

Kelly, Monsignor George A. *The Second Spring of the Church in America*. Preface by Ralph McInerney. South Bend, Indiana: St. Augustine's Press, 2001. 195 pp. \$25 hardcover.

Over the past half-century, through seemingly countless books, articles, and smaller publications, and with the realistic eye of a true Catholic social scientist, Monsignor George A. Kelly has analyzed just about every specific aspect of importance within the Catholic Church in the United States vis-a-vis the normative guidelines set for it by the Magisterial authority emanating from Rome. He has also authored three comprehensive interpretations of the state of the Church in this country: in his magnum opus, *The Battle for the American Church* (Doubleday, 1979), in a subsequent update, *The Battle for the American Church Revisited* (Ignatius, 1995), and now in the volume under review, *The Second Spring of the Church in America*.

All three volumes are linked through two common, central, and related issues. The first is the mostly self-inflicted weakening of the foundational and central role of episcopal leadership and authority in articulating, promoting, and defending the eternal truths and sacred practices of a 2,000 year old, organically developing, Catholic Christian tradition. The second is the debilitating effects of dissent within key sectors of the Church such as her educational establishment, national conference, and other bureaucratic entities that have led to a defilement in the Church's "plausibility structure" and hence ability to socialize the contemporary and coming generations of Catholics into an authentic understanding and acceptance of the Faith. On more than one occasion in the volume, Monsignor Kelly quotes the key question posited in 1974 by (of all places) the National Conference of Catholic Bishops that reflects the importance of these two foundational issues, to wit: "the emerging question for the Catholic community may well be whether in the future, as in the past, it derives its fundamental beliefs and attitudes from the traditional value system of Catholic Christianity, or whether its beliefs and attitudes will be drawn more and more from the secularistic, humanistic value system around it." The continuity and centrality of these two issues is manifested more concretely in Monsignor Kelly's latest volume through his specific analyses of such historical controversies, events, and trends, as the Land o' Lakes declaration; the Charles Curran affair; the promulgation and reception of the documents of the Second Vatican Council, *Humanae Vitae*, *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, and *Ex corde Ecclesiae*, among other papal initiatives; the feminization of the Church and the withering down of most congregations of women religious; the inversion of priorities from otherworldly salvation to this-worldly political causes; and the diminishment of the role of Bishop, pastor, and priest. Like scores of other scholars, I have incorporated generously from the intellectual

corpus of Monsignor Kelly in my own work, most recently in *Bright Promise, Failed Community: Catholics and the American Public Order* (Lexington books, 2001).

Despite the continuity between the volumes of Monsignor Kelly, this reviewer also sensed some subtle changes of emphasis found in *Second Spring*. One perceived change is that Monsignor Kelly now is more likely to offer some quite specific suggestions for reform, most of them involving an increased willingness to exercise the juridical authority of both Pope and Bishop. One is to re-emphasize the right of metropolitan Archbishops (who, having been chosen by John Paul II, empirically tend to be quite orthodox) to oversee and intervene, if necessary, in the activities of Bishops in adjacent dioceses. Another is to involve Bishops in the business of accrediting (or not accrediting) colleges that claim to be a part of the Catholic heritage.

A second perceived change is that Monsignor Kelly seems to place a slightly greater emphasis than he did previously on the deleterious effects on the Catholic population of both the secular American value system and the role of the State. If my perception is accurate, this change is not necessarily contradictory with his earlier interpretations, which emphasized intra-Church machinations (e.g. the failure of Bishops to lead the institution with integrity; the subversive activities of the “new Catholic knowledge class”) and only asystemically incorporated the effects of the outer civilization on the Church and on individual Catholics. This is so because these earlier works were written when the American value system and State were arguably not as antithetical to the Catholic faith and when even dissenters could be assumed to have understood the faith that they were rejecting. In contrast, most of today’s younger generation of Catholics, as a rule, are almost totally innocent of the Catholic heritage and of what it means to “think, feel, and walk with the ‘Mind of the Church,’” an effect of the severe weakening and secularizing of the Catholic plausibility structure sustained over time during the post-Vatican II period. As Monsignor Kelly notes, the issue today is no longer a tug of war between conservative and liberal Catholics, rather it is far more basic and entails the issue of a fundamental belief (or disbelief) in the historic claims of the Catholic Church. Nonetheless, this change of Monsignor Kelly, if correctly noted, is interesting given that, in an earlier life and in a different Church and society, he was considered a “liberal Catholic, labor priest.”

I am admittedly on even shakier ground regarding a third perceived change of emphasis, i.e. Monsignor Kelly’s expectations for the role of the Catholic Bishops of America in laying the groundwork for what Father Richard Neuhaus has referred to as the “Catholic moment.” In earlier works, one gets the feeling from Monsignor Kelly that only Rome can stop the movement toward an autonomous “American Catholic Church.” While certainly less than

completely happy with the activity (or lack of activity) of the current episcopal leadership in the United States, I surmise that Monsignor Kelly is indirectly pointing to two things. The first is that Pope John Paul II has positioned many key appointments in important archdioceses and dioceses replacing, to a degree, the earlier, and in the main, progressive, “Jadot Bishops.” Second, there are emerging (albeit still faint) signs of a “new breed” of sophisticated yet orthodox Bishops “with an attitude” who understand how dire is the present situation of the Catholic Church in the United States and who are more likely to “mix it up” with the dissenting and dominant “Americanist” faction in the defense of the Faith than was the previous generation of Catholic episcopal leadership. Put crudely, and perhaps reading too much between the lines, I am suggesting that Monsignor Kelly is cautiously hopeful that the Catholic American counter-reformation may soon *finally* be launched and that, under a reinvigorated leadership, the Church in this country will, by the grace of God, be rebuilt, brick by brick if necessary.

My admittedly speculative analysis is, at least, consistent with the ambiguity and confusion of Monsignor Kelly’s choice of a title for this volume. On the one hand, Monsignor Kelly admits that, in many respects, the situation in the Church of the United States is today worse than ever. Yet, he still talks of a “second spring.” Perhaps both insights are true and reconcilable, that, in effect, it’s “darkest before the dawn.” Perhaps the groundwork laid, heroically and stoically, by the present leadership of the restorationist movement of the Catholic Church in the United States – led jointly by Bishops, priests, religious, and laity – is finally appearing on the radar screen of both Church and society. And perhaps the restorationist movement might ultimately prove to stand in what the classical sociologist, Max Weber, referred to as an “elective affinity” with other forces, both political (e.g. a, relatively speaking, “Catholic friendly” Bush presidency) and historical (the societal priority-changing attack on the World Trade Center) that might spring a dialectically related revitalization in both Church and society. Or, perhaps, this is just wishful thinking on my part and represents an overly optimistic spin on Monsignor Kelly’s latest work.

In any event, several initial sources, outside of his own voluminous writings, are suggested to those scholars interested in pursuing the contributions of Monsignor George A. Kelly both to the Catholic Church of the United States and to Catholic scholarship in general. They are: the complete set of back issues of *The Fellowship of Catholic Scholars Quarterly* (originally *Newsletter*); a collection of essays edited by Patrick G.D. Riley, *Keeping Faith: Msgr. George A. Kelly’s Battle for the Church* (Christendom, 2000, and recently reviewed by Father Robert Batule in Volume VI the *C.S.S.R.*); and my own overview article, “Catholicism, American Culture, and Monsignor George A.

Kelly: Reflections of and on a True Catholic Sociologist,” published in the *C.S.S.R.* (Volume IV, 1999).

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