

Father Edward F. Boyle: Boston's Labor Priest

Joseph J. Fahey and Thomas A. Kochan

Boston and the nation's labor management community lost a treasure on November 13, 2007. Father Edward F. Boyle S.J., Boston's Labor Priest who, for the past thirty seven years, served as the Executive Secretary of the Labor Guild of the Boston Archdiocese died of cancer at the age of 76.

The Labor Guild was created in 1946 by Cardinal Cushing to educate Catholic workers about their rights and responsibilities. Today, the Guild continues to run a School of Industrial Relations and offers classes to workers in labor law, collective bargaining, steward training, union governance, parliamentary procedure, public speaking, organizing, and the philosophy of unionism. Hundreds of students benefit each year from experts and practitioners in labor, management, and arbitration who contribute their services. The Guild also provides a neutral venue for collective bargaining, arbitration, and union elections. But most importantly, over the years the Guild, under Father Boyle's leadership, has grown to become the moral voice for labor management relations, providing opportunities for the area's leading union and management leaders to meet, build close personal relationships, and explore ways to work on shared problems.

On November 30th the Guild's 1,200 members and leadership in Boston's labor management community came together for the annual Cushing-Gavin Awards dinner to celebrate the contributions of selected leaders. This year's "neutral" award went to Father Ed and in recognition of his passing and to honor his service and memory, the award will be changed to bear his name.

Father Ed was one of the last in a long tradition of Jesuit labor priests, just as the Labor Guild is the only institution of its kind left in the nation. Yet right up to the end of his life Father Ed argued with conviction and deep emotion that the Guild is needed even more today than ever before. As he said in his last Mass, fittingly televised on Labor Day Sunday, "the labor market climate in almost all sectors continues to deteriorate; the gap between worker and manager, between rich and poor, threatens the very moral foundation of our society." He went on to say "our economic system has lost its moral compass" and needs to be redirected to serve the interests of all in society, not just those at the top of the economic ladder.

True to his and the Guild's philosophy, however, Ed Boyle stated that "the only valid opposition to this ongoing situation must be a moral one grounded in God and God's will." Even as his health declined in the last months of life, he led the Guild's Executive Board in developing a new vision of the Guild's role, one that would continue to be grounded in the best Catholic social teachings but

updated to reflect the critical problems facing workers, employers, and the economy today. The new vision calls for greater efforts at upgrading immigrant and other low wage worker rights and dignity, more use of modern media to surface the moral issues at stake in contemporary debates over worker rights, union and management and government responsibilities, and the need to engage people of all faiths and religious traditions in efforts to achieve workplace justice, harmony, and efficiency. He was immensely pleased with this new vision, knowing that it would carry on his ministry after he was gone in ways that fit the needs of the day.

Ed Boyle did not take the standard path to the priesthood. He attended public schools in Belmont, MA before attending Dartmouth College on an R.O.T.C. scholarship. After he received his A.B. in Economics from Dartmouth he served as a U.S. Navy officer for three years. He then received an M.B.A. and, after that, took a position in finance with Seatrains Lines in New York City. In reflecting on his experience this summer, he said it didn't take him long to realize something was missing. "I was going down the wrong path at 100 miles an hour" by pursuing a life in which "money and winning is everything."

After attending several Jesuit retreats Ed surprised many by deciding to become a priest and he entered the Jesuit Novitiate in 1958. He left the world of finance and success for the milieu of simplicity and spirituality. He particularly appreciated being exposed to "the whole new world of the lives of the saints." He also encountered the pioneering work in social justice of Frs. John A. Ryan, George Higgins, Jack Egan, and the Jesuits Phil Carey, Leo Brown, and Phil Land. He was inspired by the witness to the corporal and spiritual works of mercy that he saw in Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker.

In the course of his studies in philosophy and theology at Weston Theological Seminary Ed met Father Mort Gavin S.J. who served as Chaplain to the Labor Guild from 1961 to 1984. Seminarian Ed Boyle was particularly attracted to Fr. Gavin's ministry and he began to spend time helping out at the Labor Guild. Following his ordination in 1969, Fr. Ed taught at BC High for a year and then formally began his ministry at the Labor Guild in 1970. He was strongly attracted to the Guild's mission to promote the "dignity of the individual person/worker as the cornerstone of a just economic system" through "democratic trade unionism" and collective bargaining.

Ed was particularly fond of the opening sentence in the 1986 U.S. Bishops' Pastoral Letter on Economic Justice: "Economic decisions have human consequences and moral content; they help or hurt people, strengthen or weaken family life, advance or diminish the quality of justice in our land." The word "justice" was never far from Ed Boyle's lips; "Justice is central to our spirituality" he said in an interview this summer.

The President of the Labor Guild's Executive Board, Marty Callaghan of Boston Newspaper Printing Pressmen's Union No. 3, summed up the feelings of all who knew Father Ed when he said, "Fr. Ed was an inspiration to all of us here at the Guild. He was the heart and soul of this organization. He worked tirelessly to ensure the continued mission of the Guild. He was truly the pastor of the labor flock in Boston. He counseled us, married us, baptized our children and buried our loved ones." Board member Greg Thornton, Senior Vice President for Employee Relations and Operations of the Boston Globe, said, "Fr. Ed encouraged collective bargaining among Guild labor and management members to be conducted in a dignified and civil environment that has often been lost or absent in other parts of the country. His example and standards will be sorely missed." Guild alumna and Board member Eileen Norton, R.N., Director of Organizing at the Massachusetts Nurses Association, stated that "Fr. Ed was one in a million! He saw the whole picture and provided a moral dimension to the dignity of work you just don't get in other places." The Guild's Board plans to continue and even to expand the good work that was shepherded by Fr. Ed for so long.

In one of his last conversations Fr. Ed said: "I have three families: My flesh and blood family; my Jesuit religious community, and; finally the Guild family." All three families mourn the loss and celebrate the life of this holy, humble, and remarkable man. Fr. Ed may have been the last of the great Jesuit labor priests but his work will continue. He would have it no other way.

Joseph J. Fahey is Professor of Religious Studies at Manhattan College.
Thomas A. Kochan is George Maverick Bunker Professor of Management at MIT's Sloan School of Management.