

# Anti-Catholicism in America: The Last Acceptable Prejudice

*by Mark S. Massa, S.J.*

The following is an excerpt taken from the publisher of Father Massa's book:

Massa's new book on anti-Catholicism in the United States from World War II to the present has been described as "a work of scholarly rigor, storytelling, and humor...[an] authoritative study that reveals how American Catholics' distinctive way of viewing the world is constantly misunderstood—and attacked—by outsiders.

He takes on those who hate the Catholic people and the Catholic Church for what makes them distinctive, as well as those who deny the distinctiveness of Catholicism. Massa goes behind the well-known stories of the ways Catholics have been vilified and mistreated in American society, boldly suggesting that Catholics *really* are different, looking at the world in fundamentally different ways than their non-Catholic neighbors. This difference explains a number of conflicts between Protestants and Catholics, including important aspects of the current priestly abuse scandals in Boston and around the country.

In an introductory chapter entitled, "Varieties of Anti-Catholicism in the United States," Massa offers a brief historical overview of what has been termed "America's deepest prejudice" by examining the major events and figures in U.S. anti-Catholicism from the Puritans in seventeenth century New England to Al Smith's ill fated presidential campaign in 1928. That historical chapter is followed by another that examines the "New Anti-Catholicism"—that is, the reappearance of negative portrayals and overt attacks on the Catholic Church

in the United States in the past two decades from a wide variety of cultural sources—from “upscale” magazines like *Vanity Fair* and the literature produced from Planned Parenthood, to movies like “Dogma” and “Stigmata,” and to the portrayal of priests and nuns on prime-time television programming.

Chapter Four provides the “glue” for the entire work, and builds on the work of the famous American Catholic theologian David Tracy. Tracy argued in his book *The Analogical Imagination* that Catholics and Protestants actually understand the essentials of Christian teaching, worship, and authority in sometimes radically different ways because of a basic “conceptual language” that shapes their entire religious worldview. Building on Father Tracy’s idea, Massa explores various ways in which such conceptual languages contributed in significant ways to shaping anti-Catholic prejudice in the U.S.

Chapter 5 begins the book’s post-World War II account by examining the publication of what many scholars consider the most sustained intellectual attack on U.S. Catholicism in the twentieth century—Paul Blanshard’s 1949 “classic,” *American Freedom and Catholic Power*. Massa explores Blanshard’s accusations regarding Catholicism’s purported “totalitarian threat” to the fragile freedom of Cold War America. He also discusses the philosophical and theological responses to Blanshard’s most famous Catholic debate partner, Jesuit political theorist John Courtney Murray.

In a chapter entitled “The Power of Negative Thinking,” the book recounts the secret campaign master-minded by famed preacher and author Norman Vincent Peale against John F. Kennedy in 1960. Peale, nationally famous for his best-seller *The Power of Positive Thinking*, is less well known today for his plan to use “Reformation Sunday” in 1960 (a week before election day) to marshal the aid of Protestant ministers across the U.S. to preach against a Catholic in the

White House. Peale and his fellow ministers involved in what has come to be known as the “Montreaux Meeting Plot” were exposed by the press, and Massa explores how the anti-Kennedy episode affected their subsequent careers.

Chapter Seven in the book examines the anti-Catholic cartoon publishing empire of Jack Chick—arguably the most successful anti-Catholic publishing venture in history, which by its own estimate has produced 400 million “Chicklets” (dollar-bill sized cartoon stories of 16 pages) left on the subways, Laundromats, and interstate restrooms, cartoons that regularly target Catholicism as the “anti-Christ” foretold in the Book of Revelation.

Massa also explores evidence of anti-Catholicism in academic circles in a chapter on one of the most famous articles published in 1974 in *Science* magazine. This sociological article supposedly offered “scientific” reasons as to why Catholics were so statistically under-represented among the ranks of academic scientists.

Chapter Nine (“Why Does He Say Those Awful Things About Catholics?”) focuses on the career of evangelical revivalist Jimmy Lee Swaggart, whose famous televangelistic crusades sought to win over “false Christians” like Catholics in both the United States and in Latin America.

The second part of Massa’s study focuses on the Boston clergy sexual abuse scandal, placing the revelations of clergy misconduct within the larger context of Catholics as “outsiders” to mainstream U.S. culture.

*To order Father Massa’s book, contact the Catholic League at (212) 371-3191.*