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Ersatz Biography or Festschrift?

A Review Essay

Joseph Wieczerzak, Bishop Francis Hodur: Biographical Essays, ed. Theodore L. Zawistowski. Scranton: Central Diocese, Polish National Catholic Church, 1998. Distributed by Columbia University Press, New York.

Thirty years ago (1969) the clergy of the Central Diocese of the Polish National Catholic Church (PNCC) established the Bishop Hodur Biography Commission with the express purpose of producing a scholarly study of the PNCC's organizer, Prime Bishop Franciszek Hodur (1866–1953). Towards that end, the commission collected a variety of published and unpublished documents relating to the bishop's life and work. The commission initially entrusted the task to a non-Polish National Catholic: Professor Irene Sokol of Fairleigh-Dickinson University, New Jersey. She proved unable to complete the work—or, indeed, to accomplish very much at all—whereupon the commission asked Professor Joseph W. Wieczerzak, a Polish National Catholic history professor at Bronx Community College, New York, to assume responsibility for the biography in 1979. Though Professor Wieczerzak accepted and has engaged in a considerable amount of valuable research, the biography still appears very far from completion, even though he has retired from his position in New York and assumed the post of Dean of Students at the PNCC's Savonarola Theological Seminary.

The reasons for this failure to complete the biography over the course of 30 years are complex. Certainly Bishop Anthony M. Rysz of the Central Diocese offers one credible explanation in a “Foreword” to the volume reviewed here: “More materials surface constantly, so that many years may elapse before it is possible to digest all of them and prepare a definitive biography of the man whose faith, intellect, vision, and sacrifice gave life to the Polish National Catholic Church” (p. 6). Then, too, as Professor Wieczerzak himself writes in one of his essays, “...I had, and still have, external and internal warnings about the difficulties which might ensue in ‘handling’ a controversial individual who is still recalled by people today” (p. 13). One suspects that the latter explanation bulks largest in the non-appearance of the long-awaited biography. Actually, signs of difficulty surfaced early in the process. When I met Professor Sokol at the Jagiellonian University, Kraków, in 1977, she confessed that

she found her subject uncongenial. In my opinion, perhaps part of the difficulty stems from the fact that some Polish National Catholics would prefer the composition of a hagiography that repeats myths rather than the production of a scientific work that strives for more historiographical objectivity than one encounters in many Polish National Catholic publications. Sadly, the production of an “official” biography, which needs be “edifying”, sometimes conflicts with the canons of historical scholarship.

In view of the PNCC’s centennial (1997), the Central Diocese therefore wisely decided to collect essays on Bishop Hodur already published by Professor Wiczerzak and reprint them—along with related materials—in one volume. Though the collection therefore does not add anything to the existing historiographical literature on the topic, it does make his work available to a broader academic audience. Most of the essays and related documentation published in this volume originally appeared in PNCC Studies (edited by Professor Wiczerzak) or Polish American Studies (of which he serves as associate editor). They represent a series of vignettes or pieces of a much larger, and far from complete, puzzle illustrating the life of the PNCC’s organizer. Moreover, they are not tied together by any overall analytical framework or thesis—certainly a prerequisite for a full-fledged biography.

Professor Wiczerzak’s essays on the early life and education of his subject, as well as the circumstances under which the young seminarian Franciszek Hodur left Poland during 1893 and his career before he agreed in 1897 to lead the Polish religious dissidents who had formed St. Stanislaus Parish at Scranton, do much to fill in many “blank spots” (or, to use the author’s term, biographical “desiderata”). Bishop Hodur’s progressive outlook and hints of the *Weltanschauung* to which this would lead emerge in an essay (an English translation of which was published in 1984) penned by the emigrant Pole soon after his arrival in the United States. However, while Professor Wiczerzak lays claim to the “discovery” of this essay (p. 56), its existence had been known for some time, and it previously had been cited by at least one other student of PNCC history¹. An essay that discusses the tense relationship between Bishop Hodur and Fr. Wacław Kruszka, a Polish American priest who struggled for reforms on the Polish immigrants’ behalf *within* the American Roman Catholic church, is noteworthy in that it at least indirectly moves

¹ Laurence Orzell, “A Minority within a Minority: The Polish National Catholic Church, 1896–1907”, *Polish American Studies* 36 (Spring 1979): 5–32.

away from the traditional Polish National Catholic assumption that Bishop Hodur represented the only advocate of ecclesiastical “rights” for Poles in America.

Perhaps the most interesting essay in this volume addresses Bishop Hodur’s links with Polish American socialists, a relationship that manifested itself at the PNCC’s inception and apparently continued until mid-1911; indeed, some prominent lay figures involved in the church’s emergence were either socialists themselves or had pronounced pro-socialist sympathies. As Professor Wieczerszak notes elsewhere in this volume, such a topic has “embarrassed” some Polish National Catholics (p.43). Clearly, however, Bishop Hodur saw potentially valuable allies in socialists, who shared his deep commitment to social justice and opposition to what they jointly regarded as the negative consequences of unrestrained capitalism. For their part, otherwise non-religious socialists apparently saw the PNCC as a way to mobilize the masses for secular political purposes. Eventually, however, the PNCC and most Polish American socialists came to a parting of the ways, primarily because of ideological differences. Fortunately, this entire subject can now be openly discussed within Polish National Catholic scholarly circles. At about the same time as Professor Wieczerszak’s essay on the topic appeared in the non-PNCC journal *Polish American Studies* (1983), my efforts to discuss the issue in the weekly paper *Straż* (a publication of the Polish National Union, a PNCC-affiliated fraternal organization) met with considerable opposition. One of my essays that mentioned an alleged link between socialists and the adoption of a vernacular liturgy and concomitantly suggested that Bishop Hodur was *not* the first priest to celebrate a Polish Mass in America was not published, and I was admonished to adopt a more “positive” (filiopietistic?) tone in future writings².

Notwithstanding his flirtation with socialist politics, Bishop Hodur was first and foremost a figure who struggled for the religious, social, economic and educational advancement of Polish immigrants, and he firmly believed that their adherence to the PNCC was the best means to achieve this goal. Towards this end, he initially sought to work with and receive

² The Old Catholic priest Fr. Paul Kaminski apparently introduced a Polish liturgy during his brief tenure at a dissident parish in Freeland, Pennsylvania, several years before Fr. Hodur, who celebrated a Polish Mass at Scranton on Christmas Day, 1901 (not 1900, as most PNCC accounts claim). Fortunately, *Professor Wieczerszak* met with less resistance than I initially had, and he discussed the subject several years later in his “On Two Trails: The Polish Independent Parish of Freeland, Pennsylvania: Father Paul Kaminski”, *PNCC Studies*, 11 (1990): 23–60.

the support of the Polish National Alliance, a Chicago-based fraternal organization that included several progressive and even anti-clerical elements in its leadership. However, as Professor Wiczerzak notes in an essay on this subject, the Alliance leadership, though often critical of Roman Catholic clergy, could not bring itself to advocate a schism. Bishop Hodur nonetheless did not yield in the face of this disappointment, and on several occasions he challenged Polish American Roman Catholic clergy to debates. The one and only major occasion when they accepted this challenge took place in 1920, when Fr. Andrzej Żychowicz agreed to a public debate. Professor Wiczerzak discusses this debate dispassionately and notes that the adherents of each party in the dispute believed that their leader had won—thereby suggesting that the disputants spoke at, rather than to, each other.

The last major contribution in this volume of essays addresses a topic that all too often has been eclipsed by the “Polish” nature of the PNCC: its efforts—or, to be more precise, its willingness—to extend its work to other nationalities. Professor Wiczerzak summarizes several attempts to form “National Catholic” parishes among Italians, Hungarians, Slovaks, Lithuanian and Czechs that started during the second decade of the 20th century. In some respects, the socio-economic causes that gave rise to the PNCC played a similar role among these ethnic groups; however, in no instance did these movements attain anywhere near the size of the PNCC, and he offers several possible explanations, such as the failure to develop a distinct theological identity, inter-ethnic frictions, and a dearth of good leaders.

Old Catholic readers may well be disappointed that this collection of essays does not contain any distinct treatment of Bishop Hodur’s theological views or his attitude towards, and relations with, the European Old Catholics—apart from a translation of his published recollection in 1940 of events at The Hague in the days preceding his consecration in 1907. However, this absence is understandable, given the focus of Professor Wiczerzak’s research. Moreover, such subjects could prove particularly “controversial” in that scholarly analysis may lead to some uncomfortable conclusions. Here, too, there remain several “blank spots” (or biographical “desiderata”), such as whether Bishop Hodur in effect viewed affiliation with the Utrecht Union as a *mariage de convenance* (as did Bishop Antoni Kozłowski, the first Polish Old Catholic prelate in America³) and the handful of presbyteral “ordi-

³ See my article “A Pragmatic Union: Bishop Kozłowski and the Old Catholics, 1896–1898”, *Polish American Studies*, 44 (Spring 1987): 5–21.

nations” apparently performed by the PNCC’s leader *prior* to his consecration⁴.

Each of the essays and translations is preceded by a few introductory paragraphs—presumably authored by the editor of the volume, an ex-priest and former Straż editor—designed to set the stage for what follows. In many ways, these contribute to a better understanding of the topics discussed. In some cases, however, they pose questions to which the answers are obvious or contain statements that are unsubstantiated by the facts. For example, he asks, “Why was the Polish National Catholic Church the only American denomination to achieve intercommunion with the Episcopal Church?” (p.218). Clearly, the fact that the PNCC is the only American member church of the Union of Utrecht supplies the answer. Elsewhere he asserts that the PNCC’s leader visited Chicago in late 1904 “apparently expecting to be consecrated soon by Bishop Kozłowski, ...” (p.265). Available evidence suggests that Bishop Hodur’s *rap-prochement* with his erstwhile foe in Chicago was, to a significant extent, directed towards securing consecration from European Old Catholic bishops, not from Bishop Kozłowski, even had the latter proved willing to render his services in this regard⁵. Finally, it is regrettable that the editor did not use greater scrutiny in preparing the final version of the manuscript, for there are a significant number of typographical and other errata (e.g., the misidentification of the Polish Catholic Congress as the “Polish American Catholic Congress” [pp. 101–02] and the fact that most of the citations in the essay on “Multiethnic Activities” do not correspond to the information in the actual text).

These shortcomings nonetheless do not significantly detract from the overall quality of Professor Wieczerek’s essays, and the Central Diocese—in particular its archivist, Fr. Senior Casimir Grotnik—has performed an invaluable service by republishing them. At the same time, however, the volume cannot substitute for a critical biography; rather, it represents a *Festschrift* in honor of Bishop Hodur. A “definitive” biogra-

⁴ I discuss these briefly in an essay entitled “The ‘National Catholic’ Response: Franciszek Hodur and his Followers, 1897–1907”, published in *The Polish Presence in Canada and America*, ed. Frank Renkiewicz (Toronto: Multicultural History Society, 1982), pp. 117–35. Professor Wieczerek does mention a “newly-ordained” PNCC clergyman in 1905 (pp. 126–27) but does not note who performed the “ordination”.

⁵ This is one of several topics I have discussed recently in an ongoing series published by Straż entitled “‘Kościół Narodowy’: The Polish National Catholic Church, 1896–1907”.

phy may not be possible for some time and may require an even greater attitudinal change within the PNCC, above all a greater dissipation of the *timor reverentialis* felt by many who address the topic. In the mean time, it is devoutly to be wished that the PNCC continue to encourage the publication (or republication) of original research that not only helps fill in more “blank spots” in the career of the PNCC’s organizer but also sheds light on the roles played by other one-time prominent—but now all but forgotten—figures who contributed to the church’s development.

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