

Concise American Catholic Encyclopedia

Imre Becke, Sr., ed. *Concise American Catholic Encyclopedia*. Kerhonkson, NY: USAChristendom.org, 2011. 404 pp. \$28.50. Paperback. ISBN: 0985153205

A letter that accompanied the release of this book states, “This one volume Catholic Encyclopedia will be a rational reference service to your readers. This First Edition will be a permanent, lasting record of the Catholic Church in the USA for the year 2012, unlike the constantly changing Internet websites.” Because many entries are only one or two lines long, the small, 404-page book has over 5,500 entries. Entries are arranged in an A to Z sequence. The focus seems to be on facts and figures, rather than on definitions, concepts, or historical context. For instance, there are hundreds of entries for individual counties in the United States, stating the number of Catholics and the percentage of the general population represented by Catholics. Likewise, individual dioceses in the United States are listed, again, with handy statistics on each one. There are entries for well-known Catholics including U.S. bishops (both living and dead), some saints and “blesseds,” and even people like Jim Caviezel, a well-known actor. Sprinkled throughout the work are also some definitions of basic terms (e.g., “Cloister”) as well as some for more abstract concepts (e.g., “Charisms”). The book seems aimed at librarians or other searchers who need a “ready reference” source of information on the Catholic Church, especially the American Catholic Church.

The Concise American Catholic Encyclopedia is indeed a concise work, and it does offer lots of information about the Catholic Church in United States. However, it does not have enough depth or scope to deserve the name “encyclopedia.” In the occasional definitions offered, the approach is quantitative, not qualitative. For example, the entry for “Jesuits” gives the briefest definition, and then launches into a list of Jesuit saints and schools. Similarly, under “Sacred Heart,” it lists the twelve Sacred Heart Promises, rather than explaining the Catholic concept of the Sacred Heart or discussing the history of devotion to the Sacred Heart. To its credit, the book offers some entries that are not found in other standard reference works. For instance, searching other standard print works for an entry on the recently beatified Marianne Cope, one comes up short. Similarly, a recently minted Catholic journal called *Dappled Things* has an entry, and it also is difficult to find other print resources that list Catholic publications. That said, it is difficult to discern exactly what this work has to offer that a searcher cannot find when using a good search engine in conjunction with standard works such as *The Official Catholic Directory*, Our Sunday Visitor’s *Catholic Almanac*, *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*, *The HarperCollins Encyclopedia of Catholicism* by Richard P. McBrien, older works such as the *Modern Catholic Dictionary* by John A. Hardon, S.J., or even *Catholicism for Dummies*, for that matter.

The Concise American Catholic Encyclopedia suffers in comparison to works such as those mentioned above. There are obvious omissions. There is no entry here for the concept of “deacon,” for example, whereas all the other works mentioned here had very good entries for “deacon.” (Two even included “deaconess” as well as “deacon.”) Another example of a baffling omission is the fact that there is an entry for the newspaper of the Archdiocese of New York, *Catholic New York*, but no entry for other large, important diocesan newspapers such as the Brooklyn *Tablet*.

Catholic New York is touted as the largest Catholic newspaper in the country. But the *Tablet* is sixty-eight years older, and it has chronicled the Catholic Church in America and the world for almost 100 years.

One traditional measure for the worth of a reference source — one which is almost impossible to gauge here — is “authority.” This work has no preface, so the reader is not given the editor’s credentials, nor are we given any insight to the methods of research used to assemble the work, the editorial process, sources consulted, etc. There are certainly no citations to sources, and in some cases this would have been very helpful. For instance, the entries on counties in the United States each end with a specific “national ranking” number, but there is no source given for the statistics, nor is there any explanation of what the ranking signifies. At the back of the book, there is a short list of “Resources” that presumably were the editor’s sources of information. Ironically, even though the editor derides websites in the cover letter he mailed with the book, the very short list of resources includes quite a few websites, including Wikipedia. A web search for the publisher leads only to a LinkedIn account. As far as one can tell there is no website, no blog, no list of previous works published, no “publishing house” per se called USAChristendom. Factors like these do not inspire confidence in the authority of the encyclopedia.

This offbeat work was obviously produced on a small budget. The book is paperback. It has no illustrations whatsoever, except for two small images on the cover, one of which is quite fuzzy. There are some problems with layout that should have been caught during production. For example, a large, boldface “E,” signifying the start of the entries that begin in “e,” is isolated at the bottom of page 119. Yet the first “e” entry actually begins at the top of page 120. A very peculiar aspect of the layout is a sequence of floating text boxes. They appear in what seems a random order, arbitrarily breaking up the rest of the text. One might be a snippet of a prayer. Another could contain a brief fact about Catholic schools. Neither their purpose nor the rationale for their placement is obvious to the reader. Another unprofessional aspect of the book is its sloppy misuse of cross references and italics, both of which waste the time of the reader. (“Blesseds, American” contains the italicized word *beatified* as well as the phrase *Lily of the Mohawks* in italics. Neither lead to other entries, though, so the purpose of the italics remains a mystery. Under “*Beatified*,” all one finds is the cross reference “See Blesseds, American.” There is no entry at all for *Lily of the Mohawks*.)

Objectivity is usually a quality that librarians seek in trusted reference sources. Unfortunately, the objectivity of editor Becke seems compromised by a strong preference for all things related to the Knights of Columbus. This has resulted in some downright quirky choices of what to include. How else can we explain the fact that he lists hundreds of Knights of Columbus councils individually, but no Catholic Daughter courts, or Blue Army chapters, or any other groups from among the rich array of Catholic lay and benevolent organizations? One stops to wonder why individual persons, such as “Ditka, Mike” are included. Then all is revealed when one reads his entry: “former Chicago Bears coach; member of Knights of Columbus.” Ahhh . . .

Unexpected entries like “Ditka, Mike” are actually one of this work’s peculiar charms. Another is the weird jostling of entries that result from a confluence of the A to Z format, the nature of the Catholicism itself, and the way the editor’s mind works. These juxtapositions are a perverse delight to someone who loves reference books. One example of this: “Incense” is followed by “Incest,” which is followed by “Inculturation,” then “Independence County, Arkansas,” then “Index of Prohibited Books,” and so on. Another fun sequence is: “Eau Clare County, Wisconsin” . . . “Ecclesiology” . . . “Ecology” . . . “Economy, Divine” . . . “Ecstasy.”

Because of its reasonable price and small size, there seems no harm in recommending the purchase of this book for libraries interested in maintaining a comprehensive Catholic collection. Some readers will enjoy browsing through it. But this recommendation for purchase comes with strong reservations.

Elyse Hayes

Seminary of the Immaculate Conception, Huntington, NY

