

MONSIGNOR GEORGE A. KELLY

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When *The Battle for the American Church* appeared in 1979, it was a bombshell. Here was a detailed, careful, documented account of what had happened to the Roman Catholic Church in the United States since the close of Vatican II in 1965. There had been nothing like it before.

The sense that something was going wrong with the renewal set in motion by Vatican II was widespread. Liturgical innovations of a silly if not sacrilegious sort had become the common coin of Catholic conversation. Balloons were released, a kind of pep-rally air invaded the churches, parents were subjected to demeaning exercises by the new cadre of religious instructors coming out of graduate school with their M.Div.'s and elbowing the pastors aside. "Somewhere in this room a bag is hidden. We are all going to search for it." Thus parents were addressed when they attended the mandatory meeting if their children were to be confirmed. The idea was to suggest the notion of a gift, a surprise. Oh whoopee. People slunk home in embarrassment from such encounters, if they didn't blow their stack. But these were minor matters.

Monsignor Kelly was not trading on the excesses or gaucheries of this priest or that nun or some director of religious education. His concern

was faith and morals. If one were to select a single post-conciliar event to show how things went wrong, it would doubtless be the incredible -- and incredulous -- response to Paul VI's *Humanae Vitae* in 1968. Kelly's book made it clear that this was not an isolated event, not did it spring out of nowhere. The *Battle* helped us see that noisy theological dissent and the rejection of the Church's sexual morality was part of a large sad picture.

Who is Monsignor George Kelly? Born in New York in 1916, he was ordained in 1942. After earning his Ph.D. at the Catholic University, he returned to New York to parish work but also as Family Life Director and Secretary for Education in the Archdiocese of New York. The chapter on "Learning the Church Spellman Style" in his autobiography *Inside My Father's House* (1989) provides the best insight into Kelly's conception of himself as a priest.

He has a undeniably pre-conciliar *look* about him. Always in clerical dress, with an inexhaustible fund of clerical stories, most of them involving bishops, he grew up in a Church where bishops were bishops, pastors were pastors, and laypeople were laypeople. Kelly is the quintessential Catholic priest. He is also a quintessential American. The different roles in the Church were not altered by Vatican II; they were if anything reinforced, but styles can change, and Kelly has no quarrel with that. Indeed, he can rightly say that he prepared the way for desirable changes through his Family Life work. The *Battle* drew attention to six alarming trends.

First, controversy over the very nature of the Church, invoking the Council as having set aside the "hierarchical" model! Second, the controversy over the renewal of Religious life. Third, the controversy over Divine Revelation. Fourth, the controversy over religious freedom in the Church. Fifth, the controversy over contraception. Sixth, the controversy over the extent of the Church's involvement in worldly affairs.

Kelly begins with the changes on the Catholic campuses of the nation, citing the Land O'Lakes Declaration of 1967 as crucial. This event has to be understood in terms of what led up to it, and Kelly knows the story. He was involved in it every step of the way. He traces with muted dismay the decision of Catholic institutions to cut their ties with the hierarchy, to downplay their commitment to the faith, often for the sake of state aid.

By beginning with Catholic education, Monsignor Kelly not only reveals his own keen interest in it but rightly points to that which played a role in all the subsequent events he relates. Never content to be a spectator or chronicler of events, Kelly sought to counter the impression that all Catholic academics were at odds with Rome by founding the Fellowship of Catholic Scholars, which flourishes and expands with every year.

On with the lamentable litany the *Battle* continues, the Curran commotion at Catholic University, the incredible collapse in some orders of religious women. The great spiritual writers of the past gave way to Erik

Erikson, the campuses nuns attended during summer school became dating bureaus, and many marriages between priests and nuns had their origin there.

Priests and nuns and laity were being told that it was an entirely new ball game. The old Church with its rules and prohibitions and fear of God was dead. Celibacy and the vow of chastity were reinterpreted. Dr. Johnson's dictum that marriage has its pains but celibacy has no pleasures lost its point. Being a Catholic was redefined into a style of life that had previously characterized non-Catholics, even anti-Catholics. Pope-bashing 501 was the point of departure of graduate studies in theology.

To this day there is no better account of the first fifteen years after the close of the council than George Kelly's *The Battle for the American Church*. Those who are new in the Church, young people wondering what all the aging dissenters are whining about, would do well to read Monsignor Kelly's account of the struggle that continues in the Church in the United States.

Prior to his recent retirement -- if it can be called that -- Kelly's base was St. John's University on Long Island. A stream of books appeared, some analyzing the situation we are in, others mapping out the way we should go. He wrote on biblical scholarship, he reminded the bishops of their responsibility for what is going on, he lobbied, cajoled, and nurtured the Fellowship into the powerful voice for orthodoxy it has become.

"In the next century is the U. S. Catholic Church to reflect as essential elements of its nature the definitions and norms proclaimed by John Paul II, or will it be a Church which officially accepts 'pick-and-choose Catholicism' as an approved opinion for its constituency?"

Those are the stakes, as he put it in *Keeping the Church Catholic with John Paul II* (1990). It is important that we realize this. It is important that we act in the light of the realization. The work of Monsignor George A. Kelly, his books and his legacy, have made this considerably easier for us to do.