

Bernhard Hanssler on Catholicism and Democracy (Retrospective account, 1990)

Abstract

Bernhard Hanssler (1907–2005) became a Catholic prelate and spiritual director for the Rottenburg-Stuttgart Diocese after the Second World War, as well as the founder of the Cusanuswerk, a financial and intellectual support service for gifted Catholic students. Born in 1907 on a farm in southern Württemberg, near Konstanz, he experienced the Weimar Republic as a student and a devout Catholic, entering the priesthood in March 1932, just a year before Hitler became Chancellor.

In this passage, Hanssler looks back on the relationship between the Catholic Church and democratic participation in the new republic, and he spoke of a sort of “Catholic emancipation” in the 1920s, as many Catholic politicians and civil servants assumed leadership roles that would have been unthinkable prior to the war. Hanssler concluded, though, by recalling the mocking tone that his school director adopted toward the republic, which included an exaggerated satirizing of purportedly new republican terminology and forms of address.

Source

[...]

Then came the years when horizons broadened and young people began to take an interest in public affairs. The public debate about democratic loyalty began early on. Catholicism had found an approving attitude towards the new form of government earlier and more broadly than Protestantism, which in many states had lost the head of the church with the respective monarch.

But there was also a long theological dispute in the Catholic discourse. “All power emanates from the people,” the most profane of all political sentences, seemed to many to be pure blasphemy, for the fact that all power emanates from God could not be disputed as long as omnipotence was still to be regarded as the supreme predicate of God, so to speak. Because God must necessarily be thought of as omnipotent, all political and other power can only ever be understood as derived power.

Nevertheless, the unproductive doctrinal dispute soon faded into the background as the seriousness of everyday political life asserted itself. Catholicism as a whole soon came to terms with the Republic, especially as the “People’s Association for Catholic Germany” [Volksverein für das katholische Deutschland] educated Catholics about the Weimar Republic through a broad-based popular education program. In any case, the republic had brought with it a kind of emancipation of Catholics. Catholics had been virtually unthinkable in leading political positions and in the upper ranks of the army in the German Empire. It was only when the empire was in its last convulsions that they were appointed, Count Hertling, for example, as the last chancellor before Prince Max von Baden. In the young republic, however, thanks to the party constellation, there soon were quite a number of Catholic chancellors and ministers.

When the state finally got back on its feet to some extent, i.e. after the currency reform and after the first international agreements that attempted to correct the political madness of the Versailles Treaty (“the blasphemy of Versailles,” wrote Theodor Haekker as early as 1921), we young grammar school students were cheerful and enthusiastic democrats.

However, one should not be mistaken about the thoroughly inadequate roots of democracy. At my

grammar school in Ehingen on the Danube, where I was a student from 1923 to 1927, reactionary sentiment prevailed – in the person of the principal, who was a classical philologist and Catholic clergyman, in accordance with the regulations for the two boarding schools in the state. People there more or less openly wore black, white and red; the colors of the republic were ridiculed (“black, red and mustard”) and German was spoken to the point of ridiculousness [i.e., avoiding words with Latinate roots, transl.]. “Herr Amtsgenosse,” said the principal to the teacher upon entering a classroom, *zeitliche Festlegungen* (appointments, no longer called “*Termine*”) were determined using the “*Zeitweiser*” (not the *Kalender*).

[...]

Source of original German text: Bernhard Hanssler, „Es war eine große Zeit für die Kirche: Die Revolution fand im Reiche des Geistes statt“, in *Alltag in der Weimarer Republik: Erinnerungen an eine unruhige Zeit*, hrsg. von Rudolf Pörtner. Düsseldorf: ECON Verlag, 1990, pp. 222–24.

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