

Catholics Are Real People

God, Church and Flag: Senator Joseph R. McCarthy and the Catholic Church, 1950-1957. by Donald F. Crosby, S. J., Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1978 xv + 307 pp. \$16.95.

FATHER DONALD CROSBY set out "to determine the true extent, the fluctuations, and the intensity of McCarthy's Catholic following"; in addition, he wanted to "determine the ideological sources of both Catholic McCarthyism and anti-McCarthyism," and to explore additional questions about the historical rôle of American Catholicism, the Church's position in American society, the extent of its assimilation into that society, and the impact of religion and politics on each other. At the end of the book, his chief conclusion "is that Catholics divided on McCarthy fully as much as the rest of the country, though their support for him was broader than among other population groups." He notes further that the debate over Senator McCarthy was "predominantly an affair of elites—of conservative editors, politicians, educators, business leaders, and leading clergymen—all ranged against liberals drawn largely from the same ranks." Thus, in effect, the book is an in-depth case study of a cliché about the Catholic Church and its reactionary and monolithic rôle in American life: that McCarthy received massive support from the Catholic masses as well as leaders like Cardinal Spellman and intellectuals like William F. Buckley, Jr. The cliché turns out to be largely invalid. Catholics turn out to be real people, just like Protestants, and on political issues they act politically and not religiously.

Father Crosby's work provides us with a laboratory case of some of the best and worst tendencies in the scholarship of American liberalism. As an academic exercise, it is a valuable piece of work, and I hope that the criticisms that follow will not be taken as strictures on many of the strictly professional issues involved. The author has a definite, liberal point of view; he writes well on the whole, although he should tame his lust for par-

enthetical asides; he organizes clearly and efficiently; he has examined the relevant public record, conducted many fruitful interviews, and worked with marginal success in the available manuscripts. There are only a few minor factual errors. As a contribution to knowledge and display of historical ability it ranks better than most.

But I think that, for readers of this journal, the book will be far more interesting as a specimen of the problems of liberal historiography. Father Crosby is relentless as he tracks down the clichés of anti-Catholic journalists as they mindlessly assume some kind of Church plot to be led by the junior senator from Wisconsin. But he is as blind as they are on the closely related issue of McCarthy's rôle as a supposed American conservative. He says that he "has used the word *conservative* to describe the McCarthyites and the word *liberal* to define the anti-McCarthy forces," and then with touching solicitude assures us that "we do them no injustice by calling them conservatives." I wouldn't doubt that at certain Eastern graduate schools *conservatism* is a fighting epithet not to be used between gentlemen, but in the larger scholarly world the word has taken on definite meanings that have little or no relationship to Senator McCarthy. In essence, Father Crosby assumes McCarthy's conservatism rather than proves it. Instead of a definition involving the rôle of the government in private affairs, or the relationship to the status quo, or the involvement in a religious heritage, Father Crosby is capable of describing McCarthy's "relentless conservatism" as his actions when "he opposed public housing, lobbied on behalf of the sugar interests, joined the conservatives in opposing the Fair Deal's welfare legislation, and voted against the many foreign-aid bills that the Truman administration proposed to the Senate." The issue of public housing at the time divided conservatives; lobbying for the sugar interests is utterly irrelevant; and attitudes toward foreign aid, and isolationism in general, cut across the spectrum from the far left to the far right. Only the opposition to President Truman's Fair Deal legislation is germane, and here the definition turns out to be that McCarthy was a conservative because he joined the

conservatives. One expects better logic from a Jesuit!

In fact, if we use the type of definition I have long been defending in print, that conservatives are those who believe that what is important in life cannot be achieved by political means, McCarthy turns out to be no conservative at all. Father Crosby himself mentions McCarthy's scheme for a large-scale pension plan for the aged, although he quietly passes over McCarthy's affection for high farm price supports. He likewise mentions McCarthy's support of the staunch liberal Congressman Clement Zablocki, but professes to find this "curious" rather than suggestive that he is simply wrong. But the most outrageous example of nodding over his own evidence comes in the discussion of Robert Kennedy. Here we have what has become the Holy Family of American liberalism, with both John and Robert now blessed by that most eminent of current writers of liberal hagiography, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. Yet Senator John Kennedy evaded any condemnation of McCarthy in public, and always insisted that his career provided only a narrow legal problem, and not a moral or liberal one. And with Robert Kennedy, that hero of the blacks and alienated youth, we have a man who served on McCarthy's Permanent Senate Subcommittee on Investigations, who never disavowed McCarthy at any time, and who rivaled Jean Kerr McCarthy in his loyalty even after McCarthy's censure. It isn't that Father Crosby hasn't done his homework; it's that he seems to have been programmed not to perceive anything that disturbs his predilections.

In fact, my own judgment is that McCarthy was neither a conservative nor a liberal. He seems to have had no principles of any kind. He was instead an opportunist who discovered a good issue and exploited it shamelessly. Insofar as he deserves further description, it should be that he was the unguided missile of American anti-communism, shooting off in one direction after another, hitting people at random, and finally falling to earth, exhausted. More conservatives found him a useful ally than liberals on the communist issue, and at this point a majority of articulate Roman Catholics did as well. The Church had long been concerned

with the communist advances in Europe, and McCarthy was an habitual if not a philosophical member of the Church. But religion played little rôle in his choice of an issue, and his career split the Catholic community bitterly.

It is unfortunate that a worthy book is flawed in this manner. Both secular liberal journalists and Protestant fundamentalists should take particular note of Father Crosby's insistence that Catholics in America tend to act pretty much the way other Americans act. The Church was not a monolith in the 1950's, and is even less so today. For every Cardinal Spellman there may well be a Bishop Bernard J. Sheil, for every *Brooklyn Tablet* an *America*. This will hardly be news to Catholics, but for others it is a useful lesson.

Reviewed by ROBERT M. CRUNDEN

Affirming Art

On Moral Fiction, by John Gardner, *New York, Basic Books, Inc., 1978. 214 pp. \$8.95.*

ALEXSANDR SOLZHENITSYN was right, of course, when he pointed out in his Harvard commencement address that we are living in spiritually and morally sterile times. Our greatest concerns, despite the occasional flutterings of the banners proclaiming human rights, appear to be the inflationary spiral and rising taxes. The best sellers reflect this seemingly exclusive preoccupation with material considerations. Books emphasizing the skills and thrills of jogging are outselling those recording the vibrations of the soul and how to keep it fit.

Into this moral miasma, Mr. John Gardner's book is a welcome antipollutant. Gardner, already well established as a successful novelist (*Nickel Mountain, The Sunlight Dialogues, Grendel, and October Light*), a publishing scholar (*The Life and Times of Chaucer*), and a