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**A PEOPLE ADRIFT:  
THE CRISIS OF THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH IN  
AMERICA**

PETER STEINFELS  
SIMON & SCHUSTER, 2003  
\$26.00, 416 pages

*Reviewed by Nathaniel Zimmer*

Suggesting to a conscientious American Catholic that the Church currently finds itself embroiled in issues with the potential to either destroy or define its existence is likely to generate little excitement. Expounding on the nature of those issues, including possible causes and solutions, is likely to elicit a lively and animated argument. Catholics have little trouble agreeing that these are important times for the Catholic Church in America. Beyond that, agreement gives way to sharply drawn lines between conflicting factions. Peter Steinfels, former religion correspondent to the *New York Times* and former editor of *Commonweal* magazine, does not hesitate to wade into these uncertain waters.

At its core, the book is about leadership. Leadership, according to Steinfels, extends far beyond a clamoring, uncritical defense of a preconceived worldview. It requires continuous reappraisal, careful diligence, and an open ear to the perspectives of the opposing camps. The goal should not be to win; rather, the goal is to achieve the unity in truth articulated by Christ for the Church. According to Steinfels, the crisis of the Catholic Church, while it manifests itself in a variety of concrete, practical situations, can almost always be traced to a crisis of leadership.

For example, the opening premise of the book suggests that the liberal/conservative polarization itself is the product of a lack of leadership. The voices most commonly heard are loud and forceful polemics from those occupying the extremes. These hardliners, it is often assumed, speak for everyone in their respectively conservative or liberal communities. Meanwhile, moderate liberals and moderate conservatives, who constitute the majority and heart of the Catholic Church and who are more hesitant to endorse these absolutes, remain largely silent. There are few people behav-

ing as true leaders, speaking out in the interests of common ground and constructive dialogue.

The leadership displayed by American bishops in the context of the priestly sex abuse scandal plays a prominent role in Steinfels' work, and his presentation of the events of 2002 is insightful and thorough. The scandal cannot be explained as anything less than a colossal failure of leadership on the part of many priests, bishops, and other Church officials. There is no excuse for their actions. At the same time, however, "free-floating rage is a faulty foundation upon which to construct either an understanding of the sex abuse story or an adequate remedy for what it revealed" (p. 43). Among the other important considerations are misunderstood facts about the chronology of the abuse cases, positive steps already taken by the Church before the 2002 scandal broke, and complex reasons for secrecy that extend far beyond maliciousness.

The media, while playing an important role in bringing the abuse to light, also deserves a critical eye for fostering an environment in which any voice of moderation attempting to articulate the larger picture was dismissed as defending the crimes. The media used the sex abuse crisis as an opportunity to attack the Church for anything and everything. Of course, the two polarized extremes of Catholicism did the exact same thing, as "each found in the sex abuse scandal proof of their preexisting diagnoses of what ails the church" (p. 65). The Catholic Church, Steinfels reminds us, would still be facing a crisis today even if the sex abuse scandal had never occurred.

Those interested in issues of Catholic identity will enjoy the lively and frank discussion concerning leadership in Catholic schools, hospitals, and other social services. These Catholic institutions today often find themselves serving a largely non-Catholic clientele. In addition, their diligent and admirable efforts to stay on the cutting edge of technology and advancement have had the effect, intentional or not, of weakening their Catholic identity. Hospitals and universities have been pressed to hire on the basis of professional skill rather than religious devotion. While this may improve the quality of medical care and educational instruction, the extremely important elements of intense Christian care and solid Catholic formation suffer. While this problem is daunting, it is far from hopeless, and Steinfels highlights a variety of measures currently underway to counter the trend.

The strength of the book stems from its readability and its thoughtful attention to detail and perspective. Thanks to Steinfels' careful explanations, a non-Catholic reader would have little trouble grasping the engaging dialogue. This rendering seems intentional. A theme of the book is a challenge to the laity to step forward into the leadership vacuum created by the declining numbers of priests and vowed religious women and men. The text has the feel of reaching out beyond established Catholic talking heads to a

Catholic population at large that is either unfamiliar with recent developments or altogether unaware of them. For example, the painstaking description of Vatican II seems geared toward a younger group of Catholics who did not experience that revolution directly.

Steinfels accounts not only for differences in age and theological education, but also for differing ideologies. Steinfels does a remarkable job of balancing liberal and conservative reasoning and defers to the knowledge of leaders in both camps, and presents both sides respectfully in discussions of liturgical practice and religious instruction. Still, Steinfels is not a centrist; the presentation of the papal encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, conclusions concerning the ordination of women to the priesthood, and overt disdain for the conservative episcopacy of the former Archbishop of Boston, Bernard Cardinal Law, reveal a perspective that leans slightly to the left.

The other significant criticism concerns Steinfels' frame of reference. While Steinfels cannot be faulted for writing from personal experience, the book occasionally seems to be more a representation of Catholicism in Chicago and New York than an all-encompassing portrayal of American Catholicism. The specific examples and events highlighted to support the diagnosis of the American Catholic Church are not a representative sample. With the exception of a few references to the West Coast, Steinfels seems to rely almost exclusively on events in New York or Chicago, places in which the author has resided. Yet Catholic thought and practice vary greatly across the American landscape, and one is left wondering if in-depth analysis of a few specific areas can effectively be used to interpret the overall state of American Catholicism.

Overall, the book does an excellent job of presenting all the major challenges facing the Church today with significant depth and clarity. It is appropriate for those just beginning to delve into these issues as well as for those well-versed in Catholic thought. One has very little difficulty recognizing evidence to support Steinfels' contention that most contemporary problems relate in some way to issues of engaging, honest, positive Catholic leadership. Regardless of personal viewpoint, Catholics cannot deny that these issues are important. It is certain that they will have an effect on the future of Catholic life. Whether the effect will be positive or negative has yet to be determined. All Catholics are called to join in an active dialogue with the Church hierarchy and with each other. *A People Adrift* is an excellent starting point.

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