

## BOOK REVIEW

### *The Future Catholic Church in Australia*

Author: Philippa Martyr

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Reviewed by Paul Grant\*



Philippa Martyr’s *The Future Catholic Church in Australia* is an insightful analysis of the current state of Catholicism in Australia, offering a well-researched and at times humorous account of the challenges facing the Church. The book is both a diagnosis and a roadmap for renewal, based on statistical data, historical reflection, and firsthand testimony from practicing Catholics. Martyr’s central premise is clear: the Church in Australia is shrinking, and its institutional structures are at odds with the vibrant, faith-driven communities that sustain it.

One of the book’s strengths is its use of data to paint a stark picture of Catholic decline. Martyr cites the 2021 Mass attendance figures—just 417,000 people, “less than the population of the Australian Capital Territory”—as an alarming but largely ignored crisis. She argues that while Catholic institutions such as schools and hospitals remain financially robust, the spiritual heart of the Church is withering due to a lack of supernatural faith and an overreliance on state funding. The author critiques what she calls “beige Catholicism,” a form of comfortable, middle-class faith that avoids confrontation with secular culture and, as a result, loses its evangelical power.

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Throughout the book, Martyr emphasizes Sunday Mass attendance as the essential criterion for an authentic attitude to the serious Catholic faith. She writes, “If the lives of Christians do not witness to the truth of Christianity... what use are sermons and catechisms and all the libraries of theology?” This emphasis on lived witness, rather than institutional prestige, is that lies at the base of her vision for renewal. She calls for a return to authentic Catholic identity, urging young Catholics to rebuild their communities at the parish level rather than investing in bloated bureaucracies that have lost their evangelical zeal.

Martyr’s tone is direct and clear, making this book both engaging and somewhat provocative. She does not shy away from critiquing Church leadership, particularly the failed attempts at “consultative processes” such as the Plenary Council, which she describes as “a gathering of the Church’s HR department.” Yet, she is not without hope. She sees a future Church that is smaller but more spiritually vibrant, driven by young Catholics who seek genuine formation rather than institutional survival.

Does *The Future Catholic Church in Australia* give an accurate picture of contemporary Australian Catholicism? In many ways, yes. The book captures the growing divide between a dwindling, faithful remnant and an entrenched Church bureaucracy that struggles to respond meaningfully to declining participation. While some might argue that Martyr’s assessment is overly bleak, her reliance on hard data and direct testimony from committed Catholics lends credibility to her claims.

With regard to the book’s bibliography, it is extensive and carefully selected, organized and relevant. It draws from a mix of Church documents, academic studies, and contemporary commentary. Martyr relies on statistical reports from sources such as the National Centre for Pastoral Research, the *Annuario Statisticum Ecclesiae*, and various diocesan records. She also references theological works, including those of Hans Urs von Balthasar and contemporary scholars such as Tracey Rowland. This selection of sources strengthens the book’s credibility, ensuring that its arguments are not just anecdotal but based on specific facts.

Overall, *The Future Catholic Church in Australia* is a thought-provoking and useful read for anyone concerned about the trajectory of Catholicism in Australia. Martyr challenges readers to take their faith seriously, reject complacency, and embrace a vision of the Church that is authentically Catholic, even if it means being countercultural. The book’s ultimate message is one of both warning and hope: the Catholic Church in Australia can survive and thrive, but only if it reclaims its true mission of evangelization and holiness.