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A Catholic conscience against the war

Tom Roberts | Mar. 10, 2008

A STUPID, UNJUST AND CRIMINAL WAR: 2001-2007
By Andrew Greeley Orbis Books, 215 pages, $19

Fr. Andrew Greeley?s place in history is secure as the priest sociologist whose groundbreaking work brought to the surface truths about the Catholic community that many would have preferred to remain hidden. Against that note of biography, then, it wouldn?t be surprising if his latest book, A Stupid, Unjust and Criminal War: 2001-2007, a collection of his newspaper columns opposing the Iraq war, received limited notice. Fr. Greeley, after all, is not on the circuit these days as a political or foreign policy expert.

He ought to be. In his role as columnist for the Chicago Sun-Times, Greeley stands out as that rare, high-profile Catholic voice in the culture who uses the rich traditions of Catholic social justice teaching and the just-war tradition to call the U.S. action in Iraq into question. It is significant that he is no new convert to that position, persuaded because of the failure of the war effort. He was against the war and writing in opposition to it from the very start.

Save for a statement here and there and the occasional mention in the recent bishops? release on responsible citizenship, the U.S. hierarchy has been sadly quiet about the war, the suspension of habeas corpus for terror suspects, the advocacy of torture by the administration, and about the steady growth of militarism throughout the culture.

One need not agree with all of Fr. Greeley?s quirks to appreciate the depth of this Catholic Christian thinker who is not afraid to confront some of the unsettling realities of U.S. history, both remote and immediate. He is not afraid to push against the tide of what he calls ?pseudo-patriotism,? the uncritical and unquestioning acceptance, in this case, of whatever the nebulous ?war on terror? requires.

No pacifist, Fr. Greeley nonetheless understands that even in what might be necessary wars, virtue is ultimately sacrificed on the battlefield. ?War sucks everyone and everything into its vortex of wickedness. The wars against Japan and Germany were obviously necessary wars, and yet the victors ? emerged with bloody hands.?

He is regularly condemnatory of the Bush administration and its conduct of the ?unjust? war in Iraq and just as dismissive at times of the Democratic Party and its candidates, whom he labels ?losers? and accuses of ?cowardice.?

When so many of the U.S. Catholic voices recognized in today?s public square have become enthusiastic apologists for our national ambitions, Fr. Greeley is a welcome sign that the strong condemnations by two popes of the war in Iraq as well as the consistent teaching that war should be pursued only as a last resort and never as a preemptive option have found some space in the public discussion.

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