

Henry George and Catholic Doctrine *An Inquiry into the McGlynn Case*

By ERNEST LEOGRANDE

IT was a quiet fall afternoon. I was talking to a young woman I know. We were talking about Henry George.

"You know," she said, "there were three chaplains who preached at his funeral, Protestant, Jewish and Catholic," I hadn't known.

"The Catholic priest," she said, "was Fr. Edward McGlynn. Did you know he was excommunicated from the Catholic Church for supporting Henry George's theories and later on was reinstated?"

The statement hit me like a bombshell. I have been a Catholic all twenty-nine years of my life. Five years ago, in college economics, I was introduced to the Georgean theory of economics. Later, working in Columbus, Ohio, I attended Henry George classes. Never once had I heard of Fr. McGlynn, the excommunicated priest.

Was there then something which conflicted between the Catholic Church's teachings and Henry George's teachings? If there was, it was my duty as a Catholic to find out what it was.

And so I began to investigate. I discovered a story which stretched from New York to Rome, a story filled with bitter speeches and bitter charges, a most unfortunate but nevertheless a very real story.

A priest here in New York told me last month: "The Father McGlynn case was bitter. You will still find some vehement supporters and opponents of the man."

It's true that the case, long settled, still carries rankling memories for many people. But for me the important thing was that I found no conflict between Henry George's economic theories and the Church's tenets while at the same time I found my Church preserving its integrity through the whole incident.

The Case for Catholics

I don't intend to try to tell the McGlynn story chronologically or completely. I'm not equipped to do that. But I *would* like to talk about the case from a Catholic's viewpoint. I feel both Catholics and non-Catholics alike are interested in what Catholics think about the whole affair. In a rambling, restrained way, then, I'd like to talk about this *cause celebre*.

Much of my information is based on *Rebel, Priest and Prophet*, a biography of Fr. McGlynn by Stephen Bell, and *The Life of Cardinal Gibbons* by Allen Sinclair Will.

It was 1882 when Fr. McGlynn, pastor of St. Stephen's Church in New York City, publicly supported Henry George's "land-for-the-people" idea. Father Michael Corrigan was at that time coadjutor for Cardinal McCloskey, Archbishop of New York. When Fr. McCloskey died in 1885, Fr. Corrigan succeeded him. It was he who insisted so strongly that Fr. McGlynn take back his statements.

It's interesting to note that Mr. Bell says, "We see no reason to impugn the integrity or sincerity of the Archbishop." This is important, coming from Mr. Bell, who was no fan of Fr. Corrigan's.

There is no doubt in my mind that Fr. Corrigan *was* sincere. I do not think he was the tool of any political or financial interest. He may have been hasty, but he was sincere. He thought Henry George's ideas, as he understood them, contemplated a danger to the Church. He was reacting to that supposition.

Liberalism With Caution

The Catholic World for February, 1941, carried an article about "The Revival of Henry Georgism." It summarized this feeling by saying that an example of Catholic opposition to the scheme is founded on the "independent, democratic traditions of a people who fear state aggression. The hazard they rightly perceive is one to Church property as well as to their own security of position. If property in land is not a natural right, it must be a state concession. If the state can grant rights it can also take them away; and who is there to predict where that Leviathan will stop?" It continued, "It is not unthinkable that the whole movement may be fitted into that social and economic framework which is distinctly Catholic."

Note the two statements: On the one hand why some Catholics might fear a plan which they see as delegating undue power to the state; on the other, the expression that actually the plan may be fitted very well into the lives of Catholics.

Anyone wanting to analyze the Fr. Glynn case must first understand, then, that it was possible for Fr. Corrigan and his supporters to honestly consider Henry George as a menacing figure. (*To be continued next month.*)