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Obituary

Joseph H. Fichter: Setting the Record Straight on His Legacies to Sociology and Social Justice

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Joseph H. Fichter, suffering from lung cancer, breathed his last on February 23, 1994. On that day we lost someone who not only made a major contribution to research on Catholicism in America, but was also an advocate for some groups who suffer discrimination in our country: African Americans, Mexican migrant laborers, and women. Although some sociologists may have disagreed with him regarding aspects of his research or the social causes he espoused, I would argue that it is difficult to find sociologists who did not enjoy spending time with Joe. He will be sorely missed.

Setting the record straight was important to Joe, as is illustrated in the following anecdote. In the fall of 1993 he explained in a phone call why he had decided to skip the annual meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion. First, he was short on energy; second, he needed to conserve his strength in order to make it to the SSSR 1994 annual meeting where a panel of sociologists has been organized to discuss Joe's work on social justice. "It's more important that I'm there next year, so I can sit in the back of the room, and set the record straight if any of them make a mistake," he said. It was a few weeks later that the doctors informed him of their diagnosis regarding the cause of his lack of energy.

The sources for this obituary come from my "Fichter File," created in 1978 when I worked with Jeff Hadden to promote Joe's candidacy for president of ASA. He did not win that election, but he came very close. That same year, when I was preparing a talk to be given at a dinner celebrating Joe's 70th birthday in Boston, during the annual meetings of the Association for the Sociology of Religion, I asked him to send me some materials on his work. He continued to send me clippings until just recently, and I sense that he purposely kept me up to date, because he wanted to make sure that I set the record straight for such an occasion as this obituary.

Joe Fichter's life began in Union City, New Jersey in 1908. When he was 22 year old, he entered the New Orleans province of the Jesuit order, and received his B.A. (1935) and his M.A. (1939) from St. Louis University. He was ordained a priest in 1942, and received a doctorate in sociology from Harvard University in 1947. Though he spent most of his career teaching at Loyola University in

New Orleans, he also held the prestigious Chauncey Stillman chair of Catholic Studies at Harvard University from 1965 to 1970. On his departure from Harvard, a divinity school publication announced the completion of his term, stating, "It will be difficult to envisage life at the Divinity School without him, for he had entered fully into every aspect, social and scholarly, of our community and earned the affection and respect of students and colleagues." Joe was also visiting professor at several universities, including University of Chicago, Princeton University, University of Notre Dame, State University of New York at Albany, Tulane University, University of Meunster (Germany), and the Catholic University of Chile.

Joe served terms as president for both the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion and the Southern Sociological Society, and he was also elected as a member of the executive council of the American Sociological Association. In recognition of his stature in the field, the Association for the Sociology of Religion named its annual research award in his honor. A festschrift for him, co-edited by Jeffrey Hadden and Ted Long, was entitled *Religion and Religiosity in America: Studies in Honor of Joseph H. Fichter* (1983). Its royalties began the ASR Fichter Fund, which underwrites the award, and to which additional contributions may appropriately now be made in Joe's memory.

Joseph Fichter's research record includes approximately thirty books, two hundred articles, and dozens of unpublished research reports. Even before he began his career as a sociologist, Fichter's interest in solving social problems was illustrated in his first book, *Roots of Change* (1939). This book examines the lives of fourteen persons instrumental in shaping social change from the dawning of the enlightenment until the end of the nineteenth century. Perhaps his decision to become a sociologist was motivated by a vision of how disciplined social scientific inquiry could contribute to the solution of social problems.

The bulk of his sociological work focused on aspects of Catholicism. His work on the Catholic priesthood includes *Priests and People* (1965), *America's Forgotten Priests* (1968), and *Rehabilitation of Clergy Alcoholics* (1982), *The Pastoral Provisions: Married Catholic Priests* (1989), and *Wives of Catholic Clergy* (1992). One wonders how the priesthood might have looked today had the Catholic hierarchy responded differently to the results of his research.

His books on parishes and schools includes *Southern Parish* (1951), *Social Relations in the Urban Parish* (1954), and *Parochial School* (1958). Other books he authored cover topics such as religion as an occupation, pain and healing, the Catholic Cult of the Paraclete, and the Unification Church. His sociological autobiography was published in two parts: *One Man Research: Reminiscences of a Catholic Sociologist* (1973) and *The Sociology of Good Works: Research in Catholic America* (1993). Although the latter carries a 1993 copyright, it was not actually published until early January, 1994, a few weeks before his death. When I spoke to Joe on the telephone in mid-January, he had just received his copy of the book, and said how moved he was by Paul Roman's forward to this, his "last book."

Finally, to set the record straight on Joe's work for human rights and social justice, I will conclude with a quote from a promotional letter I co-authored with Jeff Hadden in 1978, followed by a quote from Joe himself. "In the 30s he

[Fichter] both defended organized labor and criticized corrupt union leadership; he advocated organization of white collar workers; and he pleaded for more humane treatment of Mexican migrant laborers. In the 40s he quietly achieved the first desegregation of Catholic colleges in the deep south. In the early 50s, he developed a strategy to desegregate the entire New Orleans archdiocesan school system. When a white citizens' council blocked this, he launched a decade-long educational effort which finally succeeded. In the 50s also he wrote that reputed differences between the sexes was cultural in origin. Long a member of a Catholic women's rights group, he has advocated ordination of women priests since the late 60s."

On May 7, 1975, Joseph Fichter stated on radio station WGSU, New Orleans: "I support the ratification of ERA, not because it is expedient or chivalrous to do so, or because a majority of Louisiana citizens favor it, but because it is right and just that we remove the discriminations suffered by women in all walks of life."

Joseph Fichter — priest, sociologist, feminist, social activist, friend, and colleague — we salute your life.