

Fall 2016

Intellectualism and American Parish Priests: A Study of the Library of Monsignor Bernard J. Beckmeyer

Stephanie Soule

University of Dayton, sshreffler1@udayton.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://ecommons.udayton.edu/roesch_fac



Part of the [Catholic Studies Commons](#)

eCommons Citation

Stephanie Soule (2016). Intellectualism and American Parish Priests: A Study of the Library of Monsignor Bernard J. Beckmeyer. *American Catholic Studies.*, 35-56
https://ecommons.udayton.edu/roesch_fac/46

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Roesch Library at eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Roesch Library Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of eCommons. For more information, please contact frice1@udayton.edu, mschlangen1@udayton.edu.

Intellectualism and American Parish Priests: A Study of the Library of Monsignor Bernard J. Beckmeyer

Stephanie L. Soule

The 1955 publication of John Tracy Ellis's article, "American Catholics and the Intellectual Life," sparked new discussion among historians about the role of intellectualism in the lives of American Catholics. This article examines the intellectual habits of American parish priests in the early and mid-twentieth century by studying the working library of Monsignor Bernard J. Beckmeyer of Dayton, Ohio. The contents of his library support Ellis's assertion that parish priests usually concentrated on the administration of their parishes, and not on scholarship and intellectualism. This focus was likely due to several factors, including the lackluster quality of seminary education of the time, which promoted Neo-Scholastic philosophy to the exclusion of new intellectual ideas; the very real demands of administering a parish; and the lack of continuing education opportunities for priests prior to the Second Vatican Council.

Since the 1955 publication of John Tracy Ellis's landmark article, "American Catholics and the Intellectual Life," historians have disputed the nature of American Catholic intellectualism. Ellis argued that American Catholics had little appreciation of the intellectual life, and had achieved little in the intellectual realm. His article sparked much conversation about the role of scholarship in the lives of American Catholics, which will be reviewed later in this essay.

What can the working library of a mid-twentieth century parish priest reveal about this issue? The Bernard J. Beckmeyer Special Collection at the University of Dayton contains the library of Bernard J. Beckmeyer, the pastor of St. Mary Church in Dayton, Ohio from 1917 to 1967. The contents of his library offer intriguing clues about the reading habits and intellectual interests of a typical parish priest in the twentieth century. Significantly, the collection offers support for the contention, made by Ellis and others, that priests frequently had little time or inclination for scholarship, and instead chose to focus on the practical necessities of administering their parishes.¹ The conclusions

Stephanie L. Soule is an Assistant Professor at the University Libraries of the University of Dayton in Dayton, Ohio. She is the Collections Librarian and Archivist for the U.S. Catholic Special Collection. For further comment on this article please contact the author: ssoule1@udayton.edu.

1. See, for example, John Tracy Ellis, *American Catholics and the Intellectual Life* (Chicago: The Heritage Foundation, 1956), 34-35; Michael V. Gannon, "Before and After

AMERICAN CATHOLIC STUDIES Vol. 127, No. 3 (2016): 35-56

that can be drawn from this study are necessarily limited, as his library alone cannot give the full picture of Beckmeyer's intellectualism. This examination can, however, provide a starting point for understanding how Beckmeyer's education and the pressures of his administrative duties may have affected his ability to indulge his aptitude for intellectualism.

The problem of defining intellectualism is a difficult one. Perhaps one of the most precise definitions of the intellect comes from Richard Hofstadter in his book, *Anti-intellectualism in American Life*. Hofstadter compared popular understandings of "intellect" with "intelligence," finding that intelligence "is an excellence of mind that is employed within a fairly narrow, immediate, and predictable range," and that it "works within the framework of limited but clearly stated goals." In comparison, Hofstadter defined the intellect as "the critical, creative, and contemplative side of the mind," which "examines, ponders, wonders, theorizes, criticizes, imagines."² With these definitions in mind, then, *intelligence* may be said to focus more predominately on solving practical matters to achieve a particular "goal." *Intellectualism*, as the use and application of the intellect, is a frame of mind which supports knowledge and learning for its own sake. One possible way for a diocesan priest to demonstrate great intelligence would be in the successful administration of his parish, improving its ability to promote the worship of God and to care for its members and the surrounding community. A diocesan priest who showed an inclination for intellectualism, on the other hand, may have revealed this trait through the books and journals he read, the conversations he held with others, and the sermons he preached. Did he keep his library up-to-date, and did he attempt to keep up with the latest periodicals, or did he allow his reading to stagnate? Did he preach thoughtful sermons which showed a depth of knowledge of theology and philosophy, and which discussed new ideas in these areas, or did he tend to stick to familiar themes, both in sermons and conversation?

The existing literature on the libraries of individual parish priests is slim, while reviews of seminary libraries are much more common. Kathleen M. Comerford studied the library at the Seminary of Fiesole from 1646 to 1721, concluding that the library provided evidence that

Modernism: The Intellectual Isolation of the American Priest", in *The Catholic Priest in the United States: Historical Investigations*, ed. John Tracy Ellis (Collegeville, MN: Saint John's University Press, 1971), 356; Leslie Woodcock Tentler, "God's Representative in Our Midst': Toward a History of the Catholic Diocesan Clergy in the United States," *Church History* 67 (June 1998): 338.

2. Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970), 25.

seminary education in the early modern era focused on practical matters.³ Similarly, Sheza Moledina examined the evolution of the library of the Jesuit Seminary in Jersey, England, from 1880 to 1945, in particular concentrating on the work of librarian Pedro Descogs, who led a great effort to catalog and properly store the library's 70,000 volumes.⁴ Audrey M. Cairns and Peter H. Reid studied a Scottish seminary library, finding that although the college library had an impressive collection, junior seminarians tended to use their own working library, which had titles better suited to their needs.⁵ Turning to the United States, Michael T. Krieger reviewed the history of the libraries of the seminaries of the Franciscan Province of St. John the Baptist from their creation in the 1800s to the late twentieth century.⁶ In contrast to these articles, a search was unable to find any studies of the libraries of individual diocesan priests, such as Beckmeyer. It is likely that few of these priests' libraries have been maintained as one collection after their owners' deaths. Priests were often advised to donate their libraries to seminaries, colleges, and their own parishes after their death, splitting up their collections and making comprehensive studies of the collections difficult, if not impossible.⁷ This article thus sheds new light on the reading and intellectual habits of parish priests in the twentieth century.

Bernard J. Beckmeyer

Bernard J. Beckmeyer was born to German parents, Joseph and Bernardina (Kroger) Beckmeyer, on May 27, 1877, in Cincinnati, Ohio. He was the fifth of seven children, and he was baptized on May 28, 1877, at St. Boniface Parish. Bernard attended St. Francis of Assisi Elementary School in Cincinnati, and decided at the age of eight to enter the priesthood, like his older brother, Clement.⁸ He began his junior seminary studies at St. Francis College in Cincinnati in 1890, and finished this college course in 1895. Due to poor health, he attended

3. Kathleen M. Comerford, "What Did Early Modern Priests Read? The Library of the Seminary of Fiesole, 1646-1721," *Libraries & Culture* 34 (Summer 1999): 203-221.

4. Sheza Moledina, "Books in Exile: The Case of the Jesuit Seminary Library in Jersey, 1880-1945," *Library & Information History* 26 (June 2010): 105-120.

5. Audrey M. Cairns and Peter H. Reid, "The Historical Development of the Library of St Mary's College, Blairs, Aberdeen, 1829-1986," *Library & Information History* 25 (December 2009): 247-264.

6. Michael T. Krieger, "The Seminary Libraries of the Franciscan Province of St. John the Baptist," *Libraries & Culture* 30 (Summer 1995): 284-308.

7. William Stang, *Pastoral Theology* (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1897), 289.

8. "May We Present: Monsignor Beckmeyer, Close to the Heart of St. Mary Parish," *Dayton Daily News*, August 6, 1944.

St. Meinrad Seminary in Indiana for one year of philosophy courses. He then transferred to Mount St. Mary of the West Seminary in Cincinnati, and was ordained a priest by Archbishop William Henry Elder on June 21, 1900. For the first few years of his priesthood, he served short terms at multiple parishes across southwestern Ohio.⁹

Beckmeyer organized a new parish, Saints Peter and Paul in Norwood, Ohio, in October 1906. He remained there until 1917, when he became pastor of St. Mary Church in Dayton, Ohio.¹⁰ Beckmeyer pastored St. Mary for the next fifty years, becoming a monsignor in 1944. After his retirement at age ninety in 1967, he served as pastor emeritus. He died on July 5, 1969, and is buried, along with many of his family members, in Saint Joseph New Cemetery in Cincinnati.

Scattered evidence hints at Beckmeyer's complex personality. Contemporary newspapers frequently commented on Beckmeyer's administrative skills, praising the great physical improvements he made to St. Mary. This drive to improve the parish may have caused him to present himself unfavorably at times. Some people have recalled him as a gruff, stern man, who denigrated parishioners who put only nickels and pennies into the collection basket.¹¹ Yet Beckmeyer appears to have had a gentler side, as well. He began an annual tradition of decorating St. Mary at Christmas with an elaborate nativity scene, which at its peak included thousands of figurines and covered the entire right front side of the church. This fondness for nativity scenes hints at the joy he must have felt during the Christmas season, and his desire to share this joy with others. Additionally, upon the sixty-fifth anniversary of his ordination, Beckmeyer commented, "When you're a priest 65 years, you see a whole lot of things . . . It's a pleasure in a way, and a grief many a time. With people you feel their sorrow. There's many a happy occasion, like baptisms, weddings. When a mother dies, with three or four little children – it's hard you know. I was called to many accidents."¹² Beckmeyer clearly was not an unfeeling man, even if he did not always reveal these sentiments to his parishioners.

Over the course of his lifetime, Beckmeyer acquired a large collection of books, most of which covered religious and moral topics. This working library remained at St. Mary after his death until its donation to the University of Dayton in 2001. Today, the Bernard J.

9. Bernard Beckmeyer, *History of St. Mary Church, Dayton, Ohio*, vol. 1, 1859-1944 (Dayton, OH: 1944), 17.

10. *Ibid.*, 18.

11. Jim DeBrosse, "Parish Celebrates 150 Years: St. Mary Still a Beacon for East Dayton Faithful," *Dayton Daily News*, August 12, 2009.

12. Kay Black, "65 Years As Priest: Msgr. Beckmeyer Recalls Career," *Dayton Daily News*, June 19, 1965.

Beckmeyer Special Collection resides in the U.S. Catholic Special Collection of the University Libraries. The U.S. Catholic Special Collection holds books and archival materials which document the American Catholic experience. It has over 32,000 books, from the early nineteenth century to the present, and its archival collections include examples of devotional materials such as prayer cards, the records of religious congregations, and the papers of Catholic activists.



Monsignor Beckmeyer with his library in 1944.

Courtesy of Special Collections and Archives, Wright State University.

The Bernard J. Beckmeyer Special Collection

The Bernard J. Beckmeyer Special Collection consists of 236 books collected by Beckmeyer and his associates from the late nineteenth century to the 1960s. The majority of the books were purchased by Beckmeyer himself, but some books originally belonged to others. For example, nine books were owned by Reverend A. M. Quatman, under whom Beckmeyer served at Holy Angels Church in Sidney, Ohio, and were likely given to Beckmeyer after Quatman's death.

Other books in the Beckmeyer Collection seem to have been added to it during the thirty-two years between Beckmeyer's death and the collection's donation to the University of Dayton, and thus were never owned by Beckmeyer himself. In particular, nine books have the name "Thomas Gavin" or "T. M. Gavin" inscribed in them, indicating that they were owned by Thomas M. Gavin, who was pastor of St. Mary from September 1984 to June 1990.

The remainder of the books may be assumed to have belonged to Beckmeyer. His library can be divided into eleven topics: moral theology, pastoral theology, dogmatic theology, canon law, homiletics, church history (including biographies of saints), manuals of liturgy and rites, ascetical theology and devotional texts, Bibles and Bible studies, catechisms and catechetical studies, and miscellaneous books. The miscellaneous category includes books on business and finance, travelogues, poetry, psalters, and various dictionaries and encyclopedias.

Book Category	Number of Books	Date Range of Books
Moral Theology	4	1865-1908
Pastoral Theology	6	1845-1902
Dogmatic Theology	6	1861-1896
Canon Law	2	1864-1890
Homiletics	17	1859-1922
Church History	13	1874-1938
Manuals of Liturgy and Rites	22	1883-1964
Ascetical Theology and Devotional Texts	22	1863-1967
Bibles and Bible Studies	12	1870-1965
Catechisms and Catechetical Studies	10	1829?-1904
Miscellaneous	30	1837-1969
Total	144	

Table 1: The categories of books in Beckmeyer's library, compared with their dates of publication. Note that multi-volume sets are counted just once, hence the lower total number of books. The chart does include those books which were likely added to Beckmeyer's library after his death.

Several features of Beckmeyer's library stand out. First, the library provides a small glimpse of what late nineteenth century seminary students read and studied. Three of the books have inscriptions indicating that they were used by Bernard and his brother during their seminary studies.¹³ Two other books – Innocentius Wapelhorst's *Compendium Sacrae Liturgicae* (1889) and Heinrich Brueck's *History of the Catholic Church: For Use in Seminaries and Colleges* (1899) – have dated inscriptions from Beckmeyer's time at seminary. They were also included in the course catalogue at Mount St. Mary's in the first

13. The books include: Sacred Congregation of Rites, *Officium Majoris Hebdomadae a Dominica in Palmis usque ad Sabbatum in Albis. . . .* (Ratisbon, New York and Cincinnati: Friederich Pustet, 1896); Father X. Haberl, *Psalterium Vespertinum. Volksausgabe*. 2nd ed. (Regensberg, New York, and Cincinnati: Friedrich Pustet, 1892); John MacEvilly, *An Exposition of the Epistles of St. Paul and of the Catholic Epistles*. 2 vols., 6th ed. (New York, Cincinnati and Chicago: Benziger Brothers, 1895).

decade of the twentieth century, an indication that Beckmeyer may have used them in his studies.¹⁴

Second, a review of the subjects of Beckmeyer's books provides a clear picture of the types of materials most useful to a parish priest. The three largest categories of books are liturgy manuals, with twenty-two books; ascetical theology and devotional texts, also with twenty-two books; and homiletics, with seventeen books. The utility of books on these topics for a parish priest quickly becomes apparent when considered in light of some of a priest's most common tasks: saying Mass, writing homilies, and spending time in prayer and devotions, while encouraging his parishioners to do the same. Beckmeyer's large collection of devotional texts also reflects the popularity of these books among Catholics in general in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The rise of parish missions in the mid-nineteenth century considerably increased the popularity of devotions among American Catholics. The priests who led the missions encouraged the practice of devotions in order to maintain the religious fervor of the newly converted and reverted. For American Catholics in particular, devotional practices represented a concrete way to separate themselves from the Protestant majority of the United States. Devotions allowed them to maintain, and even emphasize, elements of the Catholic faith which Protestants rejected, such as veneration of the Blessed Virgin Mary and other saints.¹⁵ Attempts to standardize devotional practices across the United States also stemmed from the bishops' "desire to elevate Rome as the center of Catholicism and the pope as arbiter of that which was truly Catholic," an ultramontane impulse which was especially relevant in the pluralistic United States.¹⁶ This cause was aided by the increased publication of devotional books, which helped promote standardization of devotions and ensured that Catholics practiced only those devotions approved by their ordinaries.

Another important aspect of Beckmeyer's library is the inclusion of several books on administrative and financial matters (included in the miscellaneous category in Table 1). Although only four in number, these books serve as a reminder of the practical work required of a parish priest, both in the past and today.¹⁷ At St. Mary's peak, Beckmeyer held

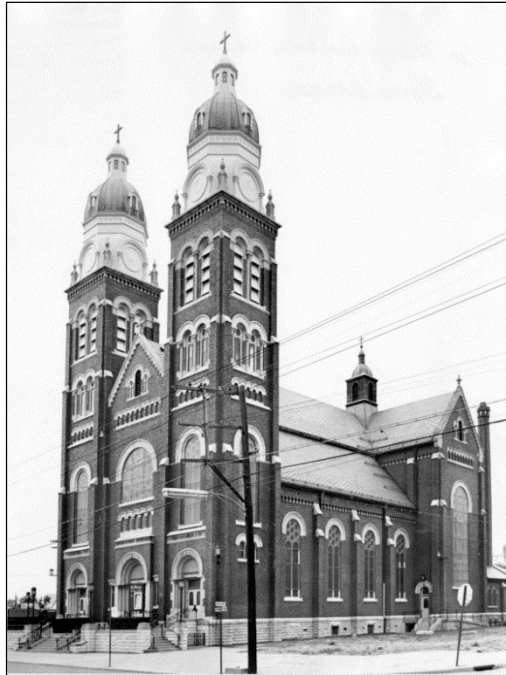
14. M. Edmund Hussey, *A History of the Seminaries of the Archdiocese of Cincinnati, 1829-1979* (Norwood, OH: Mt. St. Mary's Seminary of the West, 1979), 35.

15. Ann Taves, *The Household of Faith: Roman Catholic Devotions in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986), 127-128.

16. *Ibid.*, 118.

17. The four books are: Roger W. Babson, *Business Barometers used in the Management of Business and Investment of Money* (Babson Park, MA: Babson's Reports, 1935); Henry M. Robert, *Pocket Manual of Rules of Order for Deliberative*

administrative responsibility for a parish of over 900 families. These books provided him with the knowledge necessary for leading the parish, and thus make up a small but crucial part of his library.



St. Mary's Church, Dayton, Ohio. The neighborhood around St. Mary's became known as the Twin Towers neighborhood due to the church's two impressive clock towers.
Courtesy of Special Collections and Archives, Wright State University.

Beckmeyer's library also demonstrates his trilingualism. He owned books written in English, Latin, and German. Indeed, Beckmeyer actually owned fifty books written in German, and only twenty-three books written in Latin. This circumstance hints at the immense strength of the German section of the Catholic Church in the United States. The son of German immigrants, Beckmeyer likely learned to read, write, and speak German as a child. The southwestern Ohio region in which he grew up attracted many other German Catholic immigrants, allowing his family to maintain a strong sense of their German identity.¹⁸ Although the United States offered religious liberty to German Catholic immigrants, they faced difficult challenges. They

Assemblies (Chicago: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1901); G. C. Selden, *Psychology of the Stock Market* (New York: Ticker, 1912); and Richard D. Wycoff, *How I Trade and Invest in Stocks and Bonds* (New York: The Magazine of Wall Street, 1922).

18. Colman J. Barry, O.S.B., *The Catholic Church and German Americans* (Milwaukee, WI: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1953), 8.

entered a nation in which they did not speak the dominant language, and in which their religion was looked upon with suspicion and fear by the Protestant majority. German Catholics built their own national churches in the United States in the nineteenth century so that they could maintain their language and connection to their homeland in the midst of a bewildering new country. Prompted by the slogan, "Language Saves the Faith," clergy and lay societies alike promoted the German language as a crucial element of maintaining the immigrant's Catholic faith. German priests and bishops understood that German immigrants considered Catholic faith and German culture to be intertwined,¹⁹ and that therefore the integration of the English language into German parishes must proceed slowly.²⁰

German Catholics had a particularly strong influence on the Archdiocese of Cincinnati. German Catholics founded twelve new parishes in the city between 1835 and 1870, and Archbishop John Baptist Purcell responded to their growing numbers by allowing them a great deal of autonomy. German parishes were governed by the pastor plus a group of six elected trustees (also called wardens or counselors), who assisted in administering the church. This system was highly democratic, and there is no evidence that Purcell ever attempted to remove any trustees from their office, even though he possessed that right.²¹ These practices enabled German Catholics in Cincinnati to preserve their traditional religious practices, including their use of their mother tongue, to a high degree.

Beckmeyer's fluency in German would have aided him in his work as pastor of St. Mary, which was founded in 1859 to serve German people in the eastern neighborhoods of Dayton. Like Cincinnati, Dayton had a large population of German Catholics; in fact, three out of four of Dayton's first parishes – Emmanuel, St. Mary, and Holy Trinity – were founded as German national parishes. German Catholics continued to have a strong presence in Dayton for decades; indeed, at the dedication of St. Mary's current church building on November 18, 1906, sermons in both German and English were given.²²

19. Michael V. Gannon, "Before and After Modernism: The Intellectual Isolation of the American Priest", in *The Catholic Priest in the United States: Historical Investigations*, ed. John Tracy Ellis (Collegeville, MN: Saint John's University Press, 1971), 302-303.

20. Barry, *The Catholic Church and German Americans*, 11.

21. Roger Fortin, *Faith and Action: A History of the Archdiocese of Cincinnati, 1821-1996* (Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2002), 79.

22. Beckmeyer, *History of St. Mary Church*, vol. 1, 1860-1944, 12.

The Intellectualism of Catholic Parish Priests

On May 14, 1955, John Tracy Ellis gave a well-received lecture on American Catholic intellectualism at a meeting of the Catholic Commission on Intellectual and Cultural Affairs. He published this lecture as an article in the journal *Thought* later that fall.²³ The piece then sparked discussion vibrant enough to require 3,500 reprints in six months, was mentioned in *Newsweek*, and was discussed at numerous meetings on Catholic education.²⁴ The article caused such a sensation that the Heritage Foundation of Chicago published it as a book in 1956.²⁵ The article and book prompted immediate and lengthy discussion among scholars of American Catholicism.

Ellis contended that intellectualism among American Catholics was in a dismal state. Catholics had failed "to produce national leaders and to exercise commanding influence in intellectual circles."²⁶ Even in those fields in which Catholic universities ought to excel, such as theology and philosophy, they diluted their own success through a "mad pursuit of every passing fancy that crossed the American educational scene," while also "multiplying these units [Catholic universities] and spreading their budgets so thin . . . that the subjects in which they could, and should, make a unique contribution were sorely neglected."²⁷ Ellis attributed the neglect of intellectualism among American Catholics to five factors: widespread anti-Catholicism; the difficulties inherent in ministering to a largely immigrant church; the pragmatic, anti-intellectual spirit among Americans in general, which Catholics had largely adopted; the unimpressive example of the clergy; and the low standard of scholarship which prevailed at most Catholic universities.²⁸ Ellis focused predominantly on the intellectualism of Catholics in higher education in this essay, but he did devote some space to the scholarly habits of the clergy. He considered the majority of the clergy to have been "men of their own generation" who, like non-Catholics, placed greater importance on practical affairs than on scholarship. He particularly noted that American seminaries, as "training school[s] for a profession," did not inculcate a love of intellectualism. Although he conceded that this practical training was indeed important, he felt that

23. John Tracy Ellis, "American Catholics and the Intellectual Life," *Thought* 30 (Autumn 1955): 351-388.

24. Philip Gleason, "A Look Back at the Catholic Intellectualism Issue," *U.S. Catholic Historian* 13 (Winter 1995): 21.

25. Ellis, *American Catholics and the Intellectual Life* (Chicago: The Heritage Foundation, 1956).

26. *Ibid.*, 16.

27. *Ibid.*, 42.

28. *Ibid.*, 16, 18, 19-30, 33, 42.

the seminaries could nevertheless have encouraged greater interest in intellectual affairs than they had.²⁹

Ellis was not the first scholar to criticize the lack of intellectualism among American Catholics, but his arguments influenced future scholarship much more markedly than had earlier works.³⁰ Philip Gleason has identified three major phases of responses to Ellis's work. In the first phase, scholars contributed their own interpretations of the weakness of Catholic intellectualism, in agreement with Ellis's arguments. In the second phase, several reactions emerged. Andrew Greeley maintained that Catholics had overcome their anti-intellectualism, as Catholics intended to enter academic careers in similar proportions to non-Catholics. Other scholars dropped the Catholic intellectualism issue entirely, as "academic freedom, laicization of governance, and the demand for 'relevance'" dominated the conversation. A strong strain of anti-intellectualism also developed at this time. Finally, in the third phase, Catholic intellectualism was studied from three perspectives: examinations of the "substantive issues raised in the controversy"; reviews of the controversy itself; and works on Catholic intellectualism which mentioned the issue without focusing on it.³¹

Beckmeyer's library reveals clues about his own intellectual growth and development. Thus, it provides a new window with which to examine the role intellectualism played in the lives of mid-twentieth century American Catholic priests. Although the library, as just one collection, does not serve as a representative sample of the libraries of all priests, an analysis of Beckmeyer's collection can provide commentary on Ellis's assertions that mid-twentieth century priests focused more of their time on their practical ministries, instead of on intellectual matters.

Influences on Beckmeyer's View of Intellectualism

Before further examining Beckmeyer's library, it will be helpful to review the intellectual framework in which Beckmeyer worked. What attitudes may have shaped his own perspective on the role of intellectualism in a priest's life?

Decades prior to the work of Ellis, Catholics expressed concerns about the state of intellectualism among their brethren in the United States. In 1899, John Talbot Smith wrote of his serious concerns

29. *Ibid.*, 33, 38.

30. See, for example, John A. O'Brien, ed., *Catholics and Scholarship: A Symposium on the Development of Scholars* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 1939).

31. Gleason, "A Look Back," 20-24.

regarding the intellectual rigor of American seminaries. He described the curriculum as "rarely recogniz[ing] anything but theology and philosophy," while "The serious political life of the times is shut out. . . History is taught in random, unscientific fashion. . ." He declared it a "wonder" that the new priest "should at all be able to hold his own in the sneering world, so skilled in knowledge of its times, so devoted to science and history." A new priest had to face many critics, who were "weary of the man who goes on preaching the homilies of the ancients, in the same language threshing out the ideas, arguments, figures of ten centuries past; who ridicules scientific achievement, and answers accusation, solves problems, staves off inquiry with a snap of the fingers. . . Such a man is no leader in the modern parish."³² Smith believed American seminaries utterly failed to produce priests who could stand up to the scrutiny and criticism of the modern world. Indeed, Smith questioned the rigor of most seminaries' academic programs, and whether they taught their students anything beyond the most basic level.

Beckmeyer's contemporaries expressed concerns about the intellectualism of American priests well into the twentieth century. In 1919, George T. Schmidt wrote a book commenting on the current status of Catholic priests in America. In it, he reflected,

[I]f more brains and better education are demanded in the citizen, must not the priest, who by his sacred office is to be a leader of men, be a man of high intelligence and mature knowledge? A smattering of Theology and of Church History, a little piety, the observance of the commandments, and the ability to raise money, may have been all that was demanded of the American priest four or five decades ago. But that time is past, if it ever did exist.³³

Schmidt specifically recommended that American priests study theology, a natural subject for them. He also advised the study of sociology, so that a priest could "occupy his rightful place as a leader of men" and "save his people from moral shipwreck on the reefs of socialism and rationalism."³⁴ Later, he urged priests to "equip [themselves] with facts and figures on the problems of the day."³⁵ Schmidt embraced new branches of knowledge; indeed, he considered

32. John Talbot Smith, *The Training of a Priest (Our Seminaries): An Essay on Clerical Training* (New York: William H. Young & Company, 1899), 251-252.

33. George T. Schmidt, *The American Priest* (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1919), 13.

34. *Ibid.*, 14.

35. *Ibid.*, 16.

them essential for any priest who hoped to connect with the laity and minister effectively in the twentieth century.

In this regard, Schmidt echoed the views of earlier writers on the subject of American priests and intellectual study. Michael Müller, a priest in the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer, specifically urged his fellow priests to "devote" themselves to studies "during the rest of [their lives]."³⁶ He added, "Suppose a doctor should give up study as soon as he receives his diploma, he would certainly do but little good and much harm to those who have the misfortune to employ him. How much more harm can a priest do who neglects to study after he is ordained?"³⁷ Beckmeyer may have continued studying the books he obtained during seminary and his first years as a priest for the rest of his life. However, as Müller suggests, an essential part of study is to engage with new ideas and theories. A doctor who continually studied his or her old textbooks without also referring to the latest medical and scientific journals would soon find his or her skills out of date. As will be elaborated below, Beckmeyer appears to have purchased few new books after the 1920s, and so he may have lost touch with the latest scholarship in theology and philosophy.

In contrast to the warnings offered by Smith, Schmidt, and Müller, the education that Beckmeyer actually received did not tend to emphasize the value of continued engagement with the most current philosophies. Smith's fears regarding seminary curricula seem particularly relevant in light of the coursework offered at Mount St. Mary's Seminary during Beckmeyer's years of study. The seminary courses of this period were greatly influenced by the papal encyclical, *Aeterni patris* (1879).³⁸ In it, Leo XIII expressed his concern about the "false conclusions concerning divine and human things" which had spread from the domain of pure philosophy to "all the orders of the State" and "been accepted by the common consent of the masses."³⁹ Noting that "if men be of sound mind and take their stand on true and solid principles, there will result a vast amount of benefits for the public and private good," Leo sought to inculcate these "solid principles" by encouraging the study of Scholastic philosophy by seminarians and other students. Such study would enable students to "advance the cause of religion with force and judgment."⁴⁰

36. Michael Müller, C.Ss.R., *The Catholic Priesthood, Part II: The Private Life of the Priest* (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1885), 285.

37. *Ibid.*, 291.

38. Francis Joseph Miller, *A History of the Athenaeum of Ohio, 1829-1960* (Cincinnati, OH: F. J. Miller, 2006), 89.

39. Leo XIII, *Aeterni patris*, August 4, 1879, Paragraph 2.

40. *Ibid.*, Paragraph 27.

The nineteenth century witnessed a resurgence of interest in the study of Scholasticism, a medieval system of philosophy. This revival of Scholastic ideas became known as Neo-Scholasticism, and it sought to apply Scholastic principles to the modern age. Neo-Scholastics believed that the truths of philosophy and theology do not change, and thus that the scholasticism of the thirteenth century remained the best, most complete system of philosophy ever conceived. Neo-Scholasticism's popularity came about, in part, as a reaction to the spread of Modernism. As Una M. Cadegan has aptly summarized, theological Modernism represented the "assimilation" of "the findings of historical biblical criticism, the significance of the rise of science, and the philosophical implications of democracy into Christian understandings of the human person and the nature of tradition and authority."⁴¹ The church considered Modernism to be incompatible with the Catholic religion and faith, as it questioned many of the church's doctrines, and indeed, the very foundations of the church's authority. Neo-Scholasticism discouraged innovation of thought, as it was believed that humanity had already discovered the greatest philosophical truths. Any philosophical or theological innovations, especially those promoted in Modernism, were viewed as dangerous heresies.

In response to *Aeterni patris*, the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore appointed a committee to establish a seminary curriculum that would abide by the pope's decree and teach Neo-Scholasticism. Meeting in 1886, the Committee of Buffalo mandated a set curriculum for all major seminaries in the United States.⁴² Mount St. Mary's followed this curriculum closely when it reopened in 1887, after the Cincinnati archdiocesan financial scandal. Although earlier catalogues have been lost to time, the 1907-1908 catalogue of the seminary affirmed its commitment to the precepts of the Council of Trent and the Third Council of Baltimore, which "form[ed] the basis of the discipline that prevails in the house."⁴³ In light of the council's precepts, Beckmeyer received a thorough education in Scholastic philosophy and theology, the very "knowledge of ten centuries past" which Smith felt must be supplemented with more modern ideas. Moreover, Neo-Scholasticism's particular emphasis on objective, unchanging truth meant that priests received an education which discouraged them from seeking alternative perspectives. Thus, Beckmeyer collected books for

41. Una M. Cadegan, *All Good Books are Catholic Books: Print Culture, Censorship, and Modernity in Twentieth-Century America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013), 49.

42. Miller, 90.

43. "Catalogue of the Seminary Mt. St. Mary of the West, Cedar Point, Ohio," (1907-1908), 8. Courtesy of the Archdiocese of Cincinnati Archives.

his library which upheld Neo-Scholasticism while avoiding those which strayed too far from this philosophy.

In 1907, the papal encyclical *Pascendi dominici gregis* reaffirmed the importance of training priests in Neo-Scholasticism. Pope Pius X issued this encyclical in response to the continued rise of theological Modernism. Pius strictly censured the philosophy and those who promoted it in the name of intellectual freedom. He identified several steps to stop the further spread of Modernism, including a mandate that bishops censor objectionable publications, and the prohibition of priests serving as editors of journals or other publications without express permission of the Ordinary. Pius also called for the creation of a "Council of Vigilance" in each diocese, which would "watch most carefully for every trace and sign of Modernism both in publications and in teaching" so as to protect "the clergy and the young" from adopting it.⁴⁴ In particular, he noted that Modernism was replete with "hatred of scholasticism," and that "there is no surer sign that a man is on the way to Modernism than when he begins to show his dislike for this system."⁴⁵ Therefore, he called for renewed emphasis on Scholasticism as the foundation of all theology and philosophy, especially in seminaries and religious institutions.⁴⁶

Aeterni patris and *Pascendi dominici gregis* had a marked effect on the intellectual work of American Catholics. With two papal condemnations of the freedom of thought necessary for truly original scholarship, it can hardly be surprising that the "first indication of a budding intellectual life among the Catholics . . . was suddenly overshadowed and snuffed out."⁴⁷ Even prior to the issuing of these encyclicals, American Catholic publishers had been influenced a great deal by the bishops. The bishops had promoted both the censorship of objectionable books, and the increased publication of "orthodox" books and newspapers.⁴⁸ The harsh strictures of the encyclicals, especially *Pascendi dominici gregis*, required the bishops to apply even stricter rules to the granting of *imprimatur* to books, thus limiting the output of new publications.

44. Pius X, *Pascendi dominici gregis*, September 8, 1907, Paragraph 49, 50, 53.

45. *Ibid.*, Paragraph 42.

46. *Ibid.*, Paragraph 45.

47. Ellis, "The Formation of the American Priest: An Historical Perspective," in *The Catholic Priest in the United States: Historical Investigations*, ed. John Tracy Ellis (Collegeville, MN: Saint John's University Press, 1971), 57.

48. Una M. Cadegan, "Running the Ancient Ark by Steam: Catholic Publishing," in Carl F. Kaestle and Janice A. Radway, eds., *A History of the Book in America, Volume 4: Print in Motion: The Expansion of Publishing and Reading in the United States, 1880-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 397.

Beckmeyer's intellectual habits were formed on a foundation of Neo-Scholasticism, as taught to him in the curriculum of Mount St. Mary's Seminary. This curriculum, created in obedience to the decrees of *Aeterni patris* and the Third Baltimore Council, stressed the unchanging nature of truth and the rejection of philosophies which questioned church authority. These intellectual habits show themselves clearly in Beckmeyer's library, which changed little from the time of his early priesthood. Although he had a large library collection, the majority of his books seem to have been acquired either while he attended seminary, or in the earliest years of his priesthood. Out of the 236 total books in Beckmeyer's collection, only forty-three books were published after 1920. Of those forty-three, seventeen appear to have been added to Beckmeyer's library only after his death. An additional two books were given to Beckmeyer as gifts. With a library full of recommended texts from his seminary days, Beckmeyer in all likelihood saw little need for updating his book selections. In his perspective, the truths of theology and philosophy would never change, and thus extensive purchases of books on new ideas would be an unwise investment. *Pascendi dominici gregis* ensured the continued dominance of Neo-Scholastic philosophies among most American priests, and would have reassured Beckmeyer of the continued value of his seminary education and the books he already owned.

In addition to Neo-Scholasticism, seminaries also strove to impart the importance of more practical abilities to their students. The Third Plenary Council of Baltimore issued decrees on administration of parish property and parochial schools, among others, which affected the duties that parish priests needed to fulfill.⁴⁹ These skills were addressed by two works of pastoral theology published in the 1890s: William Stang's *Pastoral Theology* (1896) and Frederick Schulze's *Manual of Pastoral Theology* (1899).⁵⁰ These books primarily focus on traditional tasks of a priest, such as performing the sacraments, but they also discuss pragmatic issues in which a priest would need to be competent. Stang included chapters on Catholic schools (which specifically referred to the requirements issued by the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore), the construction of church buildings, the oversight of parish societies, and bookkeeping.⁵¹ Schulze covered similar topics, and also included a section on the priest's personal finances.⁵²

49. Joseph M. White, *The Diocesan Seminary in the United States: A History from the 1780s to the Present* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 209.

50. *Ibid.*, 215-216.

51. William Stang, *Pastoral Theology* (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1897), 245-273.

52. Frederick Schulze, *Manual of Pastoral Theology* (Milwaukee, WI: Diederich-Schaefer, 1914), 364.

Interestingly, Stang also wrote a chapter prescribing the books a priest ought to possess in his personal library. Books, as "the tools with which he [the priest] preserves and enlarges the store of knowledge and which he handles to instruct and guide his people," were to be carefully preserved, including all of the priest's books from college and seminary.⁵³ Stang advised priests to "enlarge" their collections "as soon as [they] are placed in charge of souls."⁵⁴ He urged priests to collect books on moral, dogmatic, and ascetic theology, apologetics, canon law, church history, biblical studies and commentaries, liturgy manuals, works on philosophy, and "books for useful information," which included dictionaries, encyclopedias, and basic works on art, science, and literature.⁵⁵ Although Beckmeyer owned only a few of the books specifically recommended by Stang, the general topics of his library align with Stang's suggestions.

As has been shown above, Beckmeyer's contemporaries in the priesthood recognized that their fellow priests often did not have any particular affinity for intellectualism. Although some urged priests to concentrate on intellectual matters, others advised more practical endeavors. Practical training for priests was indeed very important, but as Ellis has suggested, seminaries may have overemphasized these matters in their curricula. Beckmeyer's library suggests that he likely did not spend a great deal of time in study. As previously discussed, the fact that he purchased so few books in his later years suggests that reading and study were not of the first concern to him. It seems unlikely that his lack of purchases was solely due to financial constraints. St. Mary was able to complete extensive renovations during his time as pastor, and so Beckmeyer's salary was likely sufficient to have allowed him to buy more books and keep up with the latest scholarship.⁵⁶ Rather, Beckmeyer, staying true to his Neo-Scholastic education, may have felt no particular need to add to his library. In this regard, he supports Michael Gannon's assertion that the "typical . . . priest of the 1920's and 1930's was [not] much of a reader," and that when he did read, he rarely if ever selected books "published after 1907. No one, apparently, was writing anything 'worthwhile' after that date."⁵⁷

53. Stang, 288-289.

54. *Ibid.*, 288.

55. *Ibid.*, 290-299.

56. Beckmeyer, *History of St. Mary Church*, vol. 1, 1859-1944, 39.

57. Gannon, "Before and After Modernism," 356.

The Demands of Practical Ministry

Beckmeyer also may have lacked the time to engage in serious study once he became the pastor of St. Mary, a thriving parish which enjoyed its greatest attendance during his pastorate.⁵⁸ Several scholars have suggested that American parish priests have tended to concentrate their attentions on business and administrative concerns, as opposed to pursuing scholarship. In a study of Michigan priests, Leslie Woodcock Tentler, quoting Father John Dempsey, noted that parish priests in the late nineteenth century "aspired to prestigious city parishes, where . . . priests were proud of their 'business ability and reputation.'"⁵⁹ These habits likely resulted from the general American tendency to value business acumen above all else. Indeed, Catholics had a more vested interest than many in achieving business success. John A. O'Brien argued that Catholic immigrants in the nineteenth century, who usually belonged to the lower and middle classes, felt the "necessity" of urging their children to study practical, "bread and butter" courses of study, since they had "to secure the means of continued livelihood" before they could fully engage in more scholarly pursuits. Having grown up in a society that valued practical abilities and business sense more highly than the abstract intellectualism demanded by scholarship, American priests naturally focused on the concrete business of running their parishes.

Beckmeyer's own written accounts of his years at St. Mary leave little doubt that he was eminently focused on the practical administration of the parish. As soon as he arrived, Beckmeyer began an ambitious plan for improvement of the church. In 1918, he oversaw the purchase of nine properties adjacent to the church on Steele Avenue and Allen Street, eventually purchasing the entire city block upon which the church sat.⁶⁰ Upon his urging, St. Mary adopted an "envelope system of collection" in 1920. This new system increased church collections from \$9,700 in January-April 1920, to over \$40,000 in May to December. With the increased revenue, the church installed a new Austin organ with 47 stops and over 3,000 pipes, at a cost of \$25,000. In 1921, Bernard Mellerio of Chicago painted the interior of the church with elaborate frescoes, and in 1922, an Italian marble sanctuary floor was added. These improvements greatly added to the beauty of the church, but came at a significant cost. By the end of 1924, the church

58. In 1932, the parishioners of St. Mary received 155,500 Holy Communions, compared to 35,000 in 1917, when Beckmeyer arrived. See Bernard Beckmeyer, *A History of St. Mary Church*, vol. 2, 1944-1959 (Dayton, OH: 1959), 8.

59. Tentler, "God's Representative in Our Midst," 338.

60. Beckmeyer, *History of St. Mary Church*, vol. 1, 1859-1944, 20.

debt stood at \$122,000, up from the \$70,000 it owed when Beckmeyer arrived. Despite the financial difficulties caused by the Great Depression, St. Mary fully liquidated its debt in 1943.⁶¹ This by no means exhaustive list of Beckmeyer's improvements to the church gives an idea of the pragmatic bent of his mind.

In this regard, Beckmeyer differed little from many other priests of his generation. Indeed, as priests advanced in the church hierarchy, their business sensibilities were likely to be in even higher demand. Ellis called the American Catholic Church a "'big business' in the typically American meaning of that term." While acknowledging that the upper clergy, such as bishops and heads of religious orders, needed acute business sense, he expressed his dismay that the "pressing tasks of administration" did not allow them to pay much attention to "intellectual concerns." Ellis believed that the higher clergy's emphasis on the "professional and vocational aspects of higher education" was likely to continue this tendency among clergy and lay Catholics alike. He attributed the clergy's focus on professional higher education on the fact that "relatively few" of them had taken advanced coursework in the "humanities and the liberal arts."⁶² Thus, while the higher clergy were well-educated men, their studies led them not towards continued scholarship but towards the everyday application of knowledge required by administrative and business tasks.

The emphasis on administrative concerns among the higher clergy may then also be a contributing factor to the somewhat static nature of Beckmeyer's working library. Certainly, running a large city parish like St. Mary demanded a great deal of time and energy. Without encouragement or even the basic expectation that priests would continually pursue their own self-education, why would Beckmeyer take such efforts upon himself? Indeed, during his homily at Beckmeyer's installation mass as a monsignor, Archbishop John Timothy McNicholas, OP, praised Beckmeyer for the "successful work" he had accomplished as pastor of St. Mary, making special note of his "great interest in vocations, . . . of the many converts he had made, which number over five hundred, and of the yearly number of Communion from 35,000 in 1917 to the peak of 155,500 in 1932."⁶³ While these successes are certainly more spiritual in nature than paying off financial debts and leading business meetings, there is still a hint of the administrative about them. The Archbishop's recital of the number of vocations, converts, and Communion that Beckmeyer had achieved demonstrates a certain practicality. Instead of using his

61. *Ibid.*, 27, 29, 33, 37, 67.

62. Ellis, *American Catholics*, 34-35.

63. Beckmeyer, *History of St. Mary Church*, vol. 2, 1944-1959, 8.

education to further knowledge and scholarship in a strictly academic sense, Beckmeyer shared his learning among the people of his parish and city, so as to win converts and encourage vocations. These activities were a noble use of his education, but they nonetheless would have limited Beckmeyer's personal study and reflection.

The Absence of Continuing Education Programs

The growth and development of Beckmeyer's library also likely suffered from his lack of access to post-ordination continuing education opportunities. The American church did not emphasize continuing education for diocesan clergy in the years before the Second Vatican Council. Beckmeyer may have taken advantage of the independent study circles sometimes formed by priests, which examined topics such as the sacraments, the liturgy, and recent papal encyclicals.⁶⁴ These groups offered valuable opportunities for priests to study and discuss various issues, but they were not mandated by dioceses. Priests could choose whether to join such a group, take other educational classes, or to do nothing at all. Frequently, priests chose not to engage in any sort of continuing education, for reasons expressed well by Father Denis D. Evenson: "Taught the 'eternal truths' in our seminary days, too many of us construed that to mean in practice that we would never need updating – further education – '*aggiornamento*.'"⁶⁵ Likewise, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops' 1972 document *The Program of Continuing Education of Priests* acknowledged several reasons that had historically discouraged priests from pursuing continuing education. These reasons included priests' busy practical ministries; lack of funding and available programs; and the belief that priests required no further education beyond their seminary training, an attitude which "may have been reinforced by an approach which stressed theology as a study of changeless and eternal truths."⁶⁶ A few dioceses began promoting continuing education after World War II, but these efforts did not, and could not, reach all priests.

Continuing education for priests received new emphasis in the wake of the Second Vatican Council's 1965 decree, *Presbyterorum ordinis*, which laid out the rights and duties of priests in the modern age. This decree called for bishops to require that all priests in their diocese take classes in "pastoral methods and theological science" every few years,

64. "Priests' Discussion Circles," *Orate Fratres* 19 (January 28, 1945): 131-134.

65. Quoted in Anna Brady, "Theological Updating," *Homiletic and Pastoral Review* 72 (March 1972): 23.

66. National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *The Program of Continuing Education of Priests* (Washington, DC: November 14, 1972), 9.

with special help and training given to the newly ordained.⁶⁷ In response, the North American College in Rome established the Institute for Continuing Theological Education in 1970 for priests who wished to update their theological studies in the wake of Vatican II. As mentioned previously, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops issued guidelines for diocesan continuing education programs in the document *The Program of Continuing Education of Priests*. This text called for dioceses to establish spiritual, academic, and professional programs for priests, and to make a special effort to meet the needs of the newly ordained. Diocesan support of continuing education for priests came too late for Beckmeyer, however, who died in 1969. His library collection, which changed very little after the 1920s, reflects the difficulties faced by a priest of his generation to obtain further education after ordination.

As previously stated, Beckmeyer purchased few books after the 1920s. It is certainly possible that Beckmeyer may have been an avid user of the Dayton Public Library (today, the Dayton Metro Library). Perhaps he chose to check out recent publications from the Library instead of purchasing them. The library has not kept its historical circulation records, however, so there is no way to know whether he frequented it. Similarly, no records exist which indicate whether Beckmeyer read publications such as *America*, the *Homiletic and Pastoral Review*, or the *American Ecclesiastical Review*. The best evidence available – his own personal book collection – suggests that he remained content with the knowledge and training that he received during his seminary education and his earliest years working as a priest.

Conclusion

The books in Reverend Bernard J. Beckmeyer's library cover a range of topics typical for a priest, with the areas of homiletics, liturgy manuals, and devotional texts particularly well represented. A majority of the books seem to have been purchased during his seminary training and his earliest years as a priest. This circumstance suggests that Beckmeyer, and perhaps other twentieth century American parish priests, focused on the practical business of running his parish, and not his own intellectual pursuits. This habit likely stemmed from a combination of factors. The somewhat lackluster Neo-Scholastic education offered by so many seminaries may have over-emphasized the unchanging nature of truth and discouraged priests from continued

67. Paul VI, *Presbyterorum ordinis*, December 7, 1965, paragraph 21.

study after ordination. Papal encyclicals which advanced Neo-Scholasticism and condemned Modernism further contributed to priests' reliance on their approved, uncontroversial seminary educations. Additionally, the significant time commitments of administering a parish, and the lack of continuing education opportunities prior to the Second Vatican Council, made it extremely difficult for even the most intellectually-minded diocesan priests to spend time in study.

As such, Beckmeyer's library supports the opinion, as held by Ellis and others, that American parish priests in the first half of the twentieth century placed a higher value on practical ministry rather than intellectual life. This view has dominated the historical understanding of the intellectualism of American Catholic diocesan clergy for the last sixty years. Although this article presents a new perspective on the topic of priestly intellectualism, as a study of just one priest's library, it cannot say definitively that all priests shared Beckmeyer's priorities. Additional studies of other priests' libraries could further clarify the general nature of parish priests' intellectual inclinations. Examinations of the libraries of other Catholic vowed religious and the laity would also help provide greater context to Beckmeyer's library.