

Father McGlynn and the Holy Office

by Will Lissner

In 1887 Father Edward McGlynn, the beloved priest of the New York Irish and other Catholics, and the learned pastor of St. Stephen's Church, founded the Anti-Poverty Society. It was to bring him into collision with an authoritarian Archbishop, Michael Corrigan, who was the lackey of Tammany Hall — and it was to bring him into conflict, too, with the Holy Office, which was misled by Corrigan and some of the ecclesiastical bureaucrats in Rome into forming the mistaken opinion that Henry George and Father McGlynn held doctrines which were inconsistent with those traditionally held by the Church.

In this conflict, Father McGlynn had the support of two Cardinals whose names are held in reverence today, Gibbons of Baltimore and Manning of London. And it is interesting that in the end, Henry George and Edward McGlynn won the greatest vindication — adoption of their position by the *Magisterium*, the teaching authority of the Church.

Let me recall a little of the background. Pope Pius IX had been a fellow traveler of the Italian liberals. Perhaps he thought that by espousing the milder social reforms he would preserve this political heritage of the Popes. But the Italian liberals let the Pope know that they were republicans, not dupes of a monarchy overladen with the trappings of religion. Pius Ninth's effort to save the monarchs, of whom he himself was one, from their inevitable doom, lost to the Church millions of workingmen and intellectuals who allied themselves with the growing democratic movement around the world.

We wish to abolish poverty because it is the fruitful source of blasphemies that go up to heaven; because it is the immediate cause and occasion that makes men doubt whether there be a God at all; because from poverty comes the constant hatred of the existing order of things; and where men are forced to believe that it is God's order, they say: We will have none of your God! — Father Edward McGlynn

When Leo XIII became Pope one of his first concerns was to undo the damage. In furtherance of this campaign he issued the encyclical letter, *Rerum Novarum* (On the

Condition of Labor), on May 15, 1891. This document did much to update the antedeluvian thinking of Catholic conservatism. But it was muddled on radical land reform; it left the impression that there was a private right to possess land which superseded the common right of all men to the use of the earth — that common right that had been asserted by the Latin and Greek Fathers of the Church from the Apostolic Age onward. Henry George read the Pope a lesson in the history of economic doctrines and in the relations between economics and ethics in his *The Condition of Labor*, an Open Letter to Pope Leo XIII. This work of George's had a profound influence upon Catholic social thinking in Europe and America.

When Father McGlynn was invited to write out a memorandum of his beliefs, it was fortunate that he had at his elbow Father Richard Burtzell. Like McGlynn he was a product of the Roman seminaries — a very quiet man who believed with McGlynn in the things he spoke about and in his right to say them. What they did was to set out that there are two rights: the common right to the use of land and the private right to possess it, and that an ethical land policy reconciled the two rights. On this basis the theologians judged that there was in McGlynn's belief nothing contrary to Catholic doctrine, and he was restored to his full offices.

But there is an aspect of the McGlynn case that is often overlooked. The position for which McGlynn was condemned was not the one held by George which admitted the necessity for private possession of land, but rather the view [suggested] in *Progress and Poverty*, that land was common property. Indeed, McGlynn went further than George and held that private possession of land was immoral.

Monsignor John A. Ryan, Monsignor Luigi G. Ligutti and other distinguished Catholic scholars thereafter labored long and hard to clarify Catholic thinking on the land question. But still the problem remained of how to reconcile the common right and the private right to land when they are in conflict. The answer came from Pius XII, one of the most scholarly and saintly of modern Popes. In his Christmas messages of 1943 and 1944 he made it clear that the common right to use land had precedence over the private right of possession. Thus he brought land reform within the purview of modern ethics.

But Father McGlynn's vindication was to be even more complete. At the second Vatican Council the Council Fathers ranged the Church on the side of land reform in the Constitution on the Church in the Modern World. And in June and July, 1966, when the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization held the World Land Reform Conference in Rome, Pope Paul VI entertained the delegates at the Vatican, had his librarian ransack the archives so that the history of the Church's pioneering in land reform from the time of the Fathers of the Church to the present could be

illustrated with ancient documents, and himself made a speech to the delegates in which he endorsed land reform, particularly with respect to reform of land tenure to end land monopoly. Pope Paul quoted to them from the Council the doctrine that had seemed irrefutable to George, McGlynn and Burtzell:

God intended the earth and all things in it for the use of all peoples, in such a way that the goods of creation should abound equitably in the hands of all, according to the dictates of justice, which is inseparable from charity. Whatever the forms of ownership, adapted to the lawful institutions of the peoples and in accordance with divers and changing circumstances, this universal apportionment of goods must be borne in mind at all times.

One further point. Charles A. Barker, in his admirable, carefully researched biography of Henry George, says on page 489 that “the works of Henry George were actually denounced by the Congregation of the Inquisition.”

What actually happened was this. Archbishop Corrigan, with the support of Bishop McQuaid of Rochester and a few of their friends in the Roman Curia of reactionary inclination, persuaded the Holy Office to begin the process of condemnation. The Holy Office circulated to the bishops, as is the custom, the text of a proposed condemnation. Cardinals Gibbons and Manning, and possibly others, wrote letters opposing the ban, which effectively ended the process. The Pope never approved the condemnation.

Hence the Holy Office, after circulating it, discarded it. The Church, in its long history, has committed many grievous sins. But it never condemned *Progress and Poverty*.

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