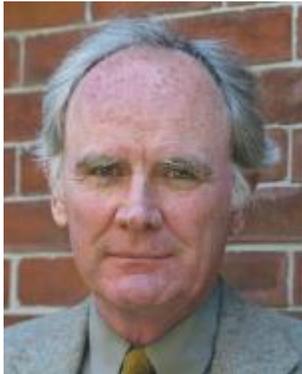


A good coach makes all the difference

Thomas Gumbleton | Apr. 24, 2009

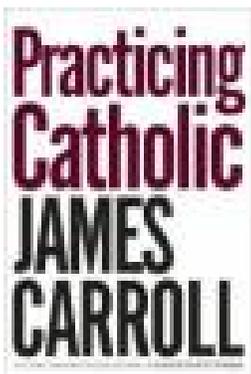


James Carroll

Practice makes perfect. I used to believe that, but many years ago when I took up golf, I discovered, as one of my friends told me, "Practice makes permanent." I spent untold numbers of hours trying to perfect my swing and achieve long, straight drives from the tee. To no avail. To my great embarrassment the ball would dribble off the tee or, if I did make good contact, it would sail far to the right or to the left. Rarely would it go far and straight. It was not too long before I gave up on golf and stayed with the sports I learned to play on my own.

There was a time when most Catholics would define themselves as "practicing Catholics." And I suppose that most of us thought that gradually by practicing our faith we would achieve, not quite perfection, but be good enough to qualify for a place in heaven where perfection would be our final outcome.

Today, however, a very large number of Catholics have given up.



They are no longer "practicing." Many have turned to other religions or joined other Christian denominations. A good number refer to themselves as "recovering Catholics." Others are stubbornly struggling to keep "practicing" on their own, as I did with golf, expecting that somehow "practice" will make them "perfect." But what we need to understand is that practice with good coaching really makes all the difference.

James Carroll is a superb coach.

His coaching is imparted through this book, which he says "has the form of a personal and historical essay about the Catholic church in my lifetime." This church is familiar to most of us:

- The church as a "perfect society" pre-Vatican II;
- The exciting arrival of Pope John XXIII;
- The council and the post-council turmoil as the never-changing church suddenly is overwhelmed by change;
- The crisis of authority with the publication of *Humanae Vitae*;
- The "restorationist" era of Pope John Paul II, continuing even further with Pope Benedict XVI;
- The utterly shocking sexual-abuse scandal, especially the profound failure of bishops and popes who were more concerned about protecting the small minority of priest predators than caring for the huge number of victimized children.
- All of this is in a world of dramatic change where a new level of violence through terrorism and war seems to threaten our very survival, and technology makes us fear for our humanness, while abuse of our environment endangers the planet itself.

As Carroll shares his personal story of living through these past 60-some years, he brings us to explore issues of theology, scripture studies, modern science, diversity of cultures and world religions as all of these affect our efforts to continue or return to being a "practicing Catholic."

As he points out in his concluding chapter: "My assumption throughout this book has been that one Catholic's personal journey can illuminate the pathways taken by -- and now open to -- all." That assumption is well-founded because at this moment in the history of the Catholic church, the Catholic people have changed. Therefore this book is their story also.

If you have fallen away, or are on the margin or a recovering Catholic, this book could be just what you need to provide the coaching that will enable you to become a practicing Catholic once more. You will discover that Catholic people have changed and now clearly understand that they themselves are the church.

Today's is a Catholic church where, as Carroll describes it: "We understand full well that our church is *simul justus et peccator*, both saved and sinner, and that it is therefore *semper reformanda*, always in need of reform. Reform is coming not from the collapsing clerical establishment but from the people. We maintain our loyalty to the church because we cannot live without it. The church gives a language to speak of God, a meaning that is God. The church feeds us in the Eucharist, keeps the story of Jesus alive in the preaching of the Word, marks our journey through life with the sacraments, and underwrites our participation in the community that transcends space and time."

As "practicing Catholics" all of us can rejoice in the great vision of Pope John XXIII with which Carroll concludes his story:

"Today ... Providence is guiding us toward a new order of human relations, which thanks to efforts far surpassing human hopes, will bring us to the realization of higher and undreamed of experiences."

Thomas Gumbleton is a retired auxiliary bishop of the Detroit archdiocese.

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