

The Church and Politics

Manhattan parish reflects ongoing story

By FATHER JOHN CATOIR

St. Stephen's parish on Manhattan's East 29th Street, where I live in residence, has had a formidable history. It also happens to be the place where my father went to grammar school. It's mind-boggling to look down from my third-floor rectory window each morning and see several hundred children at play. It's as though I was in a time warp, looking down at the childhood of my own father.

In the 1880s, a more newsworthy chapter in St. Stephen's history was developing. The pastor, Father Edward McGlynn, was concerned about the plight of the poor and he established an orphanage for 500 immigrant children and a residence for women down on their luck.

But his best efforts were not getting to the root of the poverty problem, so Father McGlynn looked for answers and thought he found them in Henry George's "single tax theory." George held that the ownership of land by the wealthy was primarily responsible for all financial injustices and inequities affecting the poor, and he urged that a tax be laid on all "unearned increment." It was a radical idea but Father McGlynn went all out in support of it.

When Henry George ran for mayor of New York in 1886, Dr. McGlynn, as he liked to be called, campaigned for him. Predictably, City Hall was furious and so was Archbishop Michael Corrigan of New York. Father McGlynn was told to stop his political activity. When he refused, the archbishop suspended him. Father McGlynn protested the move, "I deny the right of bishop or pope to punish me for my actions...unless they can show that these opinions are contrary to the teachings of the Catholic religion. This they have not shown."

The fiery priest was called to Rome for a scolding, but refused to go. After several warnings and continued defiance, Archbishop Corrigan excommunicated him in the summer of 1887. Five years later, Pope Leo XIII, who was social justice-minded, lifted the penalty saying that Father McGlynn's economic theories contained nothing in opposition to Catholic teaching.

And so, Father McGlynn was forgiven and made the pastor of a parish in Newburgh. When his remains were brought back to St. Stephen's for public viewing after his death in 1900, some 40,000 people came to pay their respects.

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