

Father Edward McGlynn: A Controversial Catholic Priest

BY GEOFFREY COBB

A tension has existed in Catholic communities between reformers advocating political changes to help the poor and conservatives who fear radical ideologies could lead to violence and tyranny. In the 1880s and 1890s, in New York City, this tension exploded into a widely publicized conflict between Fr. Edward McGlynn, a priest who was a passionate supporter of Henry George's controversial ideas on how to alleviate poverty, and his superior, Michael Corrigan, archbishop of the New York archdiocese.

FROM SIMILAR BACKGROUNDS

Although McGlynn and Corrigan vehemently disagreed, they came from strikingly similar backgrounds. Both were Irish Americans born in the 1830s into large relatively well-off families, one in New York and one in Newark. Also, after they entered the seminary, both were chosen to go to Rome where they received their doctorates in theology and philosophy from the newly opened Pontifical North American College. They were even ordained within three years of each other at the same place, the basilica of St. John Lateran in Rome.

Their paths diverged in America. Corrigan, who never had his own parish, returned to New Jersey in 1864, joining the faculty at Seton Hall College and the Immaculate Conception Seminary as professor of theology and history. Corrigan befriended Bernard McQuaid who

would later become the first bishop of Rochester, New York and an important conservative, anti-McGlynn, advisor to Corrigan. When McQuaid

became a bishop in 1869, Corrigan succeeded him as Seton Hall president and vicar general of the diocese of Newark. Corrigan's meteoric rise continued when he was named bishop of Newark in 1873 at age thirty-four. In 1880, he was named co-adjutor to New York's Cardinal McCloskey, and finally in 1885 Corrigan was named archbishop for the New York archdiocese.



A SON OF DONEGAL IMMIGRANTS

McGlynn was exposed to poverty from his youth. Although he was not born poor, McGlynn's parents were Donegal immigrants

who told him during his childhood of the famine starving hundreds of thousands in Ireland. He was also born in the Lower East Side, home to many of New York's poor. When McGlynn was a child, his father died leaving his mother to raise eleven children.

McGlynn's pastoral ministry re-enforced his awareness of poverty. His first assignment was in St. Joseph's Church on Sixth Avenue in Manhattan. Its pastor, the famous Fr. Thomas Farrell, was known for his liberal views on poverty, slavery, and social justice. These profoundly influenced McGlynn's strong affinity for an emerging liberal Catholicism. McGlynn

Photo:

Fr. Edward McGlynn emerged as a prominent and controversial spokesperson on behalf of the poor inside and outside his parish. McGlynn, born in New York City in 1837, was one of eleven children of parents from County Donegal who had immigrated in the 1820s. He was ordained in 1860 and served in several Manhattan parishes (St. Joseph's, St. Brigid's, and St. James') before becoming pastor of St. Stephen's in 1866, a position he held until January, 1887. At that point, after several years of disagreements with Church leaders, he was removed for insubordination. In July, he was excommunicated. Courtesy of Henry George School of Social Science.

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Photo:

Taken in 1859, this photo shows Edward McGlynn (front row, third from left) as a student in Rome.

In New York, he had attended the Thirteenth Street Grammar School and the Free Academy. At age thirteen, he was sent for education in Italy at the Urban College of the Society for Propagation of the Faith through the support of his parish priest and Archbishop John Hughes. McGlynn later transferred to the Pontifical North American College in Rome and received a doctorate in theology and philosophy. Courtesy of Wikipedia.



was then assigned to St. Brigid's, a parish in the impoverished Lower East Side. In 1865, at the request of his dying former pastor, Dr. Cummings of St. Stephen's on East Twenty-eighth Street, McGlynn became assistant pastor. Within months, Cummings died and McGlynn, aged 29, replaced him. St. Stephen's, with an estimated 25,000 members, was actually bigger and more important than most American dioceses.

McGlynn rapidly endeared himself to the parish. He hired the famed decorator of the Capitol Building in Washington, Constantino Brumidi, who beautified the church's sanctuary, painting stunning murals and a striking altar piece depicting the crucifixion. But it was McGlynn's work with the poor that stood out. A lifelong friend, Fr. Sylvester Malone, wrote that

Dr. McGlynn was not originally poor, but he lived among and worked for the poor unceasingly. He knew the hardships and 'horrid drudgery' of their lot, the narrowness and cheerlessness of their blighted lives and he was profoundly touched by the misery, want and suffering he saw everywhere. (Malone, 24)

Malone said that every member of the congregation worshiped the ruggedly handsome McGlynn, who stood 6' 2" and whose passionate oratory often attacked poverty and injustice. Parishioners soon began to refer to him as "soggarth aroon," or "beloved priest," in Gaelic.

QUESTIONING THE ECONOMIC ORDER

In 1873, a severe economic recession occurred, hurting many of McGlynn's poor parishioners.

The poverty he witnessed daily made him begin to question the economic and social order in America. He recalled:

I had begun to feel life made a burden by the never-ending procession of men, women and children coming to my door begging not so much for alms as for employment, not asking for food, but for my influence and letters of recommendation, and personally appealing to me to obtain for them an opportunity of working for their daily bread. I felt that no matter how much I might give them, even though I reserved nothing for myself, even though I involved myself hopelessly in debt, I could accomplish nothing. I began to ask myself "Is there no remedy? Is this God's order that the poor shall be constantly becoming poorer in all our large communities, the world over?" (Malone, 107)

McGlynn first came into conflict with Church officials over the question of establishing a separate Catholic parochial school system which Corrigan

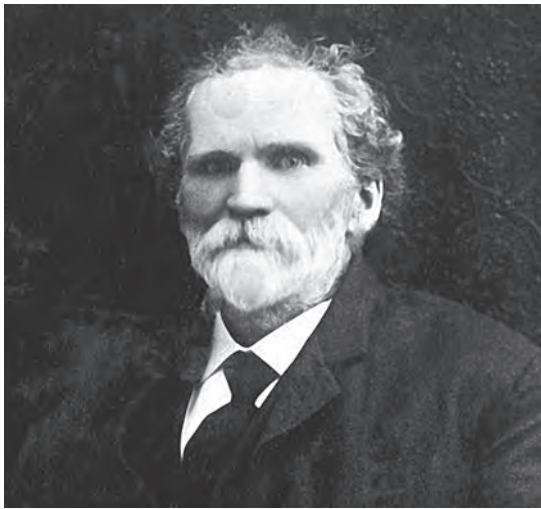


strongly supported. McGlynn, a product of New York City's public-school system, questioned the need for parochial education in an 1870

Photo:

Fr. McGlynn became pastor for the St. Vincent's in 1866. The parish had been centered in this church building (designed by James Renwick, Jr.) on East 28th Street since 1854. Under the initial care of Fr. Jeremiah Cummings, the parish was a thriving one and, with its many Irish parishioners, was among the largest in New York City for several years. In 1887 McGlynn was removed as pastor by Archbishop Michael Corrigan. Courtesy of *Daytonian* in Manhattan.

New York Sun interview. As a graduate of public schools himself, McGlynn felt that the first duty of the Church was to teach the gospel rather than secular knowledge. He also felt few Catholic



schools could compete academically with the public schools, and he expressed his opinion in the *Sun* that forming Catholic schools would create a dangerous distance between parochial-school students and neighboring public-school children.

McGlynn was also profoundly ecumenical when ecumenism was regarded with suspicion by many in the archdiocese. McGlynn became a leader among a variety of religious groups, not just for his charity but also for his learning and excellent judgement. Many prominent Jews and Protestants visited his church. He shared a stage with Henry Ward Beecher, a noted anti-Catholic, which won him a rebuke from Corrigan in 1886. He even raised money for the synagogue on East twenty-ninth Street, earning McGlynn the deep affection and respect of the rabbi there.

Most of all, though, it was his advocacy for the ideas of author, social reformer, and mayoral candidate Henry George that put McGlynn on a collision course with the archbishop. George wrote one the most widely read and controversial books of the nineteenth century, *Progress and Poverty*, which was published in 1880 and advocated taxing land ownership to help the poor.

ADVOCATING FOR HENRY GEORGE

McGlynn first read George's work in 1880, discovering there a solution to the vexing problem

of deepening poverty. McGlynn soon became George's most devoted champion, helping to legitimize him in the eyes of more skeptical Irish Americans, stating:

I found an excellent exposition on the industrial and social conditions of man in George's book, a poem of philosophy, a prophecy, a prayer. In language rare and unequalled the author presents a picture of perishing lives. And in glowing poetic language tells of God's bounties to his children, but somehow with the increase in the use of wealth there is an increase of poverty, and where there is the congregation of the greatest wealth, by its side is the greatest poverty and misery.... I had never found so clear an exposition of the cause of the trouble, involuntary poverty, and its remedy, as I found in this monumental work. I became all aglow with a new and clear light that had come to my mind in such full consonance with all my thoughts and aspirations from the earliest childhood., and I did, as best as I could, to justify the teachings of that great work based upon the essence of all religions the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man. (Malone, 24)



George's call for a tax on land was not limited to America. It included Ireland, which was expe-

Photo:

Patrick Ford is best known as publisher of the *Irish World* and *American Industrial Liberator*, one of the most widely read newspapers among the Irish in America in the late nineteenth century. Born in County Galway, as a boy Ford immigrated with his parents to Boston in 1845. After employment as a young man in newspaper publishing, he fought in the Civil War with the Ninth Massachusetts Regiment. In 1870 he settled in New York City and founded the *Irish World* newspaper. Like Fr. McGlynn, he was influenced by the ideas of Henry George and argued for economic changes like those George was to propose in his book, *Progress and Poverty*. In 1878 Ford changed the name of his newspaper, adding "*American Industrial Liberator*," to reflect that support. Ford also supported Land League activities in Ireland and used his paper to solicit donations for a Land League fund. Courtesy of RTE

Photo:

Archbishop Michael Corrigan was born in Newark, New Jersey and was the third archbishop for the New York diocese. The son of Irish immigrants, Corrigan was educated in Catholic colleges in Maryland and studied at the North American College in Rome. He was ordained in 1863 in the Basilica of St. John Lateran and received a doctorate in divinity in the next year. He served as president of Seton Hall College and, in 1873, became bishop of the Newark diocese, which in that era encompassed the entire state of New Jersey. In 1885, he became Archbishop of the New York diocese. Courtesy of MacNamara's Blog.

riencing a peasant eviction crisis that spawned the famous Irish Land League. McGlynn shared a passionate concern for the fate of poor Irish peasants with Patrick Ford, editor of the widely read New York newspaper, the *Irish World*, who became an ally of both George and McGlynn. Ford denounced not just British landlordism, but all landlordism, drawing parallels between economic oppression in the United States and Ireland. In recognition of George's ideas, Ford expanded the name of his paper from *The Irish World* to *The Irish World and The American Industrial Liberator*. Ford wanted to redistribute the land in Ireland, believing that it was absolutely necessary that land be in the hands of the people. He stated that

The struggle in Ireland is radically and essentially the same struggle in America, a contest against legalized forms of oppression. (Bell, 102)

George and McGlynn met and, finding much in common, they became friends. George's ideas disseminated by Ford, along with McGlynn's speeches, transformed the way Irish Americans saw oppression from an ethnic, cultural and religious oppression to a socio-economic one.

ORDER FROM A CARDINAL

In Rome, Cardinal Giovanni Simeoni, who headed the Church's organization charged with spreading the faith, on learning of McGlynn's support for George saw it as a dangerous attack on the sacred rights of property—and therefore as socialism. Early in the 1880s the Cardinal sent an order to Archbishop Corrigan for silencing McGlynn or even for his suspension, if necessary. Corrigan supported the British over the Land League on questions of property rights in Ireland. But he did not deem McGlynn's suspension necessary. The archbishop though, forbade McGlynn to make any more speeches on the Land League, which McGlynn promised to do. But while speaking at a charity event for Irish peasants, he again invoked George's ideas on rural Irish poverty, earning him a further rebuke from Simeoni and a stern Corrigan lecture. Simeoni repeatedly tried to get McGlynn to make a retraction or modification for his support of George's ideas,

but McGlynn stood firm.

In his biography of McGlynn, Stephen Bell argued that Corrigan never really understood George's arguments, stating that

While the archbishop was actuated by the best intentions in the world, it was impossible for him with his faulty understanding of the points at issue to render to the Vatican an accurate and fair account of George's ideas. (Bell, 31)

Corrigan increasingly only saw McGlynn's public support for George as willful insubordination.

THE ELECTION OF 1886

George's campaign to be elected mayor of New York City in 1886 sealed McGlynn's fate. Corrigan and many in the archdiocese were strong supporters of Tammany Hall, whose candidate for mayor, Abram Hewitt, was threatened by George's popularity among the Irish working class. Corrigan, on learning that McGlynn intended to speak on October 1 on George's behalf, forbade him to do so. The speech, which was widely advertised, would draw huge crowds and media attention and McGlynn felt his absence from the podium would be a blow to the Catholic church and to its support of the working man. McGlynn told George of Corrigan's prohibition, urging him to go to the archbishop. When George did so, Corrigan was cordial but also showed him undated letters from Rome to Cardinal McCloskey demanding McGlynn's suspension "at the express order of the Pope because in his Land League speeches he had taught doctrines that were contrary to Church teachings and McGlynn had shown 'a propensity to favor revolution in Ireland.'"

McGlynn defied the archbishop's order, explaining his reasons in a letter to Corrigan:

I, in view of my rights and duties as a citizen, which were not surrendered why I became a priest, am determined to do what I can to support Mr. George; and I am also stimulated by my love for the poor and oppressed laboring classes, which seems particularly consonant with the charitable and philanthropic character of the priesthood. (O'Donnell, 127)

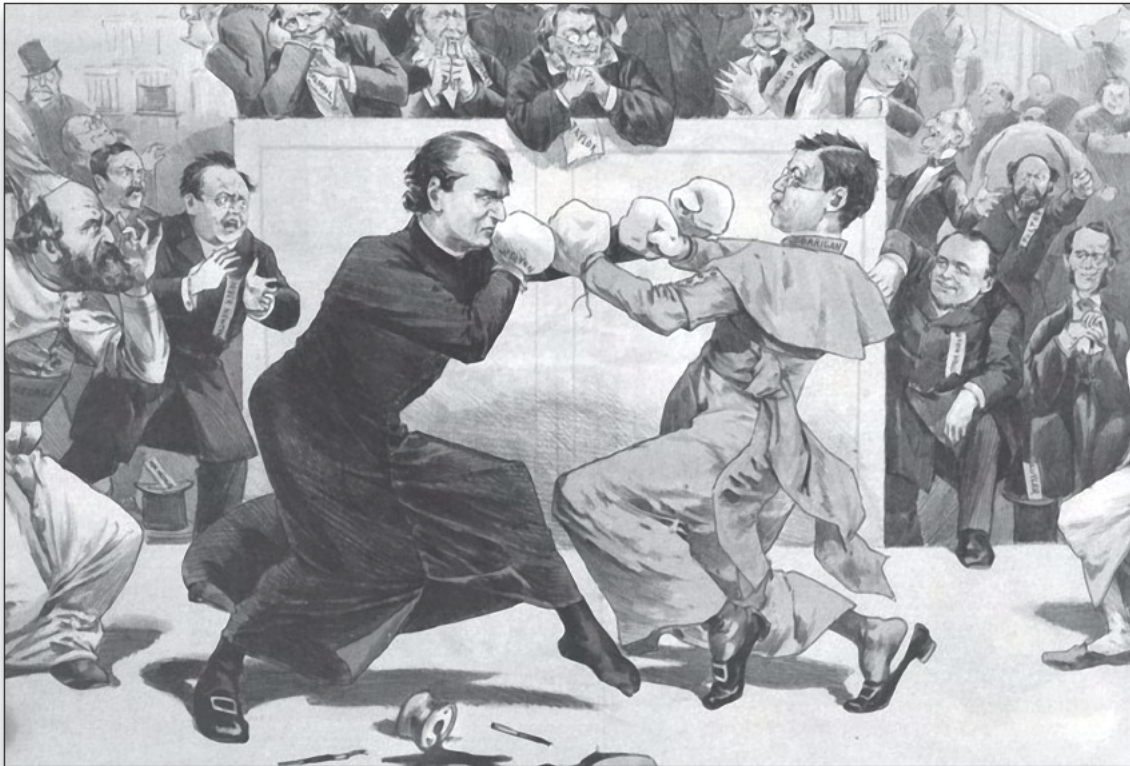


Illustration: Detail is from a cartoon that appeared in *Puck*, the popular American magazine in the 1880s and 1890s. It depicts Fr. McGlynn and Archbishop Corrigan in a boxing match, with Henry George (at left) whispering to McGlynn. Disputes between the two men became the subject of many commentaries in the popular press. The caption for this cartoon states "It's a very pretty quarrel as it stands... and the Protestants, whoever wins, can afford to smile." Courtesy of Henry George School of Social Science.

A speaker who listened to McGlynn's speech said

Never before had I heard such eloquence. I did not know that he spoke under threat of suspension; that Archbishop Corrigan had forbidden him to speak at the meeting. (Malone,80)

McGlynn's defiance brought a swift reaction. Corrigan suspended him from his priestly duties for two weeks and restricted him from public speaking for the rest of the campaign against Hewitt. Years later, prominent Tammany Hall leaders revealed that they had approached Corrigan, urging him to silence McGlynn. (O'Donnell, 219) The church had long relied on Tammany Hall favors to get favorable deals on plots of land for new churches and for parochial school subsidies, so it had a vested interest in McGlynn's silence and George's defeat. Corrigan, at the urging of his friend, Bishop McQuaid, began to demand the Vatican take formal disciplinary action.

McGlynn made no more campaign speeches, but rode with George in a carriage on Election Day. George polled a huge number of votes and probably won, but Tammany Hall rigged the election to ensure Hewitt's victory.

McGlynn, whose case was pending in Rome, added to the controversy in an incendiary interview published in the *New York Tribune*, and the enraged Corrigan promptly extended McGlynn's suspension to the end of 1886. McGlynn was summoned to Rome, but he refused to appear, claiming ill-health. The Vatican declared that McGlynn's failure to appear in Rome would cause his ex-communication.

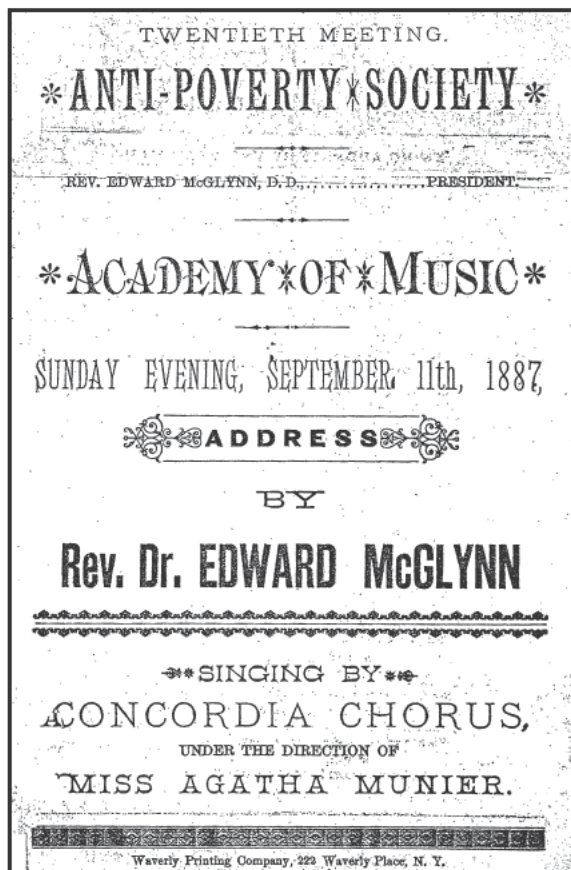
A STORM OF PROTEST

McGlynn's suspension caused a firestorm of protest, especially in his parish. The normally packed church was almost empty, and a street protest drew thousands of angry parishioners. A meeting at Cooper Union to protest McGlynn's removal was jammed to overflowing. A short brochure handed out there in defense of McGlynn stated:

He is punished because of his action in American politics....It was only when Dr. McGlynn had a word to say for the oppressed people of Ireland, or the oppressed workingmen of America, that Dr. McGlynn was punished by his ecclesiastical superiors. (O'Donnell,248)

Illustration:

A poster announcing a meeting of the Anti-Poverty Society, with a speech by Fr. McGlynn, in September 1887. The Society was launched in March of that year and built upon the popularity of McGlynn who saw the organization as an instrument of social and economic change. The Society initially has substantial support from Irish labor leaders in New York. However, it was regularly the target of criticism by the Archbishop and other church leaders, and eventually support and membership declined. Courtesy of Henry George School of Social Science.



On January 23, 1887, a sendoff meeting at Madison Square Garden for Irish Land League leader, Michael Davitt, turned instead into a mighty protest against the treatment of Dr. McGlynn.

On March 26, McGlynn announced the creation of the Anti-Poverty Society, and he delivered his most famous speech, "The Cross of A New Crusade," explaining its goals three days later at the Academy of Music. He stated that

It is by doing justice, the inculcation of the spirit of equality, liberty and fraternity on earth, that we shall prepare the way for the glorious millennial day when it shall be something more than a prayer and in great measure a reality.

Charles Dana, editor of the *Sun* newspaper and a bitter critic of McGlynn, was forced to declare in an editorial that

To say of the Rev. Dr. McGlynn's address Tuesday evening that it was a remarkable intellectual performance is to do it imperfect justice. The address is

entitled to rank with those great orations which at critical times and from the mouths of men of genius have swayed the course of public opinion and changed the onward movement of nations. The Catholic Herald stated that Dr. McGlynn has lost a parish and gained a continent. He will regain the parish and retain the continent. (Bell, 81)

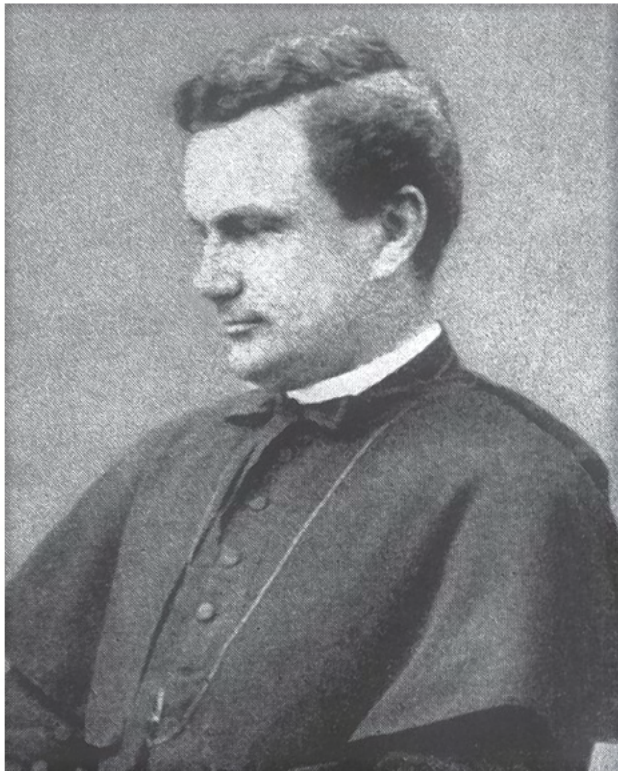
MCGLYNN EXCOMMUNICATED

On July 4, 1887 McGlynn's ex-communication was promulgated, and there was widespread outrage. But a *New York Times* editorial attacked McGlynn stating that

Whatever of pity may be felt for Dr. McGlynn by any right-minded person must be felt in spite of the knowledge that his fate is deserved. He has not only deserved but invited it, and he has nobody but himself to blame that his career is closed, and his life is ruined. (Bell, 124)

Fr. McGlynn, though, never attacked the Church directly, claiming his ex-communication was that of the ecclesiastical machine and not that of the Pope speaking *ex cathedra* for the Church. Thousands of letters to the *Catholic Standard* newspaper reacted angrily to the news of McGlynn's ex-communication. The controversy raged over the next four years. The Pope in June, 1891 wrote an encyclical "Rerum Novarum," which condemned communism and socialism, and some read the encyclical as an attack on George and McGlynn.

George studied the encyclical, and wrote a reply citing extensive evidence that the *Rerum Novarum's* author lacked an adequate understanding of his ideas and that McGlynn's ex-communication was based on mischaracterizations of McGlynn's beliefs. George argued that his Catholic adherents were still willing to accept the rulings of the Pope on faith and spiritual matters, but not social or political questions. Ironically, George was agreeing with his enemy Bishop McQuaid, who, though authoritarian in administration, adamantly had opposed papal infallibility at the First Vatican Council in 1868.

**Photo:**

Monsignor Denis O'Connell, as rector of the North American College in Rome, visited the United States in 1889 and investigated the situation surrounding Fr. McGlynn. As the unofficial contact for American bishops with Church hierarchy in Rome, he realized the McGlynn case was hurting the Catholic Church in America, and he urged another examination of it. Later, in the United States, O'Connell served as rector of the Catholic University in Washington, auxiliary bishop of San Francisco, and bishop of Richmond, Virginia. Courtesy of Wikipedia.

Corrigan made the incendiary claim that *Rerum Novarum* was binding on the beliefs and consciences of Catholics, which many Catholics considered a misunderstanding of "Church Teaching." A number of magazine articles in the Catholic press vehemently disagreed with Corrigan's claim, and it soon became clear that the encyclical had not only failed to accomplish its goal but even widened the rift between the archdiocese and McGlynn's supporters.

In 1891, the archbishop published a letter, approved by the Pope, outlining the conditions upon which the McGlynn could re-enter the Church. One condition was that he should publicly condemn and retract all that he had said and done of an insulting character against the archbishop and the Holy See.

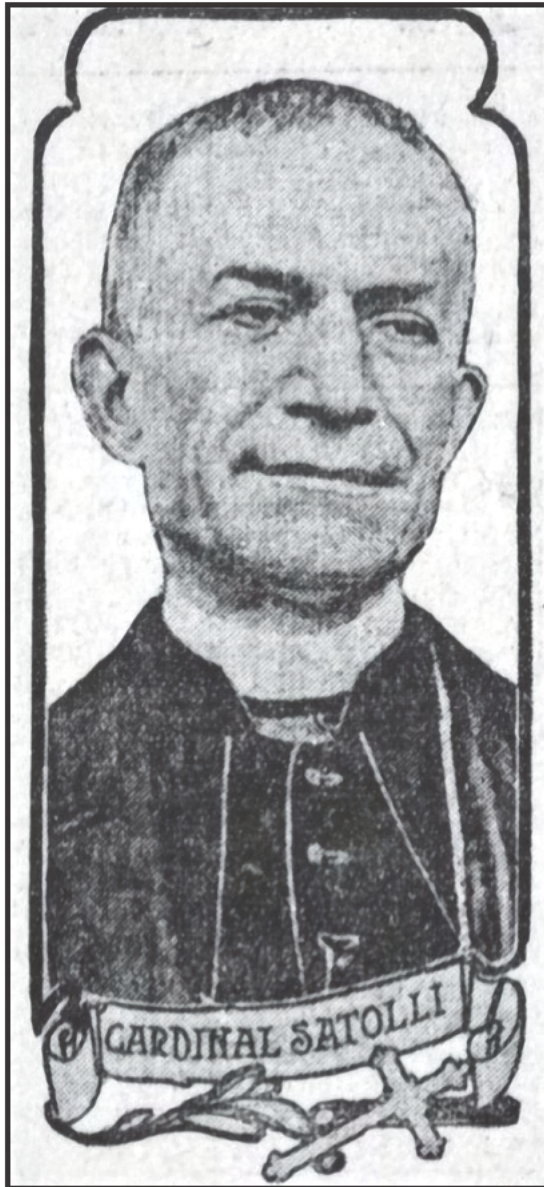
McGlynn responded stating that he could not condemn or retract these insulting statements because he had never said or made insulting statements. He said he was ready to abide by the orders and submit to the judgments of the Holy See, so far as such orders and judgments were within the well-known and well-defined limits prescribed by the right reason and teachings of the Catholic religion.

FURTHER DEVELOPMENTS

Monsignor Denis J. O'Connell, rector of the American College in Rome, had visited the United States in 1889 and had made a very thorough examination of the McGlynn case. He realized that McGlynn's ex-communication had hurt the Church's image and that a re-examination was necessary. Monsignor Francesco Satolli was chosen as the Pope's representative in 1892 to celebrate the four-hundredth anniversary of the discovery of America. He was clothed with the extraordinary power to examine and settle all disputes arising between priests and their bishops, especially the McGlynn case. His authority superseded that of any American prelate.

McGlynn was invited by Satolli to a closed-door proceeding in Washington to determine if he had been advocating a philosophy that was contrary to the Christian faith and Catholic doctrine. McGlynn wrote a doctrinal statement that he presented to the Pope's representative. Monsignor Satolli examined the statement and formed his judgement, but also submitted it to theologians and experts in canonical law for their examination.

Photo:
In 1892, Francesco Satolli, then a monsignor and specially empowered papal delegate, organized a review of the McGlynn controversy by experts in Church law. The review concluded that the priest's outspoken support for the ideas of Henry George had not violated any Church laws and that Fr. McGlynn should be re-instated as a priest. Courtesy of Wikipedia.



In a judgment announced on December 23, 1892, Satolli and the experts concluded that McGlynn's support of George's doctrines was not in violation of Church law and that he should be re-instated as a priest. McGlynn immediately wrote a letter to Satolli saying "I rejoice that you are prepared to remove the ecclesiastical censure." (Bell, 232)

McGlynn celebrated his first mass after six years on Christmas in a small chapel with only his family present. He had aged greatly during his ordeal. Much to his parishioners' regret, Fr. McGlynn was assigned as pastor of St. Mary's Church in Newburgh, New York in 1894.

He celebrated his first mass there on January 1, 1895. He died after suffering Bright's disease in the church rectory on January 7, 1900. His funeral, held at St. Stephen's, attracted thirty thousand mourners. In 1932, author Stephen Bell found a note pinned to Fr. McGlynn's grave:

*To Fr. McGlynn,
We thank the Lord who gave us you,
Soggarth aroon,
Learned and wise, kindly and true,
Soggarth aroon,
You know your cause was sanctified,
Stood till measures were rectified,
And rest with God's beatified,
Soggarth aroon.*

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