

12-2000

## Review of "The Emergence of a Black Catholic Community: St. Augustine's in Washington"

Randall M. Miller

*Saint Joseph's University*, [miller@sju.edu](mailto:miller@sju.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [http://scholarship.sju.edu/hist\\_fac](http://scholarship.sju.edu/hist_fac)



Part of the [History Commons](#)

---

### Citation

Miller, Randall M. Rev. of *The Emergence of a Black Catholic Community: St. Augustine's in Washington*, by Morris J. MacGregor. *Church History* 69.4 (2000): 930-32. Print.

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Arts & Sciences at Scholarship@SJU. It has been accepted for inclusion in History by an authorized administrator of Scholarship@SJU. For more information, please contact [kmudrick@sju.edu](mailto:kmudrick@sju.edu).

Still, for the scholar who approaches the collection with a bit of care and a sense of the politics involved, there is much that is useful and that is not available elsewhere in machine-readable form. As with most scholars in the humanities who know the texts they are working with through years of intimate, nonelectronic association, the primary benefit of this CD for the specialist in Mormon Studies will be the facility and speed with which it enables textual searches and analysis. On that basis, it is worth its weight in gold. For the generalist, it is an inexpensive way to acquire a small, machine-readable library of secondary and primary sources on Mormonism.

**Grant Underwood**

Brigham Young University-Hawaii

*The Emergence of a Black Catholic Community: St. Augustine's in Washington.* By **Morris J. MacGregor**. Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1999. xiv + 543 pp. \$39.95 cloth; \$24.95 paper.

In 1987, Jay P. Dolan opened his series on *The American Catholic Parish* (New York: Paulist) with a call to bring the "new Catholic history," formed in the spirit of Vatican II and sensitive to the "new social history," to a major rethinking of American Catholic history by shifting the focus from the pulpit to the pew, from the chancery office to the schoolroom, and from the councils and synods to the confraternities, modalities, and other associations that formed the marrow of Catholic life within each parish. With almost missionary zeal, the new Catholic historians have invigorated discussions of Catholic identity and interest by digging deep into the particular stories of particular parishes to discover the church, and churches, in action. As yet no consensus has emerged as to the character and content of Catholic faith and faith-building across America over the past several centuries, except to appreciate the variety, and often volatility, of cultural expressions within Catholicism, and the search for order that informed the church's efforts to establish unity among Catholics as Catholics through regimen, respect for authority, and religiosity. Morris MacGregor's important, if sometimes overly dense book, enlarges the scope of the new Catholic history not only by providing the first full-bodied biography of a black parish, St. Augustine's, the mother church of black Catholics in the nation's capital, but also by moving from microscopic examinations of the peculiar problems facing one parish to panoramic views of the church in crisis over matters of race and social justice in the American urban environment.

MacGregor tracks the evolution of St. Augustine's from the construction of St. Martin's chapel and school in 1864, during a time of "emancipation" but also racial segregation, through its growth as a model integrated parish to the troubled days of racial and urban upheaval and lay Catholic renewal of the 1960s and after. Throughout much of its history, St. Augustine's gained reputation from its classical choir, evangelical efforts, schools, integrated worship, and social-justice mission. St. Augustine's location in the nation's capital positioned it to become the center of African American Catholic church consciousness and the conscience of Catholicism, especially in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the parish did not cheat its calling. The handsome brick St. Augustine's Church at Fifteenth Street, which the

congregation occupied in 1876, stood as a physical testament of what black leadership could do, as well as an example of interracial support, for the parish was blessed by sympathetic white (Italian-born in two instances) priests and a setting and a liturgy local white Catholics found compelling. Prominent black and white Catholics worshiped together there, much to the envy of rival parishes in the city. More important, parishioners helped organize and host the Black Catholic Congress from 1889 to 1895 and, led by parishioner Thomas Wyatt Turner and the Federated Colored Catholics, took on Jim Crow in Washington during the early twentieth century. St. Augustine's members further shaped public life by educating generations of black young people from important families in the parish schools and later by becoming teachers in the Washington's city schools. The outward thrust of the parish's interests added to its national significance by inviting other urban parishes to follow its lead toward social justice, civic improvement, and racial understanding. But St. Augustine's ambitions overreached its resources, and during the 1930s its fortunes flagged. The changing racial demography of Washington, the growing poverty and racial segregation of its parishioners, and the parish's unstable finances showed in the deteriorating church building, which the parish finally sold in the 1940s, and in its declining influence. After the desegregation of the Archdiocese of Washington in 1961, the church seemingly ended St. Augustine's independent history by merging it with St. Paul's to create Sts. Paul and Augustine. The riots of the 1960s almost swamped the parish in the backwash of neighborhood destruction. But, as MacGregor shows so well, the spirit of social justice that gave to St. Augustine's never died. During the 1960s parishioners played vital roles in pressing for integration of CYOs and a more inclusive Catholic Church generally. At the same time, in a review of its mission, the parish rededicated itself to social activism and evangelization and introduced a more democratic decision-making process that promised greater lay involvement in parish affairs. In 1982 the church recognized the "rebirth" of the parish by restoring the parish's original name.

Among the many virtues of MacGregor's book is his attention to the role of activist priests, such as the well-known Geno Baroni, who by reinforcing rather than resisting lay initiatives themselves defined parish identity. Lay-people alone did not a parish make. MacGregor also reminds us that the social history of a parish cannot be understood outside the context of institutional history. The decision by the archdiocese to merge St. Augustine's and St. Paul's was made without consultation with St. Augustine's parishioners, because, from the perspective of the archdiocese, the financial viability of a parish was necessary to its principal purpose in providing regular religious services and maintaining schools. By keeping the interests of priests and prelates in focus, MacGregor allows the reader to see the more complicated, and sometimes contested, context of church building and escapes the trap that has beset those parish histories that focus so much on internal matters that they divorce the parish history from Catholic history. At the same time, MacGregor shows how central a parish's "history" can be in encouraging and sustaining the mission of that parish. St. Augustine's lay leaders traded on the parish's visibility in the nation to insist that the parish must push for social justice in Washington lest the soul of the church be lost everywhere in America. In that regard, and in the current context of churches and faith-based

institutions assuming more direct social reform and welfare responsibilities, the history of St. Augustine's in Washington speaks to us all.

**Randall M. Miller**  
Saint Joseph's University

*Perspectives on the Social Gospel: Papers From the Inaugural Social Gospel Conference at Colgate Rochester Divinity School.* Edited by **Christopher H. Evans**. Texts and Studies in the Social Gospel, Vol. 3. Lewiston, N.Y.: Edward Mellen, 1999. xxiv + 259 pp. \$89.95.

The papers presented in this volume are a clear indication that historians are continuing to refine the place of the Social Gospel in American religious history. Approaches taken in these essays include: the place of race in the Social Gospel, a study of Reinhold Niebuhr and Martin Luther King Jr. as heirs of Rauschenbusch, and the conservation movement and the Social Gospel. In addition, the reader is asked to think about such figures as Harry F. Ward and John R. Commons and the ways in which their work reflected the views of Washington Gladden and Walter Rauschenbusch. Several of the papers in this volume leave the reader wanting to know more. Stephen Prescott's "The Social Gospel and the American South: An Historiographical Appraisal" and C. George Fry's "The Social Gospel at the Crossroads of Middle America: Washington Solomon Gladden and the First Congregational Church, Columbus, Ohio, 1882-1918" offer glimpses of research that promise to increase our understanding of American religion during the early twentieth century. The one weakness to the collection is that the papers portray the Social Gospel as an almost exclusively Protestant movement. There is no mention, for instance, of the development of Catholic social thought and its impact on American Catholics during the years that Rauschenbusch and Gladden were challenging American Protestants to think about issues of social justice. Overall, however, *Perspectives on the Social Gospel* provides a sample of the future research we may expect to see on this important phase of American religious history.

**Margaret M. McGuinness**  
Cabrini College

*The Waning of the Green: Catholics, the Irish and Identity in Toronto, 1887-1922.* By **Mark G. McGowan**. McGill-Queen's Studies in the History of Religion 2. Ithaca, N.Y.: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1999. xiv + 414 pp. \$49.95 cloth; \$29.95 paper.

When one reads that a book originated as a Ph.D. dissertation and is being published in a series edited by promoters of a new subfield, the cautious reader and buyer might well beware. But in this case, caution is overcome by the recognition that the series is edited by two no-nonsense revisionist leaders in religious and cultural history: that towering force in Canadian history, the late George Rawlyk, and the equally redoubtable George Harman Akenson. Further, this is the premier-level series, McGill-Queen's Studies in the History of Religion, in which distinguished titles have already appeared by such scholars as Marguerite van Die, Phyllis Airhart, Michael Gauvreau, William Westfall, and Mark Noll. The reader now allows caution to melt into expectation, and settles in for a great read—the historiographical equivalent of a