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 pop-
ulist 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 pro-
fessional protocolist, be-
lieves 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 sys-
tem 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 pro-
fessional 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 comple-
tment to the Catechism of the Catholic
Church.” But by assembling a vast amount
of research into the origins, history, theolog-
ical and political meaning, and current offi-
cial status of Catholic offices, ceremonies,
etiquette, and dress, Noonan has done a ser-
tice 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 igno-
rant (and perhaps vulgarly egalitarian?) hier-
archs 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 metrop-
olitan archbishop’s pallium, a humble vest-
ment without regal connotations. Too
bad Noonan seems unaware that this revi-
sion of papal rituals was less a concession
to vulgar leveling than a liturgical acknowl-
edgment of a crucial theological point: that
the ministry of the bishop of Rome is
especially pastoral in character.

Noonan does not always wear his erudi-
tion 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 tes-
timony spent countless hours in the Vatican
archives, Noonan seems curiously misin-
formed on the current status, in internation-
al law and diplomacy, of the Holy See as dis-
tinguished from Vatican City.

But for all that, The Church Visible
opens a window on a fascinating world.
 Appropriately enough for a volume affirm-
ing 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

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