). Team Inclusion, on the other hand, accentuates the Lord's desire to embrace all people, especially the marginalized, and emphasizes the subjective experience of faith—the *fides qua creditur* (the act of faith by which a person believes). Although the teams don't encompass every different opinion in the Church,<sup>1</sup> I've found that students, coworkers, and parishioners often willingly identify with either Team Clarity or Team Inclusion and that this language helps them speak more gently with Catholics who disagree with them.

Michael Leach's essay collection *Positively Catholic: 25 Really Good Reasons to Love the Faith, Live the Faith, and Share the Faith*<sup>2</sup> could serve as a Team Inclusion manifesto. The title's first word trumpets the author's main goal: the Catholic faith is positive, something that beckons its believers' love and commitment. The cover features a circular communion host with bright-colored lines radiating out from it in all directions, effectively communicating that the Eucharistic Lord seeks to reach all people, wherever they may be. The 25 chapters inside that welcoming cover each have titles that draw the reader's attention to positive aspects of the Catholic faith. Leach states his purpose: "The purpose of this book is to show you the glow of

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, this distinction doesn't necessarily correspond to liturgical preferences: there are some people who cling to a more formal smells-and-bells style on Team Inclusion and others who prefer a casual and contemporary style on Team Clarity.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Leach, *Positively Catholic: 25 Really Good Reasons to Love the Faith, Live the Faith, and Share the Faith*, Chicago: Loyola Press, 2016. (References to this work appear as parenthetical citations in the main text.)

Catholicism, the smile that comes deep from your heart, and to remind you of its embrace.” (xii–xiii) He largely achieves this goal, especially for his Team Inclusion comrades. Members of Team Clarity, however, may perceive his work as a threat.

## 1. **General Overview of the Book**

Although each chapter contains its own discrete essay detailing a positive feature of the Catholic faith, Leach maintains a delightful narrative tone throughout. As readers turn the various pages, we learn a lot about our interlocutor, who regularly addresses us directly with the second-person pronoun *you*. We learn in the opening chapter that he was once a seminarian (4) and soon after find out that he was ordained and served as a priest for three years before leaving ministry for marriage (8). His childhood took place in Chicago, near Wrigley Field (4), “in a world of Catholic poems and stories and friends.” (19) He went to a high school in which he had a priest as his English teacher (29) and relates that scrupulosity was a frequent experience among Catholics of his era (47). He establishes himself as an ardent member of Team Inclusion as he gives his assessment of the contemporary Church: “Too many Catholics fall away from the Church because they think there is no room for them. Now more than ever the church must shout out that there *is* room in the inn for everyone.” (85) Finally, in a tear-jerking passage, he tells us how he has gone from being an altar boy at daily Mass to a young seminarian to a priest to a regular Mass attendee to now a mere infrequent Massgoer (94). His many anecdotes bring to life his wounded experience of the Church, especially in its institutional dimensions. Although a collection of essays, therefore, Leach’s book reads more like a memoir: it isn’t a catechism, but rather an invitation summoning us to engage his story and see what resonates with our own experience of Catholicism.

Each chapter makes a positive claim about the Church and concludes by inviting us to identify more deeply as a Catholic. The 25 essays touch everything from the importance of Sacraments (ch. 1) to God’s unfailing mercy (ch. 4), from the saints (ch. 8) to the angels (ch. 21), and from mysticism (ch. 6) to eternal life (ch. 25). A few central themes emerge: Leach uses the expression “the chosen part of things” (1, 4, 5, 6, and

many more) to describe God's active presence in our world, although he never fully defines the term. He also prefers to describe God with humble language; rather than describing God using more lofty language (such as King of Kings and Lord of Lords), our author rejoices in a God who reveals himself "when we least expect him" (13). Along these same lines, he emphasizes that God desires to encounter us in our senses, even in small daily encounters such as carrying buckets of water (135). Insofar as God's love for humanity is an inexhaustible mystery,<sup>3</sup> Leach chooses to articulate it with the language of immanence (God's intimate closeness and presence) rather than transcendence (God's absolute sovereignty and grandeur). There's nothing wrong with this presentation of God—indeed St. Paul would remind us that Christ "humbled himself, taking the form of a slave<sup>4</sup>—but it's incomplete. Our feeble human minds can do no better: God is simply greater than our ability to know him. As readers, however, we may legitimately articulate the mysteries of both God and Church differently than our author.

## 2. **Strengths**

*Positively Catholic* stands out for its breezy and accessible style. Leach tells his story of faith as he identifies the various elements of our Catholic faith that bring him joy. He speaks with candor about the disappointment he has experienced in life—especially when telling us about his wife's partial blindness (145–47)—but still maintains a positive tone as he professes his belief in life everlasting: "Nobody knows what life after death will be like. But I know it will be." (148) As a reader, I found it easy to empathize with Leach's perspective, even having had a very different journey of faith. His chapters discussing the Catholic tradition's wide range of spiritualities (ch. 17) and Catholicism's multiethnic love of celebration (ch. 22) also contribute to a welcoming, inclusive tone. Moreover, his reflection on the difficulties of life will certainly ring true with most readers: "I don't always love doing what I do but that's because I'm still discovering who and what I

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<sup>3</sup> See Mt 13:11, Mk 4:11, Lk 8:10, 1 Cor 2:1 among other passages.

<sup>4</sup> Phil 2:8.

really am and what I'm here for. I know the words. I'm learning the Answer." (137) With his conversational style and real-life examples, many readers will find Leach's memories consistent with their own experiences.

When he turns to the more theoretical aspects of Catholicism, Leach rightly notes how Catholic theology and practice evolve over time. From the first page of the preface, he speaks of the deposit of faith<sup>5</sup>—the sum of what Christ handed on to his first followers—as “an open vault so large and deep that no one can withdraw all of its riches in a thousand lifetimes.” (xi) Catholic theology is not a mere repetition of timeless truths; it's an ongoing, never-ending quest to articulate to a constantly changing world the ancient experience of the crucified and risen Christ and outpouring of the Holy Spirit. As the centuries have passed, doctrines have developed as centuries of believers have achieved a dynamic synthesis between the unchangeable truths of the faith and the ongoing progress achieved by the human sciences. Pastoral practice has changed along with it: suicide, for example, has always been recognized as gravely immoral on its own,<sup>6</sup> but modern psychology has recognized that its causes are far more complex than once thought, such that the Church's prior practice of refusing funeral rites for those who die from suicide has been reversed.<sup>7</sup> Similar changes have occurred in banking, capital punishment, religious freedom, church-state relations, and many other areas. Accordingly, although it may make Team Clarity queasy, Leach correctly states in chapter 12 that the Church does change over time (71–75).

### 3. Weaknesses

Unfortunately, Leach takes this valid premise—that the Church can and does change—and uses it to advance several flawed arguments in chapter 12. The author returns to his pet phrase “the chosen part of

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<sup>5</sup> This term corresponds to the “purity of the Gospel itself,” which the Council of Trent describes as the single source of faith and morals, preserved through Scripture and Tradition. See Council of Trent, *Decretum de libris sacris et de traditionibus recipiendis* (April 8, 1546), in Heinrich Denzinger and Peter Hünermann, eds., *Enchiridion symbolorum definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum* (Bologna: Edizioni Dehoniane Bologna, 2003), no. 1501. The translation from the original Latin is my own.

<sup>6</sup> See *Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)*, nos. 2280–83.

<sup>7</sup> See *Code of Canon Law*, c. 1184 and commentary on this canon in John M. Huels, “Other Acts of Divine Worship (cc. 1166–1204)” in *New Commentary on the Code of Canon Law*, ed. John P. Beal, James A. Coriden, and Thomas J. Green (New York: Paulist, 2000), 1412–13.

things” and once again fails to define it with any precision (71). This vacuous “chosen part of things” thus seems to denote whatever our author likes in the Church, and he uses the undefined term as a pretext to discard what he regards as the unchosen part, “the things that don’t matter because they are made of matter.” (71) By which criteria shall the reader distinguish between the chosen and unchosen parts of things? We never find out. What we do learn quickly in chapter 12 is that our interlocutor doesn’t think much of the Sacrament of Holy Orders. He declares, “The form of priesthood changes. Its chosen part remains the same: service to others for the sake of the kingdom of God.” (72) Is “service to others for the sake of the kingdom of God” the essence of Holy Orders? Absolutely not. Rather, it describes well the mission given all Christians by the Sacrament of Baptism; Vatican II makes clear that all Christians are called to service for the sake of the kingdom.<sup>8</sup> In fact, as we read *Positively Catholic*, we readers are left wondering if Leach believes that Baptism and Holy Orders are distinct sacraments and, if so, what differentiates the two.

More problems emerge in the same chapter. He makes the astonishing assertion that “Mass was said in the vernacular (native languages) until the Council of Trent in 1563, when the church mandated Latin, until 1965, and then changed it back to the vernacular.” (73) Not a single claim in this sentence is true. In fact, the Roman Liturgy was translated into Latin during the fourth century and remained exclusively in this language until after Vatican II,<sup>9</sup> which permitted bishops to allow the Latin texts to be translated into vernacular languages,<sup>10</sup> although Latin remains always permitted under current norms.<sup>11</sup> Historians may debate the exact moment when Latin ceased as the main language of western Europe, but it certainly occurred centuries before the Council of Trent in 1546–63. Leach’s presentation of other examples in chapter 12—slavery, Galileo, marital sex as an evil tolerated for procreation, and artificial birth control (73–75)—are less obviously

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<sup>8</sup> Indeed, hardly a more fundamental assertion was made by the Council. See Vatican Council II, Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium* (1964), in *The Sixteen Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Marianne Lorraine Trouvé (Boston: Pauline, 1999), nos. 39–42. See also CCC 1269 and *Code of Canon Law*, c. 225.

<sup>9</sup> See Keith Peckers, *The Genius of the Roman Rite: The Reception and Implementation of the New Missal* (London: Burns & Oates, 2009), 7–8.

<sup>10</sup> Vatican Council II, Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (1963), in Trouvé, *Sixteen Documents*, no. 36.

<sup>11</sup> *Code of Canon Law*, c. 928.

problematic but still one-sided at best. To be sure, Leach's point in this chapter—that the Church can change—is accurate, but his recourse to an undefined “chosen part of things” leaves the reader wondering who's doing the choosing: God or Michael Leach?

The next chapter, chapter 13, addresses the difficult subject of how Catholics should grapple with difficulties they have with various Church teachings. Although Team Clarity may protest, Leach is quite correct: “The Catholic response to an individual who disagrees on a nondefinitive church teaching ... is to participate with them in a mutual search for clarity. We belong to one body and cannot cut off a member without hurting the whole body.” (79) Baptism leaves a permanent mark on a soul; the Church cannot simply dismiss her sons and daughters any more than Christ dismissed the apostles who struggles with faith.<sup>12</sup> Our author is also correct to note that a Catholic must follow a well-formed and sincere conscience,<sup>13</sup> but he overestimates the power of Google in helping a person form a proper moral judgment (80–81).<sup>14</sup> A Catholic ought to not consider the Church's teachings as simply one point of view among many: the Church's authoritative teaching authority, the Magisterium, is a gift that the Holy Spirit sustains in the life of the faithful to preserve their unity and integrity of faith.<sup>15</sup> Although Leach is correct that we must act in accord with our conscience, he leaves out the fact that the Church offers us teachings precisely to help us form that conscience and that we are responsible before God for the how we choose to form our conscience.<sup>16</sup> We would do well not to reject the Church's guidance too lightly, even when it's proposed in a nondefinitive act.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> CCC 1272. See Mk 4:40, 6:52, and other passages.

<sup>13</sup> CCC 1777–94.

<sup>14</sup> Leach makes clear his disdain for the Church's teaching regarding artificial contraception, but he never directly engages the text of *Humanae Vitae* (1968) or other relevant documents, so it's difficult for the reader to respond to his concerns. Instead, he chooses to blame the document on Cardinal Alfredo Ottaviani (75).

<sup>15</sup> See Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF), Instruction *Donum Veritatis* (May 24, 1990), nos. 15–20, accessed June 29, 2018, [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_19900524\\_theologian-vo-cation\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19900524_theologian-vo-cation_en.html). This same document contains advice for those who find it difficult to accept a given teaching proposed by the Church (see nos. 21–31) but rejects a right to public dissent (nos. 32–41).

<sup>16</sup> See CCC 1792.

<sup>17</sup> Leach bristles at being called a “cafeteria Catholic” (99–100), but he uses the term a bit differently—referring to different spiritualities—than how it is often used, to describe someone who dissents from various authoritative Church teachings. In any event, all Catholics would do well to abandon using this epithet and instead seek to understand one another rather than find excuses to demean each other.

#### 4. Conclusion

*Positively Catholic* will no doubt reawaken a nostalgia for the faith in many readers who have had a Catholic upbringing but drifted away over the years. Many readers will sympathize with his experience of the Church, especially after the many years of scandal and the gradual decline of once-ardent Catholic strongholds. Readers who identify with Team Inclusion will welcome his desire to relate the Catholic experience to contemporary culture and draw more people into a relationship with the Church.

Other readers, especially members of Team Clarity, will find Leach's work troubling in light of some of the shortcomings noted above. They shouldn't be alarmed, however, but instead welcome this book as an opportunity to listen to the memoir of a fellow Catholic who has struggled in his lifelong experience of the Church. As Catholics, we all approach the one altar to receive the Eucharist, the visible sign of the Church's unity.<sup>18</sup> Our common participation in the sacred mysteries reminds us that we all stand radically poor before our Lord, partake of the same spiritual banquet, and must therefore seek to relate to other members of the household of God.<sup>19</sup> Troubled readers might receive *Positively Catholic* as an invitation to dialogue with the author, recognize that their experiences of the sacred differ, and better understand their brothers and sisters in faith.

In the end, I can only speak for one reader: myself. I have a few things in common with our author: I too grew up Catholic, entered seminary as a teenager, and was ordained to the priesthood in my midtwenties. I too have always cherished the sacramentality of our faith tradition and feel the Church's embrace, even when I walk into a church on another continent. But our experiences radically diverge from there. I'm still happily a celibate priest, and contrary to Leach's suggestion, I don't feel like a "vanishing species."<sup>20</sup> (72) I

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<sup>18</sup> See CCC 1396.

<sup>19</sup> Eph 2:9.

<sup>20</sup> This paragraph adopts the oft-repeated cynical self-fulfilling prophecy that priestly celibacy (and possibly the restriction of priesthood to males) will end because there are not enough candidates for a celibate, male priesthood. Proponents of this view seem to overlook the fact that their failure to embrace Vatican II's teaching on the beauty of the celibate vocation and how it complements the married vocation in fact discourages would-be aspirants to the priesthood from pursuing such a vocation. See Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium*, no. 42 and CCC 1618–20. On the subject of the male-only priesthood, see John Paul II,

grew up in Georgia and South Carolina, far removed from the surplus of clergy and signs of Catholic culture that marked Leach's childhood in Chicago. I also didn't experience the burden of the shame-based scrupulosity of his era, nor did I endure the self-serving clericalism of bygone days. Perhaps then my experience proves Leach's point: the Church has changed for the better and no doubt will continue to change, although he and I may differ on the details. My reading of his memoir makes me want to hash out these differences, perhaps over a beer and some deep dish in the Wrigley Field bleachers.

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Apostolic Letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* (May 22, 1994), accessed June 29, 2018, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\\_letters/1994/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_apl\\_19940522\\_ordinatio-sacerdotalis.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1994/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_19940522_ordinatio-sacerdotalis.html) and CDF, *Responsum ad propositum dubium concerning the Teaching Contained in Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* (October 28, 1995), accessed June 29, 2018, [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_19951028\\_dubium-ordinatio-sac\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19951028_dubium-ordinatio-sac_en.html), which held that the teaching of the former document pertained to the deposit of faith. Some theologians have called the finality of the CDF's judgment into question, such as in Richard R. Gaillardetz, "Infallibility and the Ordination of Women," *Louvain Studies* 31 (1996):3–24. In any event, Pope Francis has stated his view in the press that the matter is settled; see Joshua J. McElwee, "Pope Francis Confirms Finality of Ban on Ordaining Women Priests," *National Catholic Reporter* (November 1, 2016), accessed June 29, 2018, <https://www.ncronline.org/news/vatican/pope-francis-confirms-finality-ban-ordaining-women>.