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A Review
of Topical
Theology

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REVIEW

EDITOR

Damien Cash, *The Road to Emmaus. A History of the Blessed Sacrament Congregation in Australia.* Kew East: The Congregation of the Blessed Sacrament in Australia & David Lovell Publishing, 2007. pp. xii + 648. ISBN 0 9775574 1 3. Price \$70.00 + \$10.00 postage and handling. Contact: Christine Sartori, 03 9810 2440. Email: christine@blessedsacrament.com.au

This is a book for anyone interested in Catholic culture in Australia past and present. It is also of particular interest to members of religious congregations. It is a very detailed, warts-and-all account of the journey of the Blessed Sacrament fathers and brothers from their first arrival in Melbourne in 1929 to the present, and at the same time it describes the journey of the Catholic Church. Readers will be surprised by how much they find in the book that resonates with their own personal experiences of being Catholic.

The pioneers of the Australian province of the Congregation—the ‘Province of the Holy Spirit’—arrived from Canada and the United States and took over St Francis’ Church in Melbourne. The very next day they were open for business, celebrating Masses and hearing Confessions, and St Francis became a centre of Eucharistic worship in the central business district. In the early 1950s the Congregation moved into the Haymarket in Sydney, establishing St Peter Julian’s church, also an inner-city church. St Francis in Melbourne was seen as a bulwark against irreligion, which in the 1940s and 1950’s signified communism and other subversive doctrines. St Peter Julian’s in Sydney was seen as place of sanctuary in ‘sin city’.

For Catholics of a certain age reading this book will be a walk down memory lane. We are reminded of all the old practices, such as three visits to the church to gain a plenary indulgence on All Souls Day, Solemn High Masses and Low Masses, candlelight Eucharistic processions, bigotry in ecumenical relations but surprise friendly inter-denominational encounters. There were testing times as the Church moved on—even prior to Vatican II—such as the restoration of Gregorian chant in place of the classical works of the great masters. Religious will resonate with the purchase of the first car, and then the first television set, and their impacts on religious life. There was the post-war surge of vocations, the extraordinary system of formation and the memorable novice master. The Congregation was spreading in Australia and into Asia.

The Second Vatican Council’s impact was immediate and long-term. There was considerable pain to learn that it was forbidden to celebrate Mass before the Blessed Sacrament exposed, and encouragement of communion in the hand surprised many. But more fundamental renewal was called for, and many communities and individuals became unsettled. Formation programs became controversial. There was a renewed commitment to social justice. Mission rather than Adoration became the *raison d’être* of the Congregation as it went on a journey of rediscovery of the charism of the Founder, St Peter Julian Eymard. A new Rule of Life was formulated and finally promulgated in 1985. It was a blueprint for a eucharistic way of life.

As numbers diminished it was time to think of ‘creative alternatives’. Encouragement of co-operation with the laity was one important new path. The story ends with the question of whether the province will survive. If it does not, it will not be for lack of inventiveness.

Desmond O'Donnell
OMI
GOOD NEWS FOR
THE RICH

Editor
REVIEW

The book puts a mirror to Catholic life generally and religious life in particular in Australia in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Above all, it records a remarkable contribution that continues: '[A]t the beginning of the twenty-first century, Melbourne people were burning a million candles in St Francis' Church every year.' (p.483)

—Editor

