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HECKER, ISAAC THOMAS

Isaac Hecker (1819–1888) was the founder of the Missionary Society of St. Paul the Apostle, more commonly known as the Paulist Fathers, the first community of Catholic priests formed in the United States. Hecker believed that he and the Paulists were called to evangelize the United States, which, from his nineteenth-century Catholic perspective, meant converting Protestants to Roman Catholicism. He attempted to present the Catholic faith to his fellow Americans in a way that met the particular needs of his context and culture.

Early Background and Education

Hecker was born to German immigrant parents in New York City. His mother Caroline was an active member of the Forsythe Street Methodist Church, and it was here that Hecker had his early encounters with Christianity. In his adolescence, he began a circuitous spiritual quest, leaving traditional Christianity behind and entering the circles of the New England transcendentalists. By the mid-1840s, he had returned to Christianity, and decided that the Roman Catholicism was the one true church. He joined the Redemptorists in 1845 in order to pursue a vocation as a missionary priest, and underwent five and a half years of training and education in Europe.

Significant Contributions to Christianity in the United States

Upon his return to the United States, he was assigned to a band of missionaries, all being converts to Catholicism. This cell of United States-born Catholic converts eventually decided that they would like to form a community of English-speaking Redemptorist priests, going against contemporary Redemptorist practice of only allowing German-speaking houses in the United States. Hecker travelled to

Rome in 1857 to present this suggestion to Redemptorist General Nicholas Mauron, only to be dismissed from the Redemptorist Order for insubordination. After a seven month stay in Rome, Hecker was able to secure permission from Pope Pius IX to form the Paulist Fathers, under the direction of a diocesan bishop. The Paulists were therefore founded in the diocese of New York, in 1858, with the intention of devoting themselves to missionary activity aimed at converting US non-Catholics. They conducted parish missions, held special lecture series, and engaged heavily in print publications, most notably their periodical, *The Catholic World*. It is a testament to Hecker's influence in American Catholicism that he was part of the entourage that travelled with the American bishops to Rome for Vatican I. By the mid-1870s Hecker was turning his attention to Europe, believing that the United States, and specifically US Catholics, had a providential mission in world history, and could offer solutions to the problems of church/state relations which were plaguing European Catholicism. Thus Hecker believed that his Paulists ought to begin expanding into Europe, though his dream was never realized.

These later views touch on Hecker's connection to the "Americanism" controversy which erupted after his death. Some progressive European Catholics raised up Hecker as a hero for their agenda, making use of a loose French translation of Hecker's biography, originally written by Paulist Walter Elliott. Conservative Catholics repudiated the book, and Hecker, as unorthodox. The controversy eventually resulted in the publication of Leo XIII's 1899 Apostolic Letter *Testem Benevolentiae*, which sought to distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable forms of "Americanism." The letter did not condemn Hecker or the Paulists, but because of Americanism's association with Hecker, both he and the Paulists were suspected of holding heterodox views. In the mid-twentieth century, sympathetic scholars began to argue that the views condemned in *Testem Benevolentiae* were not found in the writings of Hecker or the other Paulists. After Vatican II, Hecker's life and thought were rediscovered and reevaluated by a fresh wave of scholars, including John Farina, William Portier, and David O'Brien. Hecker's views were controversial, but he deserves attention as an important figure in nineteenth-century American Catholicism, and an important part of the liberal Catholic tradition in the United States.

Notable Publications

Hecker's journey to Catholicism was chronicled in his personal diary, which has been published as *Isaac T. Hecker, The Diary: Romantic Religion in Ante-Bellum America*, ed. John Farina (New York: Paulist Press, 1988). He wrote two significant apologetic books while he was still a Redemptorist: *Questions of the Soul* (New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1855) and *Aspirations of Nature* (New York: The Catholic Publication House, 1857). Hecker's mature views on the place of the United States in providential history can be found in *The Church and the Age: An Exposition of the Catholic Church in View of the Needs and Aspirations of the Present Age* (New York: Office of the Catholic World, 1887).

References and Resources

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—JAMES E. PEDLAR