

Catholic Social Reform and the New Deal

The Papers of Monsignor John A. Ryan and Bishop Francis J. Haas

BY JOSEPH M. TURRINI

ON OCTOBER 8, 1936, Monsignor John A. Ryan urged millions of listeners to his nationally broadcast radio speech to reject the advice of fellow Catholic cleric Father Charles Coughlin and vote for President Franklin D. Roosevelt in the upcoming election. The Democratic National Committee had prodded a reluctant Ryan to step into the fray of national politics because it feared that Catholic voters might be swayed by Coughlin's weekly insistence that FDR was a communist who no longer deserved the support of Catholics. Coughlin, the famous radio priest and demagogue of the 1930s who was on his way to being an ignoble anti-Semite, had recently turned violently against Roosevelt.

Ryan's speech, "Roosevelt Safeguards America," was the most public and prominent moment in his long and illustrious career as a social justice advocate and theorist. Ryan created and nurtured a strain of Catholic progressivism that insisted that Catholic clergy should be active in social reform movements like the labor movement and the New Deal. Indeed, it might well be said that Ryan was the founder of an American tradition of Catholic economic and political progressivism that still inspires Catholics today.

The intellectual center of this Catholic social reform tradition was on the campus of The Catholic University of America (CUA), where Ryan taught and served as Director of the Social Action Department of the National Catholic Welfare Council for most of his productive career. The scholarship and activities of a number of CUA faculty and students embodied the social reform philosophy Ryan expressed through his voluminous writings, teaching, and occasional political activism.

Perhaps the most nationally prominent and active Catholic progressive in the Ryan tradition was Bishop Francis J. Haas. A student at CUA in the early 1920s who was profoundly influenced by Ryan, Haas played a pivotal role in Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal as a public representative on several Government boards in the 1930s and as one of the busiest and most respected labor arbitrators in the country.

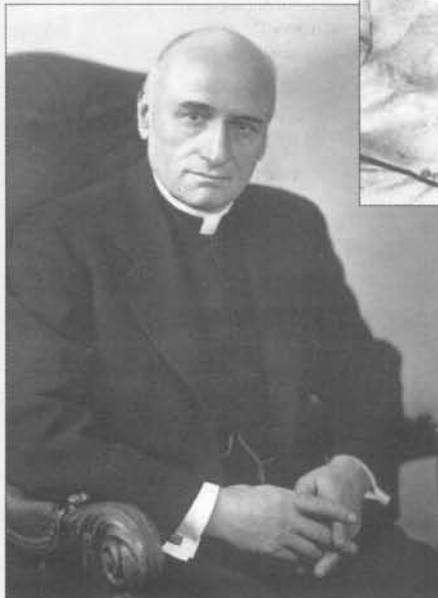
The papers of Monsignor John A. Ryan and Bishop Francis J. Haas are housed at the Department of Archives, Manuscript, and Museum Collections at The Catholic University of America (CUA Archives). A recent National Historical Publications and Records Commission grant provided the CUA Archives with the resources

to process the Ryan and Haas Papers. The grant also provided funds to process the papers of Catholic labor leaders Philip Murray and John Brophy, and the Congress of Industrial Organizations Records.

John A. Ryan was the most prolific, well known, and important Catholic social reform advocate and theorist in America between the time of his first published book in 1906, *A Living Wage*, and his death in 1945. His economic and political philosophies were initially grounded in his experiences as the eldest child in a large Irish-Catholic farm family. Born in Minnesota in 1869, he witnessed firsthand the difficult plight of small farmers and supported the populist movement as a young man.

Ryan entered the St. Paul Seminary in 1892, the year Populist Party Presidential candidate James Weaver amassed just over one million popular votes. Ryan commented angrily in his jour-

nal "Father Francis J. Haas (center), with Minnesota Governor Floyd Olson (left) and Federal conciliator E. H. Dunnigan at the conclusion of the Minneapolis truckers' strike, 1934. Photograph courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society and the Minneapolis Tribune.



nal following the Populist Party's defeat that the "time servers and hypocrites are rewarded while honest patriots are the object of mercenary ridicule. When will the eyes of the masses be opened?" Pope Leo XIII's 1891 encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*, provided a solid religious basis and intellectual foundation for a philosophy grounded in Ryan's personal experiences and family background.

Ryan never wavered from his support of an economic system based squarely on the sanctity of private property and capitalism, but one that also distributed

Monsignor John A. Ryan, ca. 1935. Photograph from The Catholic University of America Archives.

wealth and power more equitably. Excessive individual greed, Ryan argued, created a morally and economically unhealthy misdistribution of wealth. These were radical ideas for many in the Catholic Church, and they sometimes led Ryan into confrontations with other clergy. Ryan's support for a Child Labor Amendment in the 1920s, for example, resulted in a dramatic clash with the powerful archbishop of Boston, Cardinal William O'Connell. O'Connell complained about Ryan's support of the Child Labor Amendment to Archbishop Michael Curly, Ryan's superior. O'Connell insisted that Ryan needed to be rebuked and stopped from his "public activities and irresponsible communications."

Although the Child Labor Amendment was not ratified, the idea of child labor legislation, and many of Ryan's other economic remedies for the vagaries of free market capitalism, eventually surfaced within mainstream political thought. In 1919 Ryan wrote the postwar *Program of Social Reconstruction*, issued by the bishops of the National Catholic Welfare Council (NCWC). This *Bishop's Program*, as it came to be called, argued forcefully for increased government activism to create a more just distribution of wealth and power in a reconstructed post-World War I period. Many of the ideas Ryan expressed in the *Bishop's Program* emerged a decade and a half later during Franklin D. Roosevelt's presidential years in New Deal agencies such as the National Recovery Administration and the National Labor Board.

Ryan was both personally and politically close to the popular four-term president. In 1937 Ryan became the first Catholic priest to give the invocation at a Presidential inauguration. A genuine friendship and respect appears in the correspondence between the two men. Roosevelt congratulated Ryan and emphasized his tenacity and longevity in social reform struggles in a 1942 letter to Ryan: "But in these troubled times it is reassuring to hear so clear a call to duty and to know that you are still on the firing line. We need more men of your vision and courage." Ryan's political support and personal relationship with Roosevelt garnered him the nickname, "The Right Reverend New Dealer."

Although politically active at times, Ryan was first and foremost a Catholic economist and intellectual, so it is not surprising that his papers focus heavily on this component of his life. His output of articles, books, commentaries, reviews, and public speeches is impressive and well documented throughout the 42 linear feet that comprise his personal papers. The Ryan Papers also contain extensive correspondence that covers primarily the last 20 years (1925-1945) of his life; subject files that he accumulated and maintained as references for his writings and speeches; teaching notebooks; and a journal he kept as a seminary student in the 1890s. This thin journal is the only available source that provides a glimpse into Ryan as a young, radical Populist Party sympathizer. Finally, the Ryan Papers include a number of audio recordings of speeches and talks. Among the audio recordings is a copy of Ryan's 1936 speech in behalf of Roosevelt.

Monsignor Francis J. Haas' clerical and public life was firmly grounded in the Catholic social reform tradition created and nurtured by Ryan at CUA. Born in Racine, Wisconsin, in 1889, Haas was ordained as a priest in 1913 and worked as a parish priest at Holy Rosary Parish in Milwaukee until he began graduate studies at CUA in 1919.

Ryan and the social reform milieu he helped create at CUA deeply impacted Haas' intellectual development. The young priest's published dissertation, *Shop Collective Bargaining: A Study of Wage Determination in the Men's Garment Industry* (1922), examined collective bargaining agreements in the gar-

ment industry and foretold his lifetime involvement in labor relations and support of the collective bargaining process.

Haas vigorously championed labor unions as an essential component of a just, democratic society. He maintained in a 1933 speech that "every worker has a duty to himself and to his fellow men to join his union and to be proud of membership . . . Given two men of equal ability, one a union man and the other non-union, unquestionably the union man is the better. He recognizes his obligations to himself, his family, and his country."

Haas gained national prominence as a public servant after returning to CUA as a professor and administrator in the 1930s. He served as a public representative on a number of New Deal agencies, including the National Recovery Administration, the National Labor Board, the first short-lived National Labor Relations Board, and the Works Progress Administration.

But Haas kept busiest as an independent itinerant labor arbitrator and mediator. He flew and rode the train, often at a moment's notice, throughout the country to mediate labor impasses. Private industry, unions, the National Labor Board, the National Mediation Board, and the Mediation and Conciliation Services Department of the U.S. Department of Labor all utilized his keen arbitration services routinely from the mid-1930s through the mid-1940s. He arbitrated and mediated well over a thousand labor conflicts.

Haas was directly involved in settling some of the most important, confrontational, and violent labor battles in American history. He arbitrated the Minneapolis truckers' strike in 1934, a conflict that left two strikers dead, and difficult and trying strikes at Allis-Chalmers in Wisconsin in 1939 and 1941. The strikes at Allis-Chalmers pitted the militant left-wing United Automobile Workers Union Local #248 against an equally obstinate management team. The 1941 Allis-Chalmers strike seriously threatened America's wartime production.

Haas' public service work extended to civil rights. President Roosevelt named him the first chair of the Fair Employment Practices Committee in 1943. In 1947, 4 years after Haas had been advanced to the episcopacy and transferred to the Diocese of Grand Rapids, President Harry Truman appointed Haas to the President's Committee on Civil Rights. Haas remained the Bishop of Grand Rapids until he died in 1953.

The Francis J. Haas Papers concentrate heavily on his role as a public servant. Two-thirds of the collection's 64 linear feet document his work as an arbitrator and his work on Government agencies. These include the National Recovery Administration, Works Progress Administration, Wisconsin Labor Relations Board, National Labor Board, National Labor Relations Board, Fair Employment Practices Commission, the President's Commission on Civil Rights, and the National Resources Planning Board.

Haas' religious and professional activities are also documented in the collection. The Haas Papers include, for example, a large run of sermons dating back to his earliest days as a priest in the 1910s, and research notes, drafts, and galley proofs for *Man and Society*, a well-received sociology text written by Haas in 1930 (revised and republished in 1952).

The activist Catholic social reform tradition encouraged by Ryan continues today among many Catholic clerics and lay people. Priests supporting Justice for Janitors campaigns in Los Angeles and a newspaper strike in Detroit, Michigan, in the 1990s carry on the social reform vision to which Ryan and Haas dedicated their lives.

The CUA Archives holds some of the most important collections documenting the social reform impulse in the Catholic Church. The Francis J. Haas Papers and the (continued on page 19)

be a most flagrant usurpation." Furthermore, with the "multiplicity of sects" throughout America, Madison asserted that no one sect "could oppress and persecute the rest."⁷

Throughout the ratification debate, Antifederalists demanded that freedom of religion be protected. A majority of ratifying conventions recommended that an amendment guaranteeing religious freedom be added to the Constitution. In recommending a bill of rights in the first Federal Congress on June 8, 1789, Madison proposed that "the civil rights of none shall be abridged on account of religious belief or worship, nor shall any national religion be established, nor shall the full and equal rights of conscience be in any manner or on any pretext infringed." He also proposed that "no state shall violate the equal rights of conscience."⁸

The prohibition on states was removed by the Senate, while the restrictions on the Federal Government were combined and recast into what came to be the First Amendment: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." The exact meaning of this prohibition has not been easy to ascertain. Perhaps President Thomas Jefferson interpreted it best in his response to the Baptist Association of Danbury, Connecticut, on January 1, 1802. "Believing with you that religion is a matter which lies solely between man and his God, that he owes account to none other for his faith or his worship, that the legislative powers of government reach actions only, and not opinions, I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should 'make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof,' thus building a wall of separation between church and state."⁹ ❖

JOHN P. KAMINSKI IS CO-EDITOR, WITH GASPARE J. SALADINO, OF *THE DOCUMENTARY HISTORY OF THE RATIFICATION OF THE CONSTITUTION*.

Notes

¹ Madison to Jefferson, Richmond, January 22, 1786, Robert A. Rutland et al., eds., *The Papers of James Madison* (Chicago: 1973), VIII: 473.

² *Ibid.*, 474.

³ Egbert Benson to John Jay, Poughkeepsie, July 6, 1779, Henry P. Johnston, ed., *The Correspondence and Public Papers of John Jay* (4 vols., New York, 1890-93), I: 211-12.

⁴ Merrill Jensen, John P. Kaminski, and Gaspare J. Saladino, eds., *The Documentary History of the Ratification of the Constitution* (16 vols. to date, Madison, WI: 1976-), II: 593, 595. Hereafter cited as DHRC.

⁵ DHRC, V: 1003.

⁶ DHRC, X: 1213.

⁷ DHRC, X: 1223-24.

⁸ Helen E. Veit, Kenneth R. Bowling, and Charlene Bangs Bickford, eds., *Creating the Bill of Rights: The Documentary Record from the First Federal Congress* (Baltimore: 1991), 12-13.

⁹ Merrill D. Peterson, ed., *Thomas Jefferson: Writings* (New York: 1984), 510.

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John A. Ryan Papers are complemented by other collections, such as the National Catholic Welfare Council (NCWC) Records and the Monsignor George Higgins Papers. Monsignor Higgins is the retired director of the Social Action Department of the NCWC, an organization that Ryan founded in 1920 and headed until his death in 1945.

Higgins' work in the labor movement for the last 50 years represents the continuation of the Catholic social reform impulse

at CUA. These Catholic reform sources are supplemented by a strong core of related labor union collections, like the Philip Murray Papers, the John Brophy Papers, and the Terence Powderly Papers, also held at the CUA Archives. The NHPRC grant to process the John A. Ryan Papers, Francis J. Haas Papers, Philip Murray Papers, John Brophy Papers, and the Congress of Industrial Organizations Records has helped the CUA Archives provide increased access to a strong component of its holdings that document the social reform activities of the Catholic Church and organized labor in the United States. ❖

JOSEPH M. TURRINI IS PROJECT ARCHIVIST, DEPARTMENT OF ARCHIVES, MANUSCRIPTS, AND MUSEUM COLLECTIONS, THE CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF AMERICA, IN WASHINGTON, DC.

DOCUMENTING LIFE IN THE MARGINS (Continued from page 10)

right a figure of signal importance in the history of American radio, the rise of mass media, and the emergence of Southern California as a disseminator of America's cultural and religious fare. All of this was at risk.

In 1990, Spittler turned to the NHPRC for help. His grant-writing fortunes offer sobering but instructive lessons for any institution facing a similar predicament. Between 1990 and early 1993, Spittler twice submitted extensively researched, well-considered, time-consuming proposals. Both bounced back. Instead of surrendering, however, he dug in. Aided by useful counsels from NHPRC staff, the New Testament scholar, writer, administrator, and religious historian now jumped on the steep learning curve of archival science and its funding peculiarities.

The two "starter" proposals taught Spittler the importance of working locally. NHPRC funding, he realized, was not merely a transaction between the Du Plessis center and a faceless agency in Washington. Rather, it was a collaborative effort between Federal, state, and local networks. In particular, he turned to the State Historical Records Advisory Board, not as a committee of impersonal "judges" but as colleagues and consultants. He found the board members eager to help; one even came to assess the institution's archival needs and make recommendations. Finally, the early proposals revealed the importance of interpreting a project for its reviewers. Archives often seek support for the preservation of records pertaining to individuals or movements that are virtually unknown to the public at large, including that share of the public reviewing its proposal. To address that reality, Spittler recruited a *known* authority—one of America's leading religious historians—to explain the *unknown*: the nature and importance of the Du Plessis materials and the urgent need to preserve them.

The third time was indeed a charm. In late 1993, Spittler submitted the proposal that brought the Center the support it so desperately needed. The Center hired its first full-time archivist, Kate McGinn, and took an important step toward professionalism. The years since that time have seen the archives grow toward its dreams. Fuller is currently undergoing a reorganization of its library and archives that may well mandate a more ambitious plan of archival preservation. As the archive, now under the direction of Dr. Cecil M. Robeck, Jr., both widens and tightens its net, and as it matches increased documentary retention with broader access, it will more ably meet its responsibility as a curator of collective memory. ❖

ROGER G. ROBINS IS ARCHIVIST OF THE DAVID DU PLESSIS CENTER AT FULLER THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY IN PASADENA, CA.