



# The Catholic Labyrinth: Power, Apathy, and a Passion for Reform in the American Church

*Peter McDonough*

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Sexual abuse scandals, declining attendance, a meltdown in the number of priests and nuns, the closing of many parishes and parochial schools--all have shaken American Catholicism. Yet conservatives have increasingly dominated the church hierarchy.

In *The Catholic Labyrinth*, Peter McDonough tells a tale of multiple struggles that animate various groups--the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, Voice of the Faithful, and the Leadership Roundtable chief among them--pushing to modernize the church. One contest pits reformers against those who back age-old standards of sexual behavior and gender roles. Another area of contention, involving efforts to maintain the church's far-flung operations in education, social services, and healthcare, raises constitutional issues about the separation of church and state. Once a sidebar to this debate, the bishops' campaign to control the terms of employment and access to contraceptives in church-sponsored ministries has fueled conflict further.

McDonough draws on behind-the-scenes documentation and personal interviews with leading reformers and "loyalists" to explore how both retrenchment and resistance to clericalism have played out in American Catholicism. Despite growing support for optional celibacy among priests, the ordination of women, and similar changes, and in the midst of numerous departures from the church, immigration and a lingering reaction against the upheavals of the sixties have helped sustain a popular traditionalism among "Catholics in the pews." So have the polemics of Catholic neoconservatives. These demographic and cultural factors--as well as the silent dissent of those who simply ignore rather than oppose the church's more regressive positions--have reinforced a culture of deference that impedes reform. At the same time, selective managerial improvements show promise of advancing incremental change.

Timely and incisive, *The Catholic Labyrinth* captures the church at a historical crossroads, as advocates for change struggle to reconcile religious mores with the challenges of modernity.



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