Dear all:

Following on the heels of Seth’s paper two weeks ago, I’ve been thinking a lot about what I’m calling “popular” religious publications – denominational publishing of materials other than bibles, intended for a general audience. My dissertation project is focused on the intersections of gender, religion, and cultural history. I’m examining religion and print culture in the 19th-century United States and the role of women readers developing their own religious subjectivity while sustaining religious publishing movements during an era of intense Protestant-Catholic competition.

This short paper was originally prepared for the AAR Roman Catholic Studies Group, on the very broad session topic of “Catholicism as Cultural Practice: United States Historical Sources.” As such, I felt there was a lot of “show and tell,” and not much argument. If I want to use this going forward (for an article, or, if I find a place for it in the dissertation), obviously it will need more of the latter. Here, I’m suggesting more (but not quite following through yet, so it’s getting even messier!) Moreover, this is a piece about homes and families, and not women specifically, and I haven’t done much work yet to draw out the gender angle as much as I’d like. Instead, I’m beginning to think about reading as religious practice and publishing as a Catholic business. There’s a lot going on here, and I’m not if and how any of it will fit into the larger dissertation.

Having said that, these family almanacs (and this paper is just a small sampling of the genre) are sources I really enjoy, so I don’t plan to trash the research altogether. Having received a lot of feedback at the AAR on the earlier version of this, I’m really just interested in getting more reactions to the piece – what’s interesting and what’s not, what you’d like to know more about (if anything), and, certainly, what’s confusing or wrong!

Thanks for reading during this busy time of year. I’m most appreciative of your time!

-- Monica (mmmercado@uchicago.edu)
In the January 1869 edition of *The Catholic World* magazine, a short review appeared of the Catholic Publication Society’s recently issued *Illustrated Catholic Family Almanac*. According to the editors, this new project deserved much success; celebrating the “excellent” illustrations and morally upright articles, the book reviewers noted that it was time to replace any secular reference books kept in the home:

*The Catholic Family Almanac* will henceforth supersede all such trashy publications—which no father of a family should allow to endanger the faith and morality of his children. The excuse heretofore urged for their presence in the house, that there was no Catholic family almanac to be had, is [now] no longer valid.¹

Indeed, by the mid-nineteenth century, Catholic publishers in the United States were issuing scores of home reference books, marketed to the Catholic family, capitalizing on the renewed popularity of devotions, magazines, Catholic fiction, art and holy relics increasingly finding their way into middle-class homes.² Almanacs served as a guide to the religious year and the natural world; provided snippets of fiction, history, and biography; and offered beautiful illustrations accompanying the print content. In what was presumably a familiar format, the almanac taught its readers a Catholic religious history and ordering of the year; moreover, the sheer amount of advertising printed

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reminded these readers that there existed an even larger world of Catholic products to purchase, and institutions to support.

As a genre, the almanac rarely receives scholarly scrutiny, despite their proliferation in North American homes and libraries. More than thirty years ago, Marion Barber Stowell’s *Early American Almanacs: The Colonial Weekday Bible* noted almanacs nearly outnumbered the available religious books. But a question remained unanswered: what happened when religious publishers fused the encyclopedic nature of the almanac with denominational concerns? American Catholics—men and women, and their families—often encountered a religious world outside the boundaries of their local church or parish through the printed word. A close reading of one example of the reference genre – the Catholic Publication Society’s *Illustrated Catholic Family Almanac* (1869-1878) – suggests that the proliferation of religious publications in the mid-nineteenth century encouraged Catholics to think of themselves as both religious subjects and religious consumers at home in an international church.

**The Almanac as U.S. Historical Source**

The history of denominational publishing is largely a Protestant one. When historians and literary scholars study what nineteenth-century Americans read or wrote, rarely and only recently have they turned their attention to Catholics.3 Yet by the Civil

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War, American Catholics had joined the crusade to publish—putting their own religious and popular publications into wide circulation and encouraging laypeople to engage with the church by purchasing and reading a multitude of texts providing spiritual guidance and wholesome entertainment. Adding to the bibles and Catholic serials that had sold since the Revolutionary era, American Catholic publishers flooded the market with imports and new works, using the same distribution methods Protestant presses and voluntary societies had employed for decades.

The first Catholic almanacs—which functioned more like church directories—appeared in the United States in the 1810s, but, like Catholic fiction, tracts, and devotional works, did not truly proliferate until mid-century. Important examples of the Catholic almanac genre included The Metropolitan Catholic Almanac and Laity's Directory (printed in Baltimore by F. Lucas, from 1838-1861), Sadlier's Catholic Directory, Almanac and Ordo (printed in New York by the noted Irish American firm D. & J. Sadlier, from 1864-1896), The Illustrated Catholic Family Annual (printed in New York by Isaac Hecker’s Catholic Publication Society, from 1869-1878); and the Catholic Home Almanac (printed in New York and Cincinnati by the German-American firm

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Center for Print Culture published a collection of conference papers on the topic of religious publishing in the United States, American Catholics were noticeably absent from the “robust religious print culture” and the “increasing diversity of American spirituality” that the editors hoped to illustrate. See “Preface” to Religion and the Culture of Print in Modern America, ed. Charles Lloyd Cohen and Paul S. Boyer (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008), x-xi.

4 When Candy Guenther Brown studied American evangelicals during the nineteenth century, she saw an “informal canon of texts” to which evangelical Protestants looked for guidance on their spiritual journeys. At this point in my research, it is clear to me that no such “canon” existed for American Catholics. See Brown, The Word in the World, 1.
Benziger Brothers between 1884-1893).\(^5\) Sadlier’s and Benziger Brothers were firms offering a multitude of works to the growing Irish- and German-American middle classes; it is no surprise that the home almanac would join their growing list of popular religious publications.\(^6\)

In 1869, the New York City-based Catholic Publication Society first issued its *Catholic Family Almanac for the United States*, providing a lay audience with collections of religious stories, church statistics, biographies, and Catholic trivia.\(^7\) First issued just

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\(^7\) I have not found secondary literature specifically about Catholic almanacs, a market that also included *The United States Catholic Almanac, or, Laity's Directory* (Baltimore:
three years after the Catholic Publication Society was founded by Father Isaac Hecker, the Society’s ten-year run of almanacs serves as a fascinating window into what he expected American Catholics to know about their Church.

![Image of the Illustrated Catholic Family Almanac](image)

**Fig 1:** Cover of the *The Illustrated Catholic Family Almanac* with images of “Winter,” “Spring,” “Summer,” and “Fall” surrounding the cross (New York: Catholic Publication Society, 1874).

Hecker and the Paulists’ publishing mission originated with the founding of the *Catholic World* magazine in 1865 and continued with the organization of a Catholic Publication Society in 1866 to provide a range of Catholic reading materials for...

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Meyers, 1833-1837); Dunigan’s *American Catholic Almanac and List of the Clergy* (New York: Dunigan & Brothers, 1858-1860); Hoffmann’s *Catholic Directory, Almanac and Clergy List* (Milwaukee: M.H. Wilzlus Co., 1886-1899); and McCormick's *Catholic Almanac and Illustrated Annual. With Biographical Sketches of Such Renowned Writers, Poets, Philanthropists and Eminent Divines, As Will Interest Catholic and Non-Catholic Readers, with Calendars and Contributions of Interest to the Student and Family Circle; Together with the Review of Several Important Subjects of the Greatest Interest to Catholics, Etc.* (St. Louis, Missouri: J.B. McCormick, 1886-1893). One reason for the dearth of scholarship on almanacs may be that they were so well-used as to never find their way to rare book libraries! See Marion Barber Stowell, *Early American Almanacs: The Colonial Weekday Bible* (New York: Burt Franklin & Co, Inc., 1977), ix.
American Catholics and non-Catholics alike. The Paulists’ interest in reaching a broader audience through the printing and distribution of cheap tracts, modeled after the American Tract and Bible Societies, was just the beginning of a larger publishing empire that soon included fiction, prayer books for women, and children’s magazines encouraging a fuller American Catholic intellectual life at home and in school. In terms of content, this also meant Hecker and the Catholic Publication Society had a wealth of material documenting the Church in the world that could be recycled for the pages of their almanacs. Each volume totaled more than 100 pages meant for Catholic libraries or, ideally, one’s home sitting room. As a reference book (and one with more than 40 pages of advertising each year), it could not be considered a sacred object, yet it carried many of the same traits as the pocket-sized bible or prayer book—hundreds of pages of religious stories and history, with detailed illustrations to match.

The Almanac as Religious Geography

What sort of work did Catholic almanacs do? The Catholic Family Almanac surely intended to impart a religious lifestyle, linking the traditional calendars of phases of the moon and sunrise and sunset times for the year with detailed lists of Catholic holy days. These pages were each illustrated with signs of the zodiac accompanying Catholic imagery for each of the twelve months. In this design, the natural and the liturgical years

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8 Hecker, a convert to Catholicism and founder of the Paulist order eventually organized the Columbus Press (now Paulist Press) in 1881. By 1890 the Society had published close to 700 works, some in cooperation with European publishers. For histories of the Paulists and Paulist Press, see Joseph P. Cinnici, Devotion to the Holy Spirit in American Catholicism (New York: Paulist Press, 1985) and John F. Ritzius, The Pulpit, the Press and the Paulists, 1858-1958: Pioneers of the American Convert Apostolate (New York: Paulist Fathers, 1958). It appears the Catholic Publication Society folded in but the other publishing ventures continued without interruption. See “In the Hands of a Receiver. Catholic Publication Society to Dissolve Because of Poor Business,” The New York Times (August 1, 1894).
were one in the same, and both required attention. Striking many of the same notes as their “secular” counterparts, then, the Catholic almanac helped families make sense of the worlds they inhabited. Indeed, historian Molly McCarthy, writing on the history of early

American almanacs, recently characterized almanacs as “interactive” sources of data, a resource she likens to the modern iPhone, linking its “users to the outside world.”

Catholic readers, however, the outside world included both heaven and earth.

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9 McCarthy also notes that as a subject of study, the almanac as a genre “gets no respect. It’s the whipping boy of early American literature.” The problem? Almanacs aren’t viewed as literature, and their miscellaneous informative content is difficult to characterize. Her monograph, forthcoming from the University of Chicago Press, will be the first in more than 30 years to take on the genre. See “Redeeming the Almanac: Learning to Appreciate the iPhone of Early America,” Common-Place 11.1 (October 2010). For earlier
Each year, the monthly calendars were followed by content one could label as “miscellany”: bible stories, biographical sketches, church statistics, and, unique to the Catholic Publication Society’s almanacs, numerous references to the nascent history of the Catholic Church in the United States. Most volumes ran surveys of Catholic universities and seminaries in the United States; one article from 1869 called “Some First Things” listed factoids including the first priests and bishops sent to the Americas, the first Catholic books and bibles printed in the country, and the first convent established

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The Illustrated Catholic Family Almanac.

FIRST MASSES IN VARIOUS PARTS OF AMERICA.

First Mass in California, at Monterey, December 16, 1602.
First Mass in Canada, on Rivière des Prairies, June 24, 1615.
First Mass in Maryland, at St. Clement’s, Blackstone Island, March 25, 1634.
First Mass in Montreal, May 15, 1641.
First Mass in New York, at Onondaga, November 14, 1655.
First Mass in Michigan, at Keweenaw Bay, July 26, 1663.
First Mass in Vermont, at Fort Anne, La Motte Island, July 29, 1666.
First Mass in Wisconsin, at Green Bay, December 3, 1669.
First Mass in Illinois, at Chicago, December 15, 1673.
First Mass in Louisiana, at mouth of Mississippi, March 3, 1699.
First Mass in Mississippi, at Biloxi, Easter Sunday, April 19, 1709.

Fig. 3: Important American “firsts” printed in The Catholic Family Almanac (New York: Catholic Publication Society, 1869), 33.

Catholics were not the only denomination to publish almanacs in nineteenth-century America. In his description of “Specialty Almanacs,” the one-time publisher of The Old Farmer’s Almanac mentions the American Tract Society’s The Christian Almanac (1820s) and I am certain other Protestant examples exist, although I have not yet been able to read them. See Robb Sagendorph, America and Her Almanacs: Wit, Wisdom & Weather, 1639-1970 (Dublin, NH: Yankee, Inc. and Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1970), 242-44.
within the present limits of the United States. This list also reflected the Paulists’ interest in print media, documenting westward expansion by noting an obscure publishing fact: “The first book printed west of the Alleghenies was the Epistles and Gospels in French and English, printed at Detroit by T. Metlez in 1812.” Other volumes of the almanac celebrated American-born saints and offered biographies of American Catholic role models—brothers and sisters, archbishops, and military chaplains, missionaries and important laity such as Charles Carroll, signer of the Declaration of Independence.

Fig. 4: “Mother Seton” biography printed in *The Catholic Family Almanac* (New York: Catholic Publication Society, 1873), 71.

In doing so, *The Catholic Family Almanac* helped create an American Catholic history; it provided brief entries and longer stories proving the deep-rooted history of Catholics in

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11 CHECK QUOTE FOR ACCURACY. *The Illustrated Catholic Family Annual for the United States, for the Year of Our Lord 1869* (New York: Catholic Publication Society, 1869), 60.
the United States. Unlike a prayer book, bible, or even Catholic novels, the explosion of these kind of reference books suggests an interest in developing a sense of an American Catholic history much before the turn of the century. The Catholic Publication Society’s family almanacs made it clear to American Catholics at home that they were part of a popular, active American church.

Stories reprinted in *The Catholic Family Almanac* also demonstrate one way in which American Catholics were encouraged to think even more broadly about Church history and their religious geography. Peter D’Agostino argued “Rome, not Jerusalem, Washington, Baltimore, or Dublin, was the center of the American Catholic world from 1848 to 1940,” and certainly the Catholic Publication Society’s family almanacs reflect a

![Fig. 5: “The Cathedral of Sienna” illustration in *The Catholic Family Almanac*](New York: Catholic Publication Society, 1873), 77.
constant emphasis on the international church during the 1860s and 70s. In addition to an “American” history of Catholicism, the almanacs illustrated much earlier eras of Catholic history—saints and martyrs from around the Catholic world. They confidently followed the spread of Catholic missions, and they were chock-full of travelogue-like descriptions and sketches of cathedrals and shrines at home and abroad. Thus, the variety of content included in these almanacs not only reminded readers of what a Catholic America looked like, it did so in the very real context of European migration and an international church.

The Almanac as “Good Reading”

One reason the “secular” almanac genre has been much reviled as literature is because of the way that advertising took over much of the reference content, what the historian McCarthy calls the almanac’s “exploitation by the patent medicine man.” In 1869, the Catholic Publication Society was very aware of this phenomenon when it entered the almanac market, and countered with a volume that did not take advertising dollars from so-called disreputable sources. When reviewing the first issue of The Catholic Family Almanac, Paulist editors at The Catholic World magazine (with a distinct interest in almanac sales!) reminded readers that owning a Catholic almanac was far superior to other options:

Almanacs have become almost a necessity, and are looked for as regularly as the new year. It is then, highly important that an almanac, to say the least, should contain nothing objectionable to morals, and this cannot be said of too many frequently met with, which are only mere advertising mediums for quack medicines, etc.

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13 See McCarthy, “Redeeming the Almanac,” Common-Place.
Going on to essentially pat themselves on the back, the reviewers heralded the almanac as “the first attempt by any Catholic publisher in this country to get up an Almanac suitable for families.”

Fig. 6: Examples of “wholesome” advertising, including dry goods, organs, fire insurance, Catholic schooling, and Catholic publications, in The Catholic Family Almanac (New York: Catholic Publication Society, 1877), 120-121.

What was “suitable for families,” however, was also suitable for Catholic businesses. The advertising pages of each year of The Catholic Family Almanac (about one-third of the total content) can be used as a near-encyclopedic listing of American Catholic-owned businesses, Catholic secondary schools, and Catholic publishers of the era. If an impressionable child paged through the volume without supervision, the Catholic parent could be assured that no harm would come to pass—but instead of snake

15 Ibid.
oil, readers were offered a vision of American Catholic life approved by Hecker’s publication society.

*The Catholic Family Almanacs* were destined for the homes of a rising Irish- and German-American Catholic middle class, along with a slew of other print materials, devotional objects, and artworks. Its competitors offered even more beautiful options, which, after the Paulists got out of the almanac publishing business, they began to promote instead. One 1885 review of Benziger Brothers’s *Catholic Home Almanac* in *The Catholic World* praised the “admirable” literary and artistic contributions, including “a beautiful colored chromograph of the Sacred Heart.”¹⁶ The family almanac served as both practical reference book and handsome tome, a marker of status and good taste for the American Catholic family. These almanacs, then, also serve as examples of the mid-century trend to sell low-cost religious objects and reading materials for personal use, potentially creating new family heirlooms in the process. The extent of advertising in the Catholic Publication Society volumes demonstrate that at the same time, such “tasteful” objects could also encourage additional purchases for the home.¹⁷ The Catholic reader was meant to be a Catholic consumer.

Furthermore, *The Catholic Family Almanac* may be viewed as another example of Catholic “home religion,” as described by Colleen McDannell.¹⁸ Suggesting that middle-class American Catholics should not simply leave the religious education of their children

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to the priest and Catholic school, authors featured in the Catholic Publication Society’s almanacs emphasized family life that included religious reading. Most clearly illustrated in the story “Evenings at Beech Cottage,” pictured here, the domestic scene is familiar to any student of nineteenth-century gender relations; the author portrayed the after dinner activities of “one of the happiest families in the world.” “Every evening,” she continued, “the children were accustomed to sit with their parents in the family parlor, and being very well behaved, they had what they called ‘quiet play’ whenever papa or mamma happened to be reading.” Written by Mother Austin Carroll, a Sister of Mercy in New Orleans, this two-page story was taken from her 1869 novel Glimpses of Pleasant Homes: A Few Tales for Youth, also published by the Catholic Publication Society. In her preface to the larger book, Mother Carroll argued the importance of home religion

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strongly, writing “it is certain that the education given at home, besides being first in the order of time, is far more important than school education.” Reading, to Carroll, set an important precedent in the home; and homes, she argued—like scores of other nineteenth-century prescriptive literature—“whether log-cabins or marble palaces, are the nurseries of good Christians and loyal, orderly citizens.” What happens to the children—future “mechanics, chemists, geologists, divines, artists, and gardeners”—if “books deemed superfluous are not purchased and a few dollars here and there are saved…Are the results worth the price? We shall soon see.”

More than simply encouraging the purchase of religious art or the act of praying at home—elements of the “home religion” McDannell first articulated in her study The Christian Home in Victorian America—Mother Carroll’s preface and the vignette republished in the 1870 edition of The Catholic Family Almanac illustrate an increasing preoccupation with “good reading” for American Catholics. Indeed, in 1870 the Catholic Publication Society repackaged selections from The Illustrated Catholic Family Almanac as a single volume, titled Good Things for Catholic Readers: A Miscellany. [Notable for bucking the trend of European imports making their way to North American Catholic booksellers, Good Things is one of the few examples of popular works from this period first published in the United States and then reprinted in London, as the idea of Catholic reading circles took off at the turn of the century.] While historians of American Catholicism have explored an increasing emphasis on formal higher education for the laity apparent by the turn of the twentieth century, few have documented the efforts to

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21 Ibid., xiv.
22 Ibid., xii.
circulate popular and religious texts via the Catholic Reading Circle movement. Actively promoting Catholic literacy and, in particular, women’s work to foster it, the Catholic Reading Circles embraced reading at home, with family members and friends. “What a blessing it is to be fond of reading good books,” exclaimed one participant in 1896, according to the movement’s magazine, The Catholic Reading Circle Review.  

Undoubtedly, the Paulists behind the Catholic Publication Society efforts of thirty years earlier would have agreed vigorously with this assessment.

**Conclusions: Reading, Publishing, and a “Catholic Mentality”**

As historian David Paul Nord notes in his book *Faith in Reading: Religious Publishing and the Birth of Mass Media in America*, “Reading… is never a simple corollary to publishing. Reading—or ‘reader response’ in the jargon of literary criticism—has its own history.” Religious studies scholars have paid attention to the role of texts and reading as a communal activity in sites such as the convent; the Catholic family, however, has received less attention. As this paper has begun to demonstrate, family almanacs are just one facet of an understudied nineteenth-century American Catholic publishing industry; in their advertising pages and other trade lists and bibliographies, a dynamic Catholic print culture both at home and abroad can be located.

How could the act of reading at home become an important activity for defining the religious geographies of a scattered people? Una M. Cadegan’s 2009 essay “Running the Ancient Ark by Steam” explains Catholic publishing during the years 1880 to 1940 as

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23 Add footnote from Chapter 5.  
an example of “U.S. Catholicism’s movement from an immigrant mission church to a substantially assimilated subculture.” Cadegan suggests further work on subgroups such as Catholic women could demonstrate how “Catholic publishers sought to bring all aspects of life within the religiocultural boundaries of Catholicism.”

In many ways, Cadegan’s assessment of Catholic publishers is in line with Jay Dolan’s oft-repeated assertion that American Catholic authorities wanted to educate men and women to create a “Catholic mentality,” particularly when, as he tells it, “Catholics in the ante-bellum period were not extraordinarily fervent in their religious practice.”

Certainly, nineteenth-century Catholic readers and writers, and the Catholics who wrote for them contributed to a cultural process that reinforced the notion of a successful, vibrant, and growing American Catholicism, while maintaining ties abroad. The pieces chosen for publication in each year of The Catholic Family Almanac provide a fascinating example of this trend; but in addition to ordering the religious year and explaining Catholic history, these volumes merged art, science, religion, and commerce in ways encouraged home readers to seek both spiritual and earthly counsel in their pages. Packaging Catholic reading in bite-sized pieces for their family almanacs, Hecker’s Catholic Publication Society imagined reading as an integral part of American Catholic life.

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