PART

THREE

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MODERN CATHOLICISM
IN THE ARCHDIOCESE OF
CINCINNATI

1920s–1960s
Introduction

During the administrations of John Timothy McNicholas (1925–1950) and Karl Joseph Alter (1950–1969) the archdiocese attained a new level of institutional growth and became more assertive on social issues and confident of its own Americanism. Both ordinaries attempted to develop a specific Catholic culture, hoping to influence American culture with their religion. While solidifying its position in American society, the local church over a forty-year period saw a significant increase in the number of churches, schools, hospitals, and charitable agencies. During McNicholas’s tenure alone fifty-two new churches were built. Under his supervision a regional Catholic high school system was established and all Catholic charity and social service agencies were reorganized under Catholic Charities. Before the end of McNicholas’s term, Archbishop Samuel Stritch of Chicago wrote to him and praised him on his accomplishments. “Your balance sheet is probably one of the very best,” he wrote, “and the beauty of it is that you have done things.”

McNicholas was considered one of the more influential and preeminent American churchmen of his time and was widely regarded as the leading theologian in the American hierarchy. He was an effective, energetic, and persistent leader in many national movements, especially in the fields of apologetics and of social and racial justice. He achieved national prominence as spokesperson for such causes as the Legion of Decency, labor movement, and welfare of African Americans, education, and anticommunism. He also helped inspire the Catholic national program of rural evangelization in the United States. Regarded as one of the ablest minds among the American hierarchy, he served in many capacities in the National Catholic Welfare Conference, having been chosen many times by his episcopal colleagues for membership on the administrative board of the conference. From 1929 to 1935 and again from 1941 to 1950 he was a member of the NCWC administrative board, serving as its chairman from 1945 to 1950. He also served as episcopal chairman of the NCWC education department from 1930 to 1935 and again from 1943 to 1945 and was president general of the National Catholic Educational Association from 1946 to 1950.

McNicholas had a refined intellect and was one of the brightest American ordinaries. He was a rigorous thinker and in his twenty-five years in Cincinnati he made known his views on a variety of subjects, ranging widely from immoral movies, tax-supported education, and capitalism to labor, peace, and totalitarianism. The most important ground that he chose to occupy as archbishop was that of defending traditional morals, never ceasing to speak consistently for morality and Christian principles. Concerned over declining
morality in American society, McNicholas continually addressed issues that hit close to home. Indeed, he did not hesitate to address the burning issues of his day. From his earliest years McNicholas’s strength and solidity on moral matters was irrefutable, continually valuing religion, education, family, and human rights. As a shrewd administrator he was unafraid to take an unpopular stand if he thought that he was standing for what was right and best for the people. He did not shy from controversy. “Those who believe in eternal truth and age-old morality,” he wrote in 1938, “have a duty to voice their faith in them rather than stand supinely by while they are challenged by the forces of irreligion, or immorality, and atheism rampant in the world today.” In his efforts after World War II to inspire Catholics to help restructure American society, he was a staunch and conscientious worker for the improvement of public morals.

As Cincinnati’s fifth archbishop Karl Alter was a builder. By the time he resigned in 1969 the building program of the archdiocese under his leadership had included more than one hundred and thirty projects. True to their tradition, lay Catholics generously contributed their time and money toward their completion. Chief among these projects were the restoration and expansion of St. Peter in Chains Cathedral, expansion of St. Gregory Seminary, a new orphanage, St. Joseph Villa, and St. Margaret Hall, a new home for the aged. The restoration of the cathedral, Archbishop Joseph Bernardin of Cincinnati later wrote, was Alter’s “pride and joy.” It was his single greatest triumph. Alter was also the prime mover in the archdiocesan campaign that netted thirteen million dollars to build seven Catholic high schools. During his nineteen-year tenure there were forty-one elementary schools, fourteen high schools, seventy-nine rectories for priests, and fifty-five convents for nuns built. In addition, more than fifty elementary schools were enlarged. Parochial school enrollment soared during his tenure, growing from 48,000 in 1950 to over 100,000 students in 1963, increasing more than 100 percent. But in the face of an increasing shortage of women and men religious teachers, declining vocations, increasing number of lay teachers, and mounting expenses, the archdiocesan school system by the mid-1960s faced substantial financial problems and declining enrollment. This posed a new challenge to church officials.

A major thrust of Alter’s career was also to encourage the lay ministry. He helped reorganize the structures that gave lay men and women the means to help shape the philosophy of Catholic Action in the Cincinnati archdiocese. Throughout his administration Alter, who helped reorganize the Archdiocesan Councils of Catholic Men and Women, was one of the leading ordinaries in the United States who encouraged the development of the National Council of Catholic Men and the National Council of Catholic Women and their respective diocesan affiliates.