William L. Portier

Divided Friends: Portraits of the Roman Catholic Modernist Crisis in the United States. Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 2013. Pp. xxiii + 403. \$39.95.

William L. Portier is the 2015 winner of the American Catholic Historical Association's Distinguished Scholar Award. My reading of *Divided Friends* leaves me heartily applauding the ACHA's choice. What follows will be an appreciation of this book, rather than a review. Focused on the biographies of four American clergymen during the modernist crisis—John Slattery, Dennis O'Connell, Joseph McSorley, and William Sullivan—this impeccably researched and well-written narrative offers a more deeply personal understanding of the crisis than one finds in the usual historical treatments.

In his last chapter, "Finding a Place to Stand," Portier refers to his narrative as a story of four tragic figures (362). The volume brought me back to my own experience of following the modernist George Tyrrell's life and writings, from birth to conversion, to Jesuit priesthood, to distinguished author, to expulsion from the Society, and finally to burial outside the Catholic Church. Unlike Portier's divided friends, however, Tyrrell's closest friends remained united with him, which led me to ponder the reasons for such different outcomes.

If I had to identify a single element that linked Tyrrell and his two most devoted friends, Friedrich von Hügel and Maude Petre, and that kept them both faithful to one another and within the Church, it would be their common commitment to what von Hügel wrote about in his *The Mystical Element of Religion* (1908). I find this same element in Joseph McSorley, though not in the other three friends. Those who are alive to the mystical element of religion know its reality as fundamental, and prior to the effort to explain it, theologize about it, or describe its doctrinal implications or conclusions. All this is just a prolix restatement of how the early church's faith emerged, namely, via *lex orandi, lex credendi*—the mystical apprehension of divine realities, as the basis and guide for shared, communal after-reflection on religious experience.

For von Hügel, two failures are at the heart of many disagreements about formulations of what the church believes concerning its mystical apprehension of divine mysteries. First, the failure properly to balance von Hügel's three elements of religion: the historical/institutional, the scientific/intellectual, and the mystical/experiential. Second (and the one most often cited by the Modernists), the failure adequately to enter into the mystical element, which precludes any possibility of balancing the three elements. This strikes me as Portier's basic, underlying thematic. His narrative circles around the mystical element of religion, essential for counterbalancing the historical/institutional and scientific/intellectual elements.

Portier comments, “[Alfred] Loisy’s mentor, church historian Louis Duchesne [...] rather than Loisy, is the key figure” of Modernism (134–35). On what basis does this assertion rest? On that of history, which, linked with the institutional element, is one of von Hügel’s three components of religion. The historical element prevents the institutional element (i.e., church structures) from absolutizing itself; more broadly, von Hügel’s three elements *together* counteract the tendency to absolutize structures, and their concomitant authority.

This prompts a consideration of historical criticism as a salient factor in destabilizing the faith of Loisy and of Portier’s four friends, especially John Slattery. Had they—smart fellows though they were—naively equated faith and belief? Some Modernists (e.g., Albert Houtin and William Sullivan) charged that church authorities, for the sake of power, intentionally duped gullible believers, disparaging historical criticism and insisting on literal interpretation of Scripture, and thereby throwing up obstacles to intelligent faith.

On p. 167, Portier quotes Slattery’s immediate reaction to Pope Leo XIII’s encyclical *Testem benevolentiae*, which condemned Americanism: “Propria mole cadet” (it will fall of its own weight). In Slattery’s view, the bark of Rome could not be made seaworthy, and so he would have to jump ship. In a Congregationalist journal, he published “How My Priesthood Dropped from Me”—suggesting that, as the Church would collapse under the weight of its own fraud, why remain a priest? It is the mystical element of religion, to which Slattery was not attuned, that enables the belief that, despite the Church’s sinfulness, the Holy Spirit remains alive and active in bringing the Church to become what it is called to be—the sacrament of God to the world.

A principal target of Pius X’s 1907 condemnation of Modernism was the doctrine of “vital immanence,” allegedly adopted by the Modernists from liberal Protestantism, and precipitating their failure to honor the transcendence of God’s action in the world. Portier’s study refers to this matter *passim*, but the instance that most caught my eye was his citation of Gabriel Daly’s characterization of Tyrrell’s *Oil and Wine* (1902) as the most “immanentist” of all his works (240). Indeed, Tyrrell could not get the book past his censors, but published it privately. For the censors, the book’s major fault was promoting what Isaac Hecker was accused of fostering, namely, a direct relationship with the Holy Spirit that escapes the scrutiny of church authorities. This idea, or something close to it, implicated numerous suspected Modernists and readers of Tyrrell’s works. This was the *élan* of Modernism or, as I would put it, the mystical element of religion that weds the mystery of the human person to the mystery of God—a marriage that, church history shows, can go awry (see Ronald Knox, *Enthusiasm* [1950]).

Finally, a comment on Portier's closing chapter. The Modernist Crisis, he asserts, "drove Slattery and Sullivan out of the church that they once loved and ended their dreams of reconciling it with the age" (362). In my view, what drove them out of the Church was rather the magisterium's fear of what it did not understand in the currents in the Church, which prompted it to define and then condemn "Modernism." This forced many so-called Modernists into untenable situations, which their consciences told them to resolve either by retiring from academic positions or by leaving the Church altogether. A little farther on, Portier adds: "Newman [...] kept McSorley from the positivism we find in Slattery, Sullivan, and Houtin" (366). Begging Portier's indulgence, I must gloss this assertion: it was not Newman *as such* that kept McSorley in the Church. Rather, it was a reality Portier attended to on the previous page: McSorley "was a historian who prayed"—bringing us back to the mystical element of religion. Without it, the scientific/intellectual element can easily lead to a dogmatic historicism that diminishes religion's mystical element and so erodes one's faith. This is the important, tragic story Portier so poignantly tells.

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