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The Harrisburg 7 and the New Catholic Left

William O'Rourke

Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012

(40th Anniversary Edition)

344 pages, \$27.00

Reviewed by James T. Carroll, Iona College, New York

The anniversary edition of William O'Rourke's *The Harrisburg 7 and the New Catholic Left* reignited a sense of nostalgia for the energy and purpose of leftist Catholics who protested the war in Vietnam and revolutionized a small niche of the institutional Church. The "gospel of action and protest" promoted by the Berrigan brothers carried priests and Catholic sisters onto the front pages of newspapers as they protested not only the war, but also myriad other social issues, including women's rights, gay rights, civil rights, and others. The Harrisburg Seven and the Cantonsville Nine alerted both civil and ecclesiastical officials that public action had replaced passivity; priests and sisters sublimated silence for vocal opinions, and the call of the gospel trumped filial obedience. These changes emerged very quickly, raising alarms in many parts of society and the Church.

William O'Rourke, an eyewitness to events in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania in 1972, provides a detailed and compelling analysis of the trial of seven protesters who were charged with "conspiring to raid federal offices, to bomb government property, and to kidnap the presidential advisor Henry Kissinger" (p. xiii). The narrative is logically structured—pretrial motions, jury selection, the role of Boyd Douglas, and the verdict. It is clear that O'Rourke remains true to his credentials as a journalist by reporting minute details of the trial with clear and keen analysis of what was unfolding. He is particularly insightful in reporting jury selection and scrutinizing the challenges for both the defense and prosecution—there were not many precedents of nuns and priests being put on trial in 1972. The demographics of Harrisburg, the inclusion of expert witnesses, attitudes—both positive and negative—toward the institutional Church, and public perceptions about the Vietnam War complicated jury selection and played a significant role in the trial and verdict. In fact, on the more serious counts of the indictments, the jury was deadlocked.

This account of the trial benefits from the "insider status" O'Rourke en-

joyed in Harrisburg in 1972. He listened and took stenographic notes of the trial during the day and debated events with the defense committee—which was coordinating the legal defense of the seven defendants—late into the night. He was raised a Roman Catholic, educated by the Society of Jesus, and rejected blind obedience to civil and religious leaders. These *bona fides* placed him safely in the midst of leaders of the Catholic New Left who were assembled in Harrisburg.

O'Rourke pays a good deal of attention to Boyd Douglas, the informant, turncoat, enigmatic figure, and double agent who testified at the trial based on his prison relationship with Philip Berrigan. The intrigue and subterfuge of Douglas's roles as prison informant, courier, penitent, faithful Catholic, and true American are made life-like to readers thanks to O'Rourke's skillful prose and journalistic style. Moreover, the presence of Douglas allows O'Rourke to introduce J. Edgar Hoover into events in Harrisburg. The trial of the Seven added to Hoover's abundant list of paranoias that followed him to the grave on May 2, 1972, the very moment that a post-trial hearing on discriminatory prosecution was underway in Harrisburg—a fitting epilogue to Hoover's life.

The main question raised by the anniversary edition of *The Harrisburg 7 and the New Catholic Left* is where is the “Catholic Left” in the 21st century? The dynamism and passion of the movement in the 1960s and 1970s was snuffed out by a right-leaning Catholic hierarchy, diminished by the so-called “Vietnam Syndrome,” which numbed Americans into a collective amnesia about the war, and stymied by growing passivity among Catholics—priests, religious, and lay people. The “Catholic Left” was largely ineffectual—or worse, silent—during the clergy abuse crisis that has pummeled the church over the last decade. The Church of the 21st century needs the prophetic energy of the “left” to be faithful to its founding mission.

The Harrisburg 7 and the New Catholic Left is carefully researched and written in a journalistic tone. This narrative is still relevant after 40 years for those interested in the Catholicism, Vietnam, social justice, and liberal movements. O'Rourke provides an important lens for the transitions taking place in the church and society in the 1960s and 1970s by providing a glimpse at events and developments during a three-month trial in 1972 in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. The University of Notre Dame Press is commended for publishing this anniversary edition to remind us of the important role of the “left” in American Catholicism.

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