

*THE CHURCH VISIBLE:  
The Ceremonial Life and Protocol of the  
Roman Catholic Church.*

By James-Charles Noonan, Jr. Viking.  
554 pp. \$34.95

For all our affluence, we live today amid slovenly speech, slovenly dress, and slovenly manners. Remarks, costumes, and behavior that most middle-class grandparents would regard as unthinkable are now displayed daily at the highest altitudes of society. Some regard this as the triumph of genuine populist egalitarianism over false aristocratic pomp. But a good case can be made that the apotheosis of the once uncouth has made life less interesting, colorful, and . . . well, civilized. Moreover, the most hard hit are, as usual, those on the bottom of the social scale.

Viewed as an exercise in the history of manners, *The Church Visible* reminds one of nothing so much as William F. Buckley's famous 1955 statement that his newly launched *National Review* would stand athwart the course of history, yelling "Stop!" Noonan, a professional protocolist, believes that the post-Vatican II Catholic Church has succumbed to the siren-songs of the vulgarians. (A Sunday morning visit to almost any Catholic parish would, unhappily, confirm this belief.) By providing the first comprehensive study in decades of the church's liturgical and diplomatic protocol, as well as of its system of honors, vesture, and insignia, Noonan seems to imagine that he can inspire his fellow Catholics (including a few backsliding bishops and cardinals) to recover the more formally stylized personal and professional manner that characterized life within the pre-Vatican II church.

It seems a long shot. This book is not, as the publisher claims in an overly exuberant dust-jacket encomium, "the ideal complement to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*." But by assembling a vast amount of research into the origins, history, theological and political meaning, and current official status of Catholic offices, ceremonies, etiquette, and dress, Noonan has done a service to anyone interested in the church—

and for that matter, anyone interested in the social history of the West in the past several centuries.

Noonan has a prescriptive, as well as descriptive, bent. He tells you exactly how wide a prelate's sash must be, and adds that its "stitching should not be obvious." He explicates the precise difference between a *mantelletta* and a *mantellone*, chiding ignorant (and perhaps vulgarly egalitarian?) hierarchs for not realizing that "the great cape known as the *cappa magna* has never been abolished."

More provocative (and important) is Noonan's veiled displeasure at Pope John Paul I's 1978 decision to forswear a papal coronation with the traditional triple crown, or tiara, in favor of a simple "installation"—symbolized by the imposition of the metropolitan archbishop's pallium, a humble vest-

ment without regal connotations. Too bad Noonan seems unaware that this revision of papal rituals was less a concession to vulgar leveling than a liturgical acknowledgment of a crucial theological point: that the ministry of the bishop of Rome is

essentially pastoral in character.

Noonan does not always wear his erudition lightly; at times, he slips into a didactic mode that will irritate some readers while doubtless heartening others as an example of good old-fashioned clericalism. What is more, for an author who has by his own testimony spent countless hours in the Vatican archives, Noonan seems curiously misinformed on the current status, in international law and diplomacy, of the Holy See as distinguished from Vatican City.

But for all that, *The Church Visible* opens a window on a fascinating world. Appropriately enough for a volume affirming that there is a right way to do things, *The Church Visible* is an elegant piece of bookmaking and contains many useful illustrations and photographs. Who knows? Perhaps through sheer conviction and example, it will stop Catholicism in the United States from slipping any farther down the slope of slovenliness.

—George Weigel

