Review of Historical Dictionary of Catholicism

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Still occupying one volume, this slightly heftier edition of the standard reference work originally published in 1997 by William J. Collinge emerges 34 pages (5.7%) longer than the second edition published in 2012 and 76 pages (13.8%) longer than the first edition. As a single-volume dictionary, it offers short entries related to the wide range of theological ideas in the Catholic tradition. Appendices and a bibliography on matters Catholic have been updated to the date of publication.

Collinge is professor emeritus of theology and philosophy at Mount Saint Mary’s University, Emmitsburg, Maryland, where he has been since 1980. As in previous editions, he credits his parents for his formation in Catholicism, something helpful in consolidating such a comprehensive synthesis of Catholicism into a single volume. He also credits several other reference works which were used without footnotes since the first edition. In particular, he identifies the following: New Catholic Encyclopedia (2003, with supplements 2009-2013), a series of four dictionaries from Liturgical Press: The New Dictionary of Theology, The New Dictionary of Sacramental Worship, The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality, and The New Dictionary of Catholic Social Thought, as well as The Catholic Almanac published annually by Our Sunday Visitor until 2016. He used The Vatican and USCCB websites, as well as the New American Bible translation for the Bible quotations, and Norman P. Tanner, S.J. ed.’s Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils.

Much of the work remains unchanged from previous editions. Certain entries are identical, for example, Tridentine Mass, despite some recent clarifications by Pope Francis in Traditiones Custodes, which in fairness may have come too late for the publication date. The entries on Tradition, Human Rights, Inculturation remain unchanged from the second edition. This is to be perhaps expected of a reference work that offers a bird’s eye view of all the major issues touched upon by Catholic civilization. The entry for Death Penalty has been updated slightly. Divorce has been updated to include reference to Amoris Laetitia. Interreligious Dialogue has been substantially revised. The new entry for Environment brings Laudato Si into the picture and is a welcome and timely addition given the magnitude and scope of the encyclical. There have been updates to the entry on Homosexuality, reflecting Pope Francis’ support for consideration of civil unions. The entry on Sexual Abuse Crisis is updated. Notably absent is any mention of disability and extremely sparse mention of marginalized people. Presumably the publication came out before details related to the Synod on Synodality became known as there is no mention of it.

The author represents a mainstream Catholic viewpoint consistent with the modern post-Vatican II church. This reviewer found his entries on many controversial contemporary social issues measured and unbiased in terms of stating the Catholic position, where present.

This work is most useful to people who are unfamiliar with Catholicism or people who are needing a refresher on the basics of Catholic teaching. As such it is invaluable. The seemingly unending minutia related to the Catholic Tradition is daunting, even for life-long Catholics. For theology
students and researchers, it offers a quick reference guide to most Catholic ideas and what it lacks in depth it makes up for in conciseness and focus.

For most individuals already owning the first or second edition, it will be unnecessary to upgrade to the third edition. Academic institutions such as libraries, on the other hand, should update if the budget allows for it as there have been changes worth noting. The best use of Collinge’s book is as one component of a well-rounded theology reference collection. As such, it can serve as an index of main topics, providing students and researchers with the technical vocabulary and background necessary to continue further exploration in more specialized sources. For example, a student might not even be aware of the wide diversity of possible topics to explore, and this volume could serve as a handy way to browse various ideas. Then, armed with more ideas and terminology from exploring further in this and other reference tools, the student dives into databases such as Atla or ProQuest Religion with appropriate search terms to locate scholarly articles and book chapters.

Similar to previous editions, the book contains a list of acronyms and abbreviations, a chronology of the church, and a 23-page introductory essay on Catholicism. Appendices contain a list of popes, a list of the Ecumenical councils, a brief summary of the 16 documents of Vatican II, selected papal encyclical summaries up through Fratelli Tutti, and a selective list of prayers and creeds. The most extensive appendix, the bibliography, runs slightly over 100 pages. The index is highly selective.