

Dr. Edward McGlynn- The Rebel Priest

by
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As the 20th century was being born, gloom and despair settled over the town of Newburg, N.Y. Its most popular and beloved pastor, Father Edward McGlynn, lay near death in his rectory at St. Marys Church. Two prominent priests were rushing to his bedside, hoping to share his last moments, but they arrived too late. One, the Rev. Dr. Richard Burtzell, McGlynns close friend, supporter and advisor. The other, Archbishop Michael Corrigan of New York, who thirteen years earlier was responsible for McGlynns excommunication from the Catholic Church. With his last words, "Jesus, have mercy on me", Father McGlynn lapsed into a comma and died on January 7, 1900, a victim of heart and kidney failure.

Virtually the entire town of Newburg attended his funeral and departure. Leaders of all major faiths, Prdestant, Catholic and Jewish participated. His remains were taken to 29TH Street in Manhattan where he would lie in state at St. Stephens Church his home for 21 years. The Mass included two hundred priests, Archbishop Corrigan (who presided), a Bishop and a Vicar General. A group of uniformed Letter Carriers formed an honor guard around the casket. No flowers were permitted in deference to McGlynns wishes, "Flowers are for the living and not the dead". As many as 45,000 came to pay their respects to the fallen priest. They included a wide cross-section of the city's poor, particularly the Irish. Also participating were Protestants, Jews, agnostics, reformers and leaders of the labor movement. Of particular note was the large presence of women at the church. The case of the Rev. Dr. Edward McGlynn is a vital part of both the history of Catholicism in America and the struggle of our poor for recognition and respect. The issues and events surrounding his life.

almost one hundred years ago, bear close parallels with our concerns of today.

Born on the Lower East Side in 1837, he was the product of a financially successful and devout Irish Catholic immigrant family. He was one of eleven children. After completing his basic education in the city's public schools, he was chosen by Bishop Hughes to attend the Vatican's Urban College of the Propaganda in Rome. At age 23, he received a Doctorate in Philosophy and Theology. A recipient of the school's gold medal for scholastic achievement, he was "the recognized and beloved leader of the class."

Ordained a priest, he returned to New York City in 1860 to launch his pastoral career. His first assignment as assistant to Father Thomas Farrell of St. Joseph's Church in Greenwich Village was a forerunner of things to come. Father Farrell was an outspoken abolitionist and friend of Abraham Lincoln. His will bequeathed \$5,000 towards the establishment of the first Black Catholic Church in New York City (St. Benedict of the Moor). His young assistant, Father McGlynn, was soon to become a leader of Accademia, a group of priests who met regularly at St. Joseph's to discuss and examine Catholic dogma and custom. They encouraged an Americanist form of Catholicism combining religious values with the democratic ideals of the nation. After serving as Chaplain to the Central Park Military Hospital during the Civil War, McGlynn was rewarded at age 29 with the largest rectorship in the city- St. Stephens- which boasted a congregation of more than 25,000 parishoners! The composition was largely Irish working class (the Irish, at that time, were the largest ethnic group in Manhattan).

During his tenure of 21 years, the 29th church became a mecca for religious visitors of all denominations. Father McGlynn was responsible for the growth of the parish both ascetically as well as materially.

His commitment to his vows brought him in daily contact with the problems of the Irish poor in the city. With a deep concern for the children, he established a large orphanage in the church serving over 300 destitute offsprings of the poor. His successful Sunday School boasted over 1500 members. Early signs of tension between Father McGlynn and his superiors revolved around one major omission from the church's many activities- a parochial school. Dr. McGlynn was adamant in his refusal to set one up in his parish, threatening to seek a missionary assignment in the Orient if ordered to do so. He was a confirmed believer in the total separation of church and state, supported a proposed amendment to the Constitution that would prohibit any governmental aid to church-related functions. Parochial schools, in McGlynn's eyes, "developed a spirit of intolerance and disunity in our American citizenship which would foster harm, not only to the country, but to the church itself."

Another factor, widening the schism between the pastor and his bishop, was McGlynn's constant appearances on civic platforms with religious leaders of other faiths, particularly men like Henry Ward Beecher and Howard Crosby, two prominent liberal Protestant theologians of the time. Also his granting of part of his meager salary (\$800 a year) for the establishment of a Hebrew Temple across the street from St. Stephens, was to some cause for alarm. At one point, his critics referred to McGlynn's drinking habits but this charge proved absurd. A derelict questioned by the police bore on his clothing the sewn-in name of "Dr. Edward McGlynn". Upon investigation, it was determined that the clothing in question had been made for McGlynn by his women parishioners who were upset by their priest's shoddy and shabby appearance. Evidently McGlynn had accepted the gift and then given it to the first needy person he met. This was typical of the man, he cared little for his own

needs.

As an Irish American, the cause of home rule for Ireland found a powerful ally in Rev. McGlynn. In 1880, he made public appearances with Irish leaders endorsing the cause of Irish freedom and the distribution of the land to the farmers. His personal contact with the Irish-American poor in his parish bore heavily on his mind and conscience. He would express it in this manner, "The never ending procession of men, women and children coming to my door begging not so much for alms as employment. I began to ask myself, is there no remedy? ... I began to study a little political economy, to ask 'What is Gods law as to the maintenance of his family down here below?'"

Matters came to a head during the mayoral election of 1886. Father McGlynn, in his search for economic solutions, had read Henry Georges book, "Progress and Poverty". Strongly influenced by the Single-Tax theory as a means of spreading the nations wealth, he enthusiastically joined in support of the Henry George candidacy for the mayor of the city. The United Labor Party, a coalition of Socialists, Single-Taxers, labor unions and reformers, sponsored a massive election rally at Cooper Union with Father McGlynn, Henry George and Terrance Powderly (leader of the Knights of Labor) as speakers. Archbishop Corrigan, McGlynns superior was enraged by his priests intentions, equating the Single-Tax movement with socialism and ^{being} anti-church. He ordered the priest to refrain from appearing at the risk of being suspended from his parish. The labor priest refused to comply claiming his rights as a citizen of a democratic community. Father McGlynn not only spoke at the meeting but introduced Henry George to the largely Irish audience. The election was won by the Democrats whose Tammany Hall controlled the election machine-

ery. However, the Labor Party candidate came in second outdistancing the Republican, young Theodore Roosevelt. Many felt that Henry George was the victim of election fraud and was truly the winner. McGlynns participation gave George a large Irish vote.

But Father McGlynn was to pay the price for his refusal to comply with his superiors. He was suspended from his duties as a priest and his case was sent to Rome for disposition. Massive protest rallies followed McGlynns suspension led by his own parishoners, the Single-Tax movement and the city labor movement. Archbishop Corrigan's replacement at St. Stephens was met by a hostile congregation. The custodians refused to heat the building, the choir would not participate in the Mass and contributions dropped sharply. On June 18, 1887 one of the largest rallies in the city's history was staged. Led by one thousand St. Stephens parishoners, a parade from the church to Union Square attracted up to one hundred thousand supporters. Over 100 Trade Unions in the city participated with Samuel Gompers on the podium with McGlynn. Nevertheless, one month later, Pope Leo XIII excommunicated the Rev. Dr. Edward McGlynn from the Catholic Church, denying him all the Sacraments including Extreme Unction. McGlynn had refused to go to Rome to explain his actions and the ouster followed.

Undaunted, the deposed priest took the offensive. With Henry George and the support of large sections of the working class, he announced the formation of the Anti-Poverty Society. Thousands responded to his weekly call for Sunday meetings at the Academy of Music. The Society had as its aim, "the spreading by such lawful and peaceful means, the knowledge of the truth that God has made ample provision for the needs of men during their residence on Earth and that poverty is the result of human laws that allow individuals to claim a private property that which the Creator has

provided for the use of all." The excommunicated priest concluded his purpose with an attack on the "ecclesiastical machine" that dominated the church hierarchy. " Religion will never be right until we see a democratic Pope walking down Broadway in a stove-pipe hat and with an umbrella under his arm, And instead of being carried on mens arms, he will have the joke on them, for they will carry him in their hearts."

To further develop the philosophy of his new venture, citizen McGlynn gave his famous, "Cross of the New Crusade" address. The basic premise stated, "It is the doing of justice, by the inculcation of the spirit of equality, liberty and fraternity on earth, that we shall prepare the way for the glorious millennial day when it shall be something more than a prayer and in great measure a reality- Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Take up then, the 'Cross of the New Crusade'." This speech would be repeated again and again on platforms throughout the nation as McGlynn travelled around the country on tour. As a speaker he was elequent, magnetic and an imposing figure. He also wrote articles in prominent journals of the day expressing his views on major issues of the day. He was recognized by many as "a workers priest" and his ouster from the church was to many Catholic poor a personal affront. While a considerable number of Catholics were disillusioned , he urged them to remain in the church.

The arrival in the United States, five years after the excommunication, of Archbishop Satolli initiated a rather remarkable chain of events. With authorization from Pope Leo XIII to investigate the McGlynn case, he called upon the former priest and Henry George to present in writing their economic views. Satolli then appointed

four prominent Catholic theologians from Catholic University in Washington, D.C. to examine these statements behind closed doors. The four concluded unanimously that there was nothing in McGlynn's ideas that were contrary to the teachings of the Catholic Church. On Dec. 23, 1892, Pope Leo XIII, the same Pope who excommunicated the American priest, restored him with full rights and privileges to the priesthood of the Catholic Church. This amazing action demanded no retraction from McGlynn and, "in itself constituted a tacit acknowledgment that his excommunication had been a dreadful mistake."

But, as in many victories, there was a note of defeat. Where would McGlynn now serve the church? His desire was, of course, to return to his beloved St. Stephens but Archbishop Corrigan, his superior, would make the assignment. The result was the rectorship of a small church in Newburg, New York, a far off suburb of the city. McGlynn, in failing health, spent his remaining years there at St. Mary's Church. He was so popular that he was offered the mayoralship of the city- but of course declined. On special occasions he came to N.Y. City, one being the death of his good friend, Henry George. His eulogy at Henry George's funeral was extremely moving. He ended it with the statement, "There was a man sent of God and his name was Henry George." The solemn audience responded in wild applause.

His own death three years later ended a remarkable life. Buried in Calvary Cemetery in Queens, a Memorial Committee erected a life sized statue of him that stands in Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx. Visitations were conducted to both cemeteries for many years after his death, honoring his memory.

Praise for his accomplishments came from all facets of society. Labor leader John McMackin noted, "The downtrodden hailed him

as a new Moses. The rich, the privileged class, looked upon him as a revolutionary, an enemy of society. And hence the cry went forth; 'Society must be saved' and saved from what, the doing of Gods justice on earth. The obeying of the Commandment of the Master, 'thou shalt not steal!'"

The prominent Rabbi Stephen S. Wise pointed out at his memorial:

"We know him for that he stood for the truth and defended the right. If all the world were made up of Father McGlynns there would be no persecutions of the Jews... He was not only a priest of the Roman Catholic Church but of that large church in which all men are bound together in the eyes of God, the Father."

A prominent social reformer and poet, Ernest Crosby, son of the Protestant Rev. Howard Crosby, simply and poignantly expressed it in free verse.

Edward McGlynn

His face had that beauty which comes
from a lifetime of love for men.

There is no other beauty equal to it.

There is no other or shorter process
for achieving it.

It is a growth as slow and inevitable
and satisfying as that of an oak.

It defies all hypocrisy and imitation.

It is the last touch of the finger of God
in the creation of man.

The significance of McGlynns historical contribution is expressed in the preface of a fairly recent reprint of his biography. The Rev. G.J. Gustafson writes, "Cases like this never become dated. They are relevant in 1968 or 2168, for they revolve around issues so basic as to be timeless. Thus the world of Edward McGlynn, to our sur-

prise, does not at all seem remote or removed from contemporary experience. There is an internal relevancy about certain problems which the churches must always confront. Each age must decide as best it can what is social justice, and fraternal charity; what is religion, and what is politics."

Needless to say, while the remains of Father Edward McGlynn lie in Calvary Cemetery, his spirit is very much alive today. Whether it be at the Vatican Councils, or a poverty stricken village church in Central and South America or in the statements of American Catholic bishops concerning poverty and world peace. His concern for the human condition on earth and in the needs of the many are very much a part of our concerns for today.

the End