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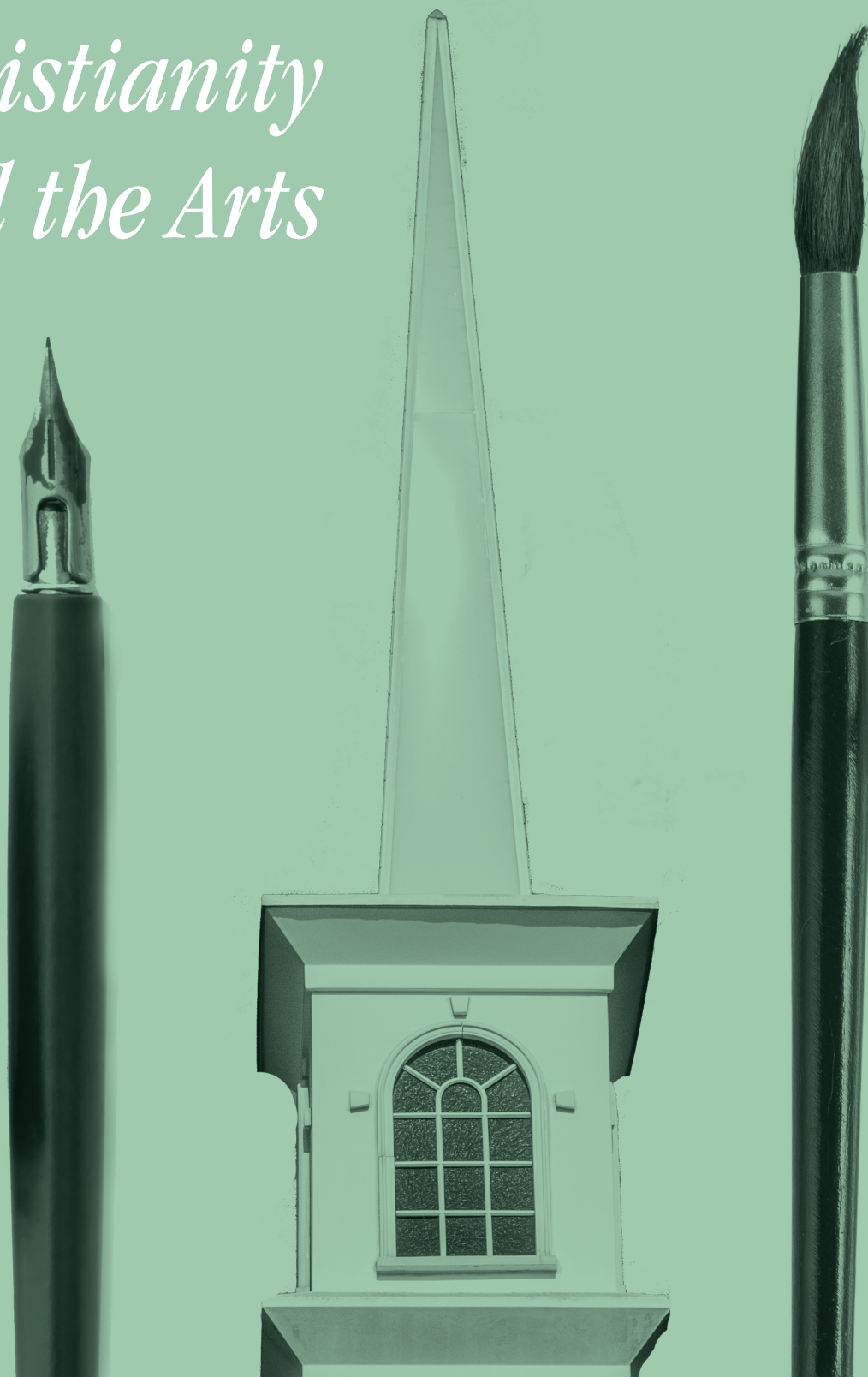
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COMMON LIFE

Frances Perkins

The Saint Behind the New Deal

By Charles Hoffacker

Adam Cohen, who teaches at Yale Law School, recently sang the praises of Frances Perkins: “If American history textbooks accurately reflected the past, Frances Perkins would be recognized as one of the nation’s greatest heroes — as iconic as Benjamin Franklin or Thomas Paine.”

Perkins is often remembered as the first woman to be a United States cabinet secretary. She remains the longest-serving Secretary of Labor (1933-45). More significantly, however, she helped establish several public policies beneficial to hundreds of millions of people. The title of Kirstin Downey’s 2009 biography sums up her major contributions to our national life: *The Woman Behind the New Deal: The Life and Legacy of Frances Perkins—Social Security, Unemployment Insurance, and the Minimum Wage*. In these ways and others she endeavored, in Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s phrase, “to make a country in which no one is left out.”

As part of a major expansion of its calendar of saints, the Episcopal Church now celebrates the feast of Frances Perkins, Public Servant and Prophetic Witness, on May 13. A bi-



An early portrait of Frances Perkins.

Photo courtesy of the Frances Perkins Center

ographical note about Perkins appears with the proper for this feast in *Holy Women, Holy Men: Celebrating the Saints* (Church Publishing, 2010). This brief note mentions that Perkins depended on “her faith, her life of prayer, and the guidance of her church for the support she needed to assist the United States and its leadership to face the enormous problems” then challenging the country. While Secretary of Labor, Perkins made a monthly retreat at an Episcopal convent.

How did Perkins understand the connection between Christianity and public life? What theology, spirituality, and political and economic views lay behind her assertion that “I came to Washington to work for God, FDR, and the millions of forgotten, plain, common working men”?

In addition to the Downey biography, there is another substantial study of her life: George Martin’s *Madame Secretary: Frances Perkins*, published in 1976. Both are admirable works, but neither examines her religious foundation at any length. Michelle L. Kew’s paper, “Frances Perkins: Private Faith, Public Policy,” available through the Frances Perkins Center (PDF at is.gd/Ozk5IW), provides a basic survey of its subject. Donn Mitchell’s insightful essay, “Frances Perkins and the Spiritual Foundation of the New Deal,” appears in *A Promise to All Generations: Stories and Essays about Social Security and Frances Perkins* (2011). He sees Perkins as “steeped in the socialist thought of British Anglo-Catholicism. This viewpoint combined Anglicanism’s traditionally af-

For Perkins, politics and economics are part of moral theology.

firmative view of the state as the instrument through which the community expresses its shared values with an emphasis on the compassionate elements of Catholic tradition.”

Mitchell made available to me three unpublished lectures that Perkins gave in 1948 at St. Thomas Church Fifth Avenue, New York. In these wide-ranging St. Bede Lectures, under the collective title “The Christian in the World,” Perkins addresses at greatest length connections between economics and politics on one hand and theology and spirituality on the other.

Perkins points to how economic change contributed to the start of Christian social action of a particular sort in the early 20th century. Wealth in the United States had accumulated to a point beyond what was required for family legacies and investment capital. Some people who had suddenly accumulated such wealth started to consider their moral obligation to others and to address community needs on a greater scale than the country had seen before.

At the same time, protest against unjust conditions took the form of law. Measures were passed against actual forms of exploitation in such areas as housing and labor. Various types of social insurance were established to protect individuals against severe adversities. These developments resulted not only from an awakened public conscience but from an extension of knowledge about how society can be organized.

The earliest of these efforts were seen to have an explicit religious origin, but soon they became characteristic of society as a whole. For Perkins, however, the theological basis remained obvious. Because of God’s love for humanity, humanity has infinite worth.

Citing Thomas Aquinas, Perkins asserts the right to own property but also the obligation to use property in ways that promote the common

good, ways included in the movement of humanity toward God. Unless people contribute to the building of a just social order, they do not fulfill their true nature as human beings; they miss out on their own progress toward God to which they are entitled.

As an example, Perkins recounts how the Diamond Match Company gave up its patent to non-phosphorus matches early in the 20th century. Manufacturing phosphorus matches exacted a horrible toll from factory workers. Diamond developed a non-phosphorus match, then gave up its patent so that other firms would no longer make the dangerous phosphorus matches. Perkins says that she was present when the patent was relinquished and that the motivation for doing so was a Christian concern for the social order.

Perkins even claims that “Christians must regard entrance into politics and political activity as a major basic Christian duty, and they must enter it as Christians.” She states her belief, now enshrined in the collect for her feast day, “that the special vocation of the laity is to conduct the secular affairs of society that all may be maintained in health and decency.”

Before becoming a federal official, Frances Perkins had engaged in settlement house work, safety inspections, and other local activities on behalf of the community. She had served in the administrations of New York governors Al Smith and Franklin Delano Roosevelt. In the St. Bede Lectures, she advocates that those who wish to promote the common good begin at the local level as well. Authority grows from engaging a small project close to home. Christians can exercise their moral judgment there and thus develop a true authority that enables them to address problems at the state, national, or international levels later on.

For Perkins, politics and economics are part of moral theology. Politics addresses the ordering of society

and economics the way people make their living. She repeatedly asserts that God’s laws must take precedence over human law, that what matters is not strict adherence to human interpretations of civil law but the moral welfare and moral improvement of actual people.

Similarly, Perkins refuses to take economic theory and predictions as articles of faith. While she made extensive use of actuarial science as Secretary of Labor, she asserts in the St. Bede Lectures that economics is not a science or even an established field of knowledge: “There are whole areas where nobody has written down any figures.”

Would she say the same today? Perhaps not, but she would probably avoid embracing any particular economic ideology. Perkins did not favor as such a collective, cooperative, or capitalistic system of operating the economy. Her test for any such system was not whether it represents a particular ideology but whether it provides people with the goods they need and contributes to the development of people “to know, love, and serve God.”

Perkins advocated several basic attitudes important for all of life, and especially participation in public life. She said that people, while still young, need to be “reconciled to themselves.” One has to accept one’s particular nature, characteristics, problems, and temptations. If people do this, they can forget about themselves and engage in activity directed to the whole of society and those things that assist us all on our way to God. While she made no personal reference here, she appears to have been speaking out of her own experience.

As a public official for many years, Perkins sometimes found herself engaged in political conflict. She recognized that Christians could reach different conclusions about practical politics and vote for different par-

(Continued on next page)

Frances Perkins

The Saint Behind the New Deal

(Continued from previous page)

ties. Each of us comes to different conclusions, she claimed, because we have different life experiences, different spiritual experiences. Someone who had witnessed poverty up close at an early age, as she had, was likely to take a different approach to it as a political matter than someone who had not.

Bitter partisanship often results from the failure to analyze an issue and to do so in a cooperative manner informed by Christian faith. Analysis of this sort does not guarantee that everyone will embrace the same solutions, but it helps to destroy cynicism and elevate the tone of political discourse.

Still another basic attitude advocated by Perkins was thankfulness. She did not endorse “you only get what you pay for” as true in any aspect of life. To someone who advocated that understanding she responded: “I get so much more than I ever pay for, not only out of the government, not only from the government in its general protection of my life and interests, but out of the people I do business with, the people from whom I buy, or who serve me in one way or another. Always, it seems

to me, I am getting a little extra.”

The St. Bede Lectures include a concrete proposal by Perkins that Christians associate together in guilds according to their occupations in order to practice and improve their Christian life within those occupations. Whether people talk effectively, responsibly, and morally in other ways, they tend to do so about their jobs and they do so with their coworkers. When people “talk shop,” they usually throw themselves into it and develop a moral and social response. These occupational guilds would develop ethical codes for themselves. Is anyone in our time promoting such a grassroots approach to ethics? Is this an area in which Christians can still minister in the world according to their particular occupations?

If laypeople are to discharge their function in society, then they must have a developed spiritual life and an authentic education, insisted Perkins. But we do not develop enough people who can be trusted, and from that flows all manner of miseries. We need a teaching church and a teaching clergy, but much more as well. The arts are an important channel for the knowledge of



Photo © Bettmann/CORBIS

Frances Perkins testifying before Congress in 1942.

God. We must practice an awareness of God's presence. We must seek harmony with God's will.

Perkins spoke of the need to become like children in a way consonant with what Jesus says about this: “We have to take ourselves as a young and inexperienced person, young certainly in the spiritual laws and in the spiritual nature of our relationship to God. We don't know; we are inexperienced; we have to find out.”

In line with classical Christian spirituality, Perkins understood the purpose of humanity as union with God. And she brought out a social aspect of this union that too often remains unacknowledged. Because the Christian knows God and enjoys some degree of union with the divine, the Christian chooses “those patterns of behavior which make for the welfare and ennoblement and enhancement and advance” of other people “toward a knowledge of God and union with God.”

Not everyone needs to have a mystical experience of union with the divine, according to Perkins. But if there is to be a revival of true community, then union with God must



Photo courtesy of the Social Security Administration

Frances Perkins offers a subtle smile as President Roosevelt signs the Social Security Act of 1935.

be widely recognized and appreciated as the purpose of human life, and sought, however imperfectly, by many people. Whatever else society needs, it requires “a corps of individuals who have, themselves, experienced, and who will work and struggle and even fight to provide for themselves, and for those who are dependent upon them spiritually, that relationship of union with God.”

For Perkins, an important channel toward divine union is offering regular acts of love to God. Following St. Augustine, she urged the frequent recitation of this prayer: “My God, I love thee above all others, and for thy sake I love my neighbors as myself.” Thus the Summary of the Law becomes prayer and aspiration.

Another such channel is examination of conscience. Because sin is separation from the divine, true and honest self-examination is essential. Examination of conscience is more likely to be effective if it occurs against a standard pattern such as the Ten Commandments or the seven deadly sins: pride, covetousness, lust, envy, gluttony, anger, and sloth. Perkins admitted that in her personal practice she often did not get much beyond pride, the first deadly sin and a dominant feature in our human confusion.

For Perkins, examination of conscience was not a private matter. The seven deadly sins provide a framework for assessing our political life as well as our personal dealings. As we examine ourselves, we must also examine our society, in particular its political and economic dimensions. Simple rules of behavior must serve as a standard. The latest political questions, whatever they are, cannot be exempt. Any examination of conscience, whether personal or social, needs to include a sense of reparation.

The faith of Frances Perkins was manifestly rooted in the Incarnation of God in Christ. Through the Incarnation, God reaches out into all parts of the earth. For Perkins, this had intense local and practical implications. God reaches out, she said, “into the sins and difficulties and disorders and chaos of New York City and Boston and the life of the Perkins

family, and to me.” What can we do in response? Serving “the secular and worldly life” of our neighbors, we serve the incarnate life of God, and that secular and worldly life becomes itself consecrated to God.

Perkins reflected on words from the eucharistic prayer she heard so frequently, “that here we present ourselves, our souls and bodies, to be a living sacrifice.” This language indicates that at the Eucharist the people of God present their temptations and problems, together with the problems and temptations of all people everywhere. All this we offer up to God in one great social act. We offer up all that we are and all that we do, our labor in its diverse forms and that of people in all places. Together this comprises the sacrifice we make to the glory of God in union with Christ crucified and risen.

One function of saints is to make us uncomfortable, to challenge us, and at the same time to give us hope. Recent saints, those still within the living memory of our contemporaries, do this in a special sense. While saints from centuries past who lived in exotic places sometimes seem distant to us, it is harder to dismiss a 20th-century saint who walked the streets of New York and Washington and loved the wilds of Maine. In the face of our nation’s contemporary economic and political shortcomings and our sometimes dim faith and languid prayer, blessed Frances Perkins appears, both to unsettle and to encourage.

Saints belong to the past and present, and also to the future. Adam Cohen is right: Frances Perkins is one of the greatest heroes of American history. However, perhaps her greatest contribution to nation and church is still to come. At a time when countless Americans are dispirited by our broken system, the example and teaching of this saint may prove to be an unexpected gift for the renewal of common life.

The Rev. Charles Hoffacker is an Episcopal priest and a board member of the Frances Perkins Center (francesperkinscenter.org).

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