

Husák, Petr

When they spread out their arms, they touch the darkness : changes to priestly identity within Czech Catholicism in the 19th and 20th centuries : summary

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SUMMARY

When they spread out their arms, they touch the darkness Changes to priestly identity within Czech Catholicism in the 19th and 20th centuries

This book examines the changes to priestly identity within Czech Catholicism in the 19th and 20th centuries. The author uses some aspects of historiographic traditions which look at the history of the everyday, as well as social, cultural and linguistic discourses and important generational characteristics. However, the main methodological focus of the work is a biographical approach with significant comparative features. The theme is explored using the examples of three Czech priests from the Brno diocese. The first of these, Emanuel Masák (1883–1964), is presented as a moderate modernist, searching for ways to reform the church. The second, Antonín Ludvík Stříž (1888–1960), represents those in the clergy who adopted a conservative position towards modernization and used many features of ultramontanist piety, which was strongly influenced by the Marian cult and veneration of the papacy. The last of the three priests, Dominik Pecka (1895–1981), added realistic conservative thought to these two perspectives. He was prepared to consider new pastoral methods which led him to becoming a charismatic leader of the youth, a promoter of youth and liturgical movements and a sought-after populariser of Christian doctrines and scientific knowledge.

Examining the priestly world at the turn of the 20th century through three different perspectives allows the author to narrate a multi-layered story of the development of priestly identity at the centre of modern Czech society, finding shared features on the one hand, while distinguishing specific phenomena on the other. Here, priestly identity serves as a type of screen onto which it is possible to project

a whole range of historical phenomena which often overlapped with the lives of individuals. This approach allowed the author to investigate and, to a certain extent, reconstruct the wider context, observe its influence on specific actors and attempt to gain a deeper understanding of it. As a result, it was possible to examine, for example, the relationship between the Czech national movement and religion, the relationship between religion and politics, the education and upbringing of the youth in the first half of the 20th century, the importance of personalities in small and large communities, and the confrontation between priestly and religious identity and totalitarian regimes.

Alongside these more general themes, the author also focused on more detailed research issues such as young people's search for authenticity in religious faith within the context of the cultural wars at the start of the 20th century, the social background of the priesthood at the turn of the 20th century, the transformations in motivation which accompanied the decision to go into the priesthood, and the development of the seminary formation of priests. The book also takes into account other central issues connected to changes in priestly identity from the end of the 19th century, such as the relationship to the modern-age crisis of identity and the desire for ecclesiastical reforms, the controversies linked to priests' political involvement, and the changing relationship between priests and lay believers. The author pays particular attention to the various ways of understanding the priesthood and the processes by which the priest tried to orientate himself in society and the church, where a significant role was played by the priest's imagination – i.e. priestly role models and images – ideals, evangelizing programmes, traditional or official spiritual content in conflict with new forms of spirituality or with the changing realities of everyday pastoral work.

The changing identity of priests in the modern age is a relevant theme in historical science and at the same time is the turbulent story of a social profession which still undoubtedly enjoyed social prestige during the mid-19th century, but which with the passing of time became a target of criticism as a symbol of backwardness and reaction for some, while for others it was a symbol of eternal order, legitimate authority, authentic service, or even martyrdom. Throughout the 20th century the priestly vocation remained to be a provocative sign, whose representatives continued to symbolize the phenomena, which proved to be unexpectedly vigorous in the conflict with the modern age, for example, the experience of the encounter with transcendental reality. Therefore, even in the 20th century, priestly identity continued to contain its sacral, spiritual and even overtly mystical content, without which it would be impossible to even imagine. As is suggested by the title, it is this which the author focuses on much more thoroughly than other Czech works have done previously on transformations to the modern identity of the priest.