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*Church and Revolution: Catholics in the
Struggle for Democracy and Social Justice*

Thomas Bokenkotter

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The story of the Roman Catholic Church's transformation from entrenched defender of the *ancien régime* into one of the world's great advocates of democracy, freedom, and economic justice is indeed a remarkable one. In the century between Pius IX's 1864 *Syllabus of Errors* and the Vatican II documents *Dignitatis Humanae* and *Gaudium et Spes*, the Church moved from vigorously condemning modern liberalism to issuing support for the principles of the free society. The history of Catholic social teaching has received considerable attention from scholars in recent years, especially in light of the encounter with theologies of liberation (and the responses issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith in 1984 and 1986), the Church's central role in the revolution of 1989 in Central and Eastern Europe, and John Paul II's strong advocacy of the free society in the 1991 encyclical *Centesimus Annus*. Thomas Bokenkotter's *Church and Revolution: Catholics in the Struggle for Democracy and Social Justice* is a useful addition to this literature on the development of Catholic social thought since the French Revolution. Bokenkotter identifies his specific objective for the book as understanding the Catholic Church's evolution from "one of the most conservative and even reactionary of the world powers" into "a very progressive force in world affairs."

Rather than examining the history of changes in official Catholic social teaching, a story that, as Bokenkotter points out, is well-documented and generally agreed upon by scholars, Bokenkotter focuses on the history of "progressive" social Catholicism as seen through the lives of approximately thirty leading

Catholic intellectuals, priests, politicians, and activists. Because of this methodological approach, the book is almost exclusively biographical in format, with each of its sixteen chapters describing the life of one or two individuals. The biographical sketches of leading Catholic figures are not complex historical analyses. With the exception of references to the published writings of certain individuals, Bokenkotter does not utilize any primary source documents or engage in any original historical research. Instead, he relies almost entirely on secondary sources, and it would seem he fails even to consider systematically the available secondary studies. In most chapters, Bokenkotter relies heavily on a few select books for his biographical information. The chapters, as a result, are largely summaries of previous historical research.

In spite of these limitations, the biographical approach does produce a highly readable book whose content spans across a vast time period and range of issues. Over the course of nearly 600 pages, Bokenkotter discusses the nineteenth-century pioneers of liberal Catholicism, Félicité de Lamennais, Jean-Baptiste Lacordaire, and Charles Count de Montalembert; Frederick Ozanam, the founder of the Saint Vincent de Paul Society; the English bishop Henry Edward Manning; the Italian anti-Fascist priest Don Luigi Sturzo; German statesman Konrad Adenauer; and the twentieth-century personalist thought of Jacques Maritain and Emmanuel Mounier. Bokenkotter also considers developments outside of Western Europe, as he explores Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker Movement in the United States, Oscar Romero in El Salvador, and Lech Walesa's leadership of Solidarity in Poland.

While the book is fast-moving and entertaining, the heavy reliance on biography at the expense of a broader and more general historical narrative does mean that this study offers a far-from-comprehensive treatment of the subject matter. While Bokenkotter's intent was not to write an exhaustive history of Catholicism and social justice, the book nevertheless suffers from its lack of an overarching narrative that might have provided a stronger organizational structure and sense of purpose. The larger theme of Catholicism and revolution is lost amid the individual biographies, and consequently, the book assumes a disjointed and even ahistorical character. While each chapter can be profitably read on its own, grasping the relationship between chapters is far more challenging. The individuals Bokenkotter discusses are a rather random lot who generally have little in common besides their purportedly progressive social vision (and, it seems doubtful that many of these individuals would have even characterized themselves as progressive). In fact, some of the biographies simply seem out of place. For example, the chapter on Michael Collins and Eamon de Valera, revolutionary leaders in Ireland, provides little insight into the

relationship between Catholicism and the struggle for social justice. Even more perplexing is the chapter on Karl Marx. This chapter, which Bokenkotter includes because of the profound influence of Marx's secular scientific socialism on Catholic social thought, was highly interesting in its own right, but ultimately seems to be an unnecessary forty page diversion that provides far too many intricate and unnecessary details about Marx's life and philosophy.

An additional factor behind the lack of continuity in *Church and Revolution* is that it ironically offers little discussion of the Catholic Church. Though the title implies this book is about the relationship between the Church and social and political change, Bokenkotter's study was ultimately not about the Catholic Church but rather, a select group of individual Catholics whose relationship with, and influence on, the larger Church was often described in ambiguous terms. For a book that purports to examine progress in the Church, the lack of reference to institutional change prohibits the reader from grasping the larger significance of the individual biographies. Indeed, far from being an agent of progressive social change, the Church is more commonly characterized by Bokenkotter as a conservative obstacle. In the end, Bokenkotter's argument that the Catholic Church has emerged as a powerful progressive force in world affairs remains largely unsubstantiated because there is inadequate discussion of specifically how, or even whether, the Church as an institution has changed since the publication of the *Syllabus of Errors*. Though Bokenkotter talks about the "gradual awakening of the Catholic social conscience," he does not satisfactorily establish a connection between the Church and the individual Catholics whose lives he chronicles. How representative were the views of the people Bokenkotter describes? What effect did the work of these individuals have on the social teachings of the institutional Church? Bokenkotter could have more thoroughly discussed developments in official Church teachings without disrupting the biographically-based structure of the book.

By focusing so exclusively on biography (specifically, biographies of people he admires), Bokenkotter allows his book to adopt a triumphant tone in which the heroes of the story are those courageous individuals who challenged conservatism and produced an awakening of social conscience. The author summarily dismisses those Catholics who did not share this progressive vision, portraying them as dangerous or historically insignificant. For example, one of the few conservative figures discussed in the book is Monsignor Umberto Benigni. However, this Italian priest who "waged a decades-long war on behalf of integralist Catholicism and in defense of the church faithful to Pius IX's *Syllabus of Errors*," is rather scathingly characterized as an anti-Semite and

Fascist whose integralist views “will always remain a temptation for certain Catholics with a straightforward and oversimplified view of papal and church authority” and for “those insecure souls who look to the Church as a refuge in a world of constantly accelerating change.” Regardless of the accuracy of these assertions, the negativity that abounds in this chapter is not to be found in Bokenkotter’s discussion of the progressive historical figures he views more favorably. In short, the author makes few attempts to understand sympathetically the historical conditions under which the Church and individual Catholics adopted certain conservative anti-liberal attitudes. Had Bokenkotter done so, he might have been less quick to disregard those Catholics who shared a different understanding of the proper relationship between the Church and the political order.

Despite reservations I have about the methodology and organizational structure employed in the book, *Church and Revolution* is still highly useful and enjoyable. Bokenkotter exhibits a vast knowledge of modern history and shows himself to be an adept synthesizer and compelling storyteller. Bokenkotter is, above all, someone whose personal views and passions are an integral part of the story he tells. This is not a traditional historical study; it is, rather, the author’s meditative reflections on historical figures whose lives he finds compelling. As long as one recognizes the limitations that accompany such an approach, then this book can be read profitably by scholar and general reader alike.