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Kereszty, Roch A.: *The Church of God in Jesus Christ. A Catholic Ecclesiology.* – Washington: Catholic University of America Press 2019. (XVI) 357 S., pb. \$ 34,95 ISBN: 978-0-813-2-31730

The intended readership for this substantial volume are those Catholics lacking a broad and deep grounding in the nature and purpose of the church. As the author states in the Preface, his motivation for writing the book is the perception that many Catholics today neither “understand what the church is” nor know “*who* the church is” (vii). To address these lacunae, Roch A. Kereszty’s work concentrates on the history of the church and its underpinning theology.

The book has three sections: the first provides an overview of the church’s history, ranging broadly from God’s work of creation to the present; the second focuses on particular issues in systematic theology that have direct implications for the life of the Christian community; the third section, largely a collection of previously-published articles, takes up specialized ecclesiological questions of particular interest to the author. Although the three-part structure works well enough, the third section does feel somewhat tangential to the overall thrust of the book. It is likely that the book would satisfy the criteria necessary for a textbook even without this final section—to say nothing of the fact that removing the final hundred p.s might make the book less daunting for its intended readers.

Given the scope of the historical sweep in Part 1, the treatment of each period is inevitably brief. Still, the summary version of the various periods does tend to be engaging. There are sufficient footnotes to provide opportunities for further reading if desired—the book’s extensive bibliography would also serve this purpose.

The one era in which K.’s historical survey is less than convincing is the present one. If a measure of the value of any ecclesiology is how it helps contemporary Christians interpret their own experience of the church, K.’s assessment of the post-Vatican II era leaves a good deal to be desired. It is certainly true that the contentious nature of so much ecclesial life in the last fifty years means that no single perspective is likely to win universal approbation, but K.’s interpretation of the church since the end of the council does seem to be unnecessarily narrow. Thus, his claim that distorted interpretations of Vatican II by the media (96) is a major root cause of the subsequent difficulties within the church, seems shallow at best. Similarly, his sweeping dismissal of much modern reflection on the church’s relationship with the world as simply the work of those “hoping to be relevant” (102) lacks nuance. Although seeing the spreading footprint of “relativism” (101) as the cause for the church’s present-day struggles may be a common approach, it can also be a way to avoid facing important questions related to the forms of the church’s self-presentation in the modern world.

One of the least satisfactory aspects of the book's presentation of the post-Vatican church is its discussion of the teaching authority of episcopal conferences, a matter that was the focus of much debate in the 1980s and 1990s. K. acknowledges the emergence of the conference as a proper application of the council's teachings on collegiality, but suggests that the conferences lost their way, and so had to be reined in, because they "developed an extensive bureaucracy of consultative and executive commissions consisting of clerics and laypersons. These experts had the tendency to influence the bishops' conferences." (104) Significantly, no sources are noted to support this assertion; reliance on it also rules out the need to take seriously questions about the inculturation of authority in the local church and the relationship between "the center and periphery," to which Pope Francis refers regularly.

The second section of the text is certainly the most interesting and demanding. The author's treatment of "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic" is detailed and theologically nuanced. One area where it would have been good to see the author respond more explicitly to the church's concrete circumstances is in relation to "holiness." There can be no doubt that "holiness" is never less than a difficult topic to examine, because of the evident sinfulness of all of those who form the church. This difficulty is far more acute today in light of the global sexual abuse crisis that has afflicted the Catholic community over the last two decades. There is one mention of sexual abuse in K.'s text (143), but it is cited only in passing, as the extreme expression of damaging behavior that can occur in the church. What remains unrecognized, then, is the urgent need for the church in this present moment of history to respond to abuse when examples of it seem to abound among the church's ministers and leaders.

On the one hand, the material in Part 2 does have a noticeably apologetic emphasis—one indicator of this is the very extensive treatment of the Petrine ministry (169–91). On the other hand, there is little explicit treatment of "mission"—the category does not appear in the index, nor is *Ad Gentes* cited in the book. Similarly, there is no direct coverage of *sensus fidelium*, discernment, and synodality, all of which have become key themes in the life of the church during the pontificate of Pope Francis. In presenting the church as "an independent metaphysical subject" (218–23), the book does seem to eliminate much of the complexity that is evident in the church today. This approach has its appeal, but it also runs the risk of losing some of the richness—indeed, mystery—that is intrinsic to the church's complexity.

The material in the third section of the book is of a somewhat different order from the first two sections. As noted above, much of the material in this section is from articles that the author had published previously in scholarly journals. This section, then, may appeal to those keen to go deeper in their pursuit of ecclesiology, but may be beyond the reach of those who form the largest part of the book's target audience.

The *Church of God in Jesus Christ* does offer a well-written and clear treatment of many themes in systematic ecclesiology, especially its treatment of the church's four marks. The absence of any detailed exploration of significant present-day challenges facing the church, and even the casual dismissal of much that has occurred since Vatican II, means that the book is a mixed blessing for those interested in a deeper appropriation of Catholic ecclesiology.

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