

One New Book for the Preacher

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CONSTANTINE'S SWORD: THE CHURCH AND THE JEWS by James Carroll.
Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001. 756 pages.

Readers may be familiar with James Carroll from several venues. He has been writing novels for many years, and he appeared in one of the later *Questions of Faith* video series. In 1997 he won the National Book Award for his autobiographical *An American Requiem: God, My Father, and the War that Came Between Us*, which I reviewed in the *JP* in 1998 (21:3). Those who read *An American Requiem* will be familiar with some of the characters and sites found in *Constantine's Sword*. Although it is a history of the relationship between the Church and Jews, many of the attitudes and awakenings described are placed in the context of Carroll's own boyhood experience, and a number of the historical sites are remembered from his impressions at his first visit to them in the late 1950s when his father was a senior air force officer stationed in Germany.

While many in this generation know about the Holocaust in Germany, 1933-1945, and there are plenty of reminders of it in our society and literature, many still wonder about its genesis. Why would Hitler and the Nazis pick particularly on the Jews? And why would German society allow that kind of persecution? Although much ink has been spilled in the last generation to answer those questions, *Constantine's Sword* is the first account this writer has read that takes us back to the beginnings of anti-Semitism in the early Church and conducts a major historical survey of such hatred and violence through the centuries of Christianity. By the time Carroll brings us to the rise of Hitler, we begin to view the Holocaust as a logical next step in the age-old sequence of oppression of the Jews by Christians who perceived the Jews as the killers of Jesus. Hitler's "Final Solution" is to be understood as an answer to a "problem" that has been closely woven into the fabric of European history for many generations.

Carroll writes from within the Roman Catholic Church. As a teenager, he was deeply moved by his family's personal audience with and an embrace from Pope John XXIII, and was deeply engaged by the sweeping reforms of Vatican II. He became a priest, and his earlier memoir chronicles his movement from the priesthood to his present vocation as a writer. Like Garry Wills, the author of *Papal Sin*, Carroll is a practicing Catholic who writes critically out of his concern and hope for their church.

Carroll clearly depicts the unification of the Roman Empire by the Emperor Constantine. Once Constantine had unified the empire, he set out to unify the church. Most ministers will have learned the basics of Constantine's conversion in world and church history. The recent writings of Douglas John Hall on the mission and purpose of the post-Constantinian church come clearly into focus as the reader follows Carroll's development of Christianity and the church. In later years Constantine was to recall his vision of the cross and the Latin motto, *In hoc signo vinces* ("In this sign conquer") on the eve of the Battle of Milvian Bridge. The cross

became a symbol of war and military might. It is not incidental to non-Christians that Constantine's sword is in the shape of a cross. In Constantine's Council of Nicea, the cross came to symbolize the suffering and death of Jesus rather than his teachings. Carroll regards this as a major error.

Constantine's Sword begins with a discussion of the controversial cross at Auschwitz, which, in part, signifies the death and recent canonization of Edith Stein, a Jewish convert to Roman Catholicism. Stein was imprisoned and persecuted not because she became a nun, a Roman Catholic, or a Christian, but because of her Jewish birth and heritage. The Jewish objection to the cross at Auschwitz is based on the perceived intrusion of the Roman Catholic Church into Jewish tragedy. Carroll moves back to the earliest days of the Church, and then forward through a chronicle of anti-Jewish preaching, persecution, violence, crusades, pogroms, lack of property rights, the expulsion of Jews from cities and indeed from entire countries, the Inquisition, the creation of walled Jewish ghettos, and much, much more in this long, sad story. In the process, he repeatedly makes his point that the cross has been a negative symbol, offensive to Jews and others because of the violence and hatred it has represented. Regardless of one's own emotional feelings about the cross as a symbol, or one's own well-thought-out theology, Carroll's case is compelling and confronts Christians with certain negative truths that are both painful and embarrassing.

Although Carroll's view of the Church is mostly Roman Catholic, he does not omit a critique of Protestant anti-Semitism, particularly citing Martin Luther's anti-Jewish preaching and writing in his last years. Even as we recognize that Luther and the other Reformers had at least one foot planted squarely in the Middle Ages, it is sad to be reminded so succinctly. Again, where did Nazi anti-Semitism come from? One need only to look back in Germany about four hundred years, to Protestant as well as to Roman Catholic precedents.

Carroll is not alone in his feeling that the work of Vatican II remains unfinished. In fact, the great strides forward taken during the brief papacy of John XXIII have been greatly diminished in the years since, and the open doors and windows of ecumenicity have gradually closed. Carroll returns repeatedly to the disastrous doctrine of papal infallibility, which dates only from 1870, and calls on the Vatican to discard this unrealistic extension of the Constantinian Church.

The culmination of this major work is Carroll's call for a new council, Vatican III. He sets a working agenda of topics that reach out to and include not only all Christians, but people of all faiths, women as well as men. His agenda includes a review of anti-Judaism in the New Testament, the Church and power, a new Christology, the holiness of democracy, and repentance. The need for each of his proposed agenda items is amply illustrated from his historical survey and is further supported by recent and current examples of papal disregard in each instance.

Constantine's Sword is an ambitious work and a significant contribution to our continuing effort to understand what the Church has been and is. Carroll examines significant crossroads and choices throughout our history with a focus on collective errors and, yes, *sin*; he is realistic and honest in his appraisal of our past, and bold and hopeful about a future course.