

Henry George and Catholic Doctrine An Inquiry into the McGlynn Case

By ERNEST LEOGRANDE

THE scene was Rome. The tone was one of festivity. A large band of Catholic faithful had attended the dedication of the Catacomb of St. Sebastian, then gone to the Church of St. Agnes where there was more room for the further ceremonies.

The crowd was clustered together. The un-comfortableness of the situation vied with the joy of the occasion. Suddenly there was the awful sound of splintering wood. Cries of horror went up as a platform collapsed.

The resulting melee and panic, heightened by the groans of the injured, threatened to turn into a stampede, causing further unnecessary injuries. A thirteen-year-old boy shouted above the crowd. He used words of encouragement and of authority. The people listened to him and the panic subsided.

Pope Pius X, who was present, came forward after order had been restored. "Who is this boy?" he asked. Then he put his arm around him, looked down at the youngster's face, and said, "The world will hear much from this young American."

This anecdote was told me by a priest I know, an Irishman who knows the McGlynn story well. It's a prophetic story. Probably not even Pius X, looking into the eyes of the young student for the priesthood, Edward McGlynn, realized how true his prediction would be.

Fr. McGlynn, firm believer in the rights of man, became a priest in a Church that fights constantly for the rights—and duties—of man. That there should ever have been a split between these two was unfortunate. That it could have been avoided I have no doubt.

The Misunderstanding

From my readings and conversations with people familiar with the case I have become convinced that two things caused Fr. McGlynn's excommunication: Bishop Corrigan's misinterpretation of what Henry George taught; Fr. McGlynn's stubbornness.

Let me explain what I mean.

I don't think it can be said that Bishop Corrigan was a tool of Tammany, a spokesman for the wealthy. I believe, as I said last month, that he acted in what he thought was the best way to prevent a teaching he thought was wrong.

Ignore for the moment the argument that Bishop Corrigan's interpretation of *Progress and Poverty* was wrong. Consider him as a man. Allan Sinclair Will in his *Life of Cardinal Gibbons* says:

"His (Corrigan's) personal tastes were for scholarship and retirement from the world, and he would have been glad to escape his weighty task as the head of the metropolitan diocese. Soon after his elevation, he wrote: 'How immense is the responsibility and how heavy is the burden!' His piety and humility seemed

like a survival from Apostolic times. Combined with his high degree of intellectual ability and natural force of character were a deep sensitiveness which ill-fitted him for the storms that swept his diocese during the period of his ecclesiastical rule, and he showed a rare gentleness in the ordinary relations of life."

Cardinal Gibbons himself, quoted in the same book and speaking as Archbishop of Baltimore, said, "Bishops are so hard to persuade! They have fixed and positive opinions and I can

scarcely imagine a class of men less easy to deal with on a subject of that kind." (He was referring to a battle over whether membership in a certain labor organization should be prohibited to Catholics.)

Bishop Corrigan's concern, I think, was whether Catholics could commit themselves to the advocacy of state ownership of property and still be Catholics. Again, omit temporarily the question of whether Bishop Corrigan really understood Henry George's teachings. Consider only whether he was acting in what he thought was a sincere move for the preservation of the Faith.

Looking Ahead

Today in Communist countries we see state ownership of property leading to absolute domination of the lives of the people, restricting even their right to practice their religion. It was this very thing, accounts of the controversy indicate, that bothered Bishop Corrigan.

It was 1880 when *Progress and Poverty* was published. It was 1882 when Fr. McGlynn upheld George's doctrine in a speech at Cooper Union. It was 1882 when Cardinal McCloskey, then Archbishop of New York, warned Fr. McGlynn not to talk again in support of a doctrine he found "socialistic."

Fr. McGlynn agreed to stop.

In 1885 Cardinal McCloskey died and Bishop Corrigan assumed his place. In 1886 Fr. McGlynn made a speech at Union Square support-

In the first installment, last month, Mr. Leogrande began an informal study of this popular controversy from a Catholic's viewpoint. He found no conflict between Henry George's economic theories and the Church's tenets, and found the Church preserving its integrity throughout. While some observers of that period found Henry George's ideas fitting very well into the lives of Catholics, others feared a plan which they saw as delegating undue power to the state. This is part two in a series of three articles.

ing George's theories. Perhaps he felt his debt of obedience to Cardinal McCloskey's order had died with the Cardinal's death. But he found Bishop Corrigan just as adamant. You must stop advocating this doctrine, the bishop told him.

This was a point at which Fr. McGlynn might have taken steps to win the controversy.

At this point (in fact, even earlier, under Cardinal McCloskey) he might have presented his case to Rome itself. As a priest he was obliged to obey the orders of his immediate superior, his bishop. But if he considered the bishop's order unjust, he had recourse to a higher authority—the Pope.

Fr. McGlynn, appealing to Rome to plead his case—that he was teaching nothing contrary to Catholic doctrine—stood a good chance of winning it. He had many intelligent priests on his side. One of them was the brilliant, diplomatic Cardinal Gibbons.

But Fr. McGlynn did not appeal to Rome. And on December 6, 1886, when Pope Leo XIII summoned him to Rome, he did not go.

Instead he chose to show his stubbornness, a quality that sometimes helped, sometimes hindered him.

(Continued next month)