

# An activist for the faithful

Tom Butler (1915–2005): lawyer, editor of the *Catholic Worker* newspaper

ONE OF THE LEADING Catholic opponents of B.A. Santamaria's political project, Thomas Michael Butler, died suddenly aged 89 in Melbourne on 8 January. As editor of the *Catholic Worker* monthly newspaper in the 1950s, Butler defied Archbishop Mannix and the weight of Catholic opinion to contest the Church's entanglement with Santamaria's anti-communist organisation, the Catholic Social Studies Movement.

The interventions of the *Catholic Worker*, particularly in 1955 and 1959, were the most informed current critiques of the Movement, and rejected it explicitly on the grounds of Catholic social principles, particularly as articulated by the political philosopher Jacques Maritain. These principles were confirmed by the Vatican intervention against the Movement in 1957, and again by the Second Vatican Council in 1965.

Butler and his colleagues received little thanks from the Church in Melbourne for helping to extricate it from a major political and pastoral disaster, in curious contrast to Santamaria, who continued to receive lavish accolades from church and state. There was no state funeral for Butler; no political figures crowded into the front pews; no bishops from near or far assembled.

Needless to say, Butler did not seek recognition. He was a reserved and modest man who placed little store in such ephemeral trappings, though his funeral in Deepdene parish attracted a full church of family and friends. By coincidence, this had also been the earlier parish of Bob Santamaria. Their families went to the same schools. And Butler and Santamaria remained on courteous terms personally.



Tom Butler, above, and at right under the portrait of Thomas More.

It would do Butler an injustice not to acknowledge his enormous contribution to Catholic intellectual life and social activism in this country. By profession a lawyer, he formed a law partnership from 1951–1968 with Gerard Heffey, and with their *Catholic Worker* colleagues they developed their views on the proper role of the Church in politics.

Over four decades, the *Catholic Worker* sustained a commentary on social life in Australia, particularly on issues surrounding the labour movement, social justice, the family wage, and international issues, particularly of war and peace. The paper fashioned a Catholic critique of the great ideological debates of the day, about fascism, communism, socialism and capitalism.

Butler also had a great love for the law, but he realised the difficulties of ensuring that the law achieved its true aims. He took inspiration from Thomas More, a large portrait of whom graced the Butlers' lounge room. A smaller painting of More was placed on Butler's coffin.

MORE WAS EXECUTED BY Henry VIII in 1535 for refusing to take the Oath of Supremacy that Henry was the head of the Church in England. More was one of the most famous European intellectuals of his day, and for some years was Chancellor of England. It took precisely 400 years for him to be canonised and made the patron saint of lawyers.

Butler drew from More the need for commitment to intellectual rigour in the search for truth, despite the inconvenience and personal cost; and for courage to be faithful to that truth. In his own way, Butler lived out of those convictions. He had been on the *Catholic Worker* committee in 1937–38, but during the war joined the army and was based in North Queensland. When he returned to Melbourne, he was perplexed by the intimate involvement of official church bodies in the new Catholic anti-communist movement. He edited the *Catholic Worker* from 1951–1955, and became chairman of the editorial committee from 1955–1957.

Central to his beliefs was the conviction about the critical role of lay people, inspired by the Gospel vision, vigorously to pursue social equity and justice, especially for the working classes and disadvantaged people, as well as to promote human rights and world peace.

This social activism sprang from the heart of his faith. For him, religion was not a private matter but a summons to contribute constructively to public affairs. Crucially, however, this activity was not to be under the direction of the Church or clergy, but undertaken on the free initiative and independent judgment of lay people themselves. In this, he was encouraged by the writings of Jacques Maritain and John Courtney Murray in the United States.



For the *Worker* people, this was a matter of high principle and supreme importance for the future of the Church. But it was not an easy decision in 1955 to challenge the political alliance between the Church and the Movement, especially at a time of acrimonious political controversy.

In March 1955 Butler and Gerard Heffey drafted an article rejecting accusations that Catholics who dissented from the Movement were 'traitors to the Faith'. The *Worker* argued that Catholics must be free to make their own political decisions.

When Mannix heard of this, he summoned Butler and Heffey and demanded they stop publication. During a warm conversation, they respectfully but resolutely declined to accept this directive from their revered

Archbishop, on the grounds that they had breached no matter of faith or morals. Mannix was greatly displeased and had the *Catholic Worker* banned from the cathedral, with most parishes following suit. Its circulation plunged from 35,000 to 15,000.

**B**UTLER AND HIS COLLEAGUES were vindicated by the Vatican intervention in 1957, but the details of this were kept secret, so it did not settle the matter in the public forum. The *Worker* people were astonished that even after the Vatican intervention, formal and direct Church support for the Movement, in Victoria especially, continued much as before.

In July 1959 Butler wrote, with Vincent Buckley, another major expose of the Movement. But the dispute dragged on, leaving many Catholics confused about what was happening, with only the *Worker* speaking frankly and honestly.

Intellectually acute and immensely well read, Butler had a strong sense of the human reality of the Church and its failings. Even in his last months he was studying earlier disputes over liberation theology and reading Hans Kung's autobiography. A few weeks before he died, Butler circulated to some friends a quote from Hilaire Belloc, writing to William Temple:

The Catholic Church is an institution I am bound to hold divine, but for unbelievers a proof of its divinity might be found in the fact that no merely human institution conducted with such knavish imbecility would have lasted a fortnight.

The *Worker* people did a great service to the Church and wider community in Australia, helping to clarify the limits to the Catholic Church's direct political involvement.

Tom Butler is survived by his wife of 55 years, Mollie (née Mary Stewart), their six children and 15 grandchildren. ■

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