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Source: *U.S. Catholic Historian*, Vol. 19, No. 4, Social Catholicism: Essays in Honor of Monsignor George Higgins (Fall, 2001), pp. 51-56

Published by: Catholic University of America Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25154792>

Accessed: 25/02/2010 10:55

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Timothy Meagher, John Shepherd, and Joseph Turrini

On 9 August 2000 at a White House ceremony presided over by President William J. Clinton, Monsignor George Higgins was honored, along with several other notables including Simon Wiesenthal and John Kenneth Galbraith, with the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian honor. Msgr. Higgins was selected because of his nearly fifty years of service to the cause of justice for workers and his widespread recognition as one of the American Catholic Church's most powerful and articulate voices on behalf of the poor and working men and women.¹

Born, educated, and ordained in Chicago, George Higgins spent most of his career in Washington, D.C., where he became a member of a long and rich tradition of powerful Catholic advocates of social justice established by Msgr. John A. Ryan, Bishop Francis Haas, and Rev. Raymond McGowan in the first half of the twentieth century. That tradition was rooted in two institutions in the nation's capital, the Catholic University of America (CUA) and the National Catholic Welfare Conference (NCWC), particularly the conference's Social Action Department. Higgins followed the legendary Ryan and Haas in that tradition, but he did not merely succeed them. He enlarged and enriched their work by helping to involve the Church more fully in the cause of Mexican-American farm workers of the Southwest, broader dialogue and cooperation with Jews, and the fight for human rights throughout the world. Still, to understand George Higgins, it is important to not underestimate that tradition of social action that nourished him and that he extended and broadened in turn.

George Higgins, John A. Ryan, and Francis Haas left a substantial and rich documentation of their work in their own collections of papers as well as in the records

1. See the Archives of the Catholic University of America's (ACUA) online exhibit of photographs documenting Higgins's social activism in honor of his Medal of Freedom award at <http://libraries.cua.edu/higgins.html>.

of the Social Action Department. Their papers and records are housed in the Archives of the Catholic University of America (ACUA), where they provide researchers with a unique insight into George Higgins and the world of Catholic Social Action that sustained him and his work.

The voluminous archival papers of Msgr. Higgins includes 172 boxes containing over 196 linear feet of manuscripts, photographs, and other materials that reflect well the myriad activities of the foremost “labor priest” and one of the leading Catholic social justice advocates and activists of his day. In a letter dated 30 September 1975 to CUA’s president, Clarence Walton, Msgr. Higgins quoted a provision of his will bequeathing his personal and official papers, then housed at the United States Catholic Conference (USCC), to the ACUA. The archives received the first accession of records in 1980, and materials have been deposited periodically since then. The Higgins papers have become one of the most significant and highly used collections at the Department of Archives, Manuscripts, and Museum Collections at CUA. They include personal and family letters and materials; professional correspondence and subject files; the monsignor’s writings, speeches, and addresses; separate files on his most important activities; and photographs and audiovisual materials.

The first section of the collection includes biographical material, personal and family correspondence, calendars, student files, and financial records that document Higgins’s youth and student years, routine family matters, and other aspects of his private life. There are, however, letters critical to episodes in his professional career in this section: expressions of support from friends and admirers, for example, when changes at the USCC threatened Higgins’s position there in 1979.

The professional correspondence is the largest and probably the richest part of the collection. The letters date back to 1943 and include correspondence from Higgins’s years as director of the Social Action Department. There is a wealth of substantive correspondence between Higgins and a wide variety of religious leaders and thinkers ranging from Michael Novak to Cardinal Joseph Bernardin and Msgr. John Tracy Ellis to Msgr. Charles Owen Rice, Dorothy Day, and Rev. Charles Curran. The correspondence also includes Msgr. Higgins’s communications with politicians such as Hubert Humphrey and Joseph Califano and labor leaders such as George Meany and James Carey. This correspondence should be considered in conjunction with Higgins’s subject files, which include articles, news clippings, and some related correspondence on topics that interested Higgins and that he wrote about often. Such topics include the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO), church and labor, hospital unions, migratory labor, the National Catholic Rural Life Conference, the National Safety Council, the Task Force on Urban Problems, and the Second Vatican Council.

One of the most notable parts of the collection is its treasure trove of Msgr. Higgins’s writings and speeches. This series includes a nearly complete run, arranged both chronologically and by subject, of his syndicated column, “The Yardstick: Catholic Tests of the Social Order.” Rev. Raymond McGowan, one of Higgins’s mentors at the

Social Action Department, began the weekly column in 1933. Higgins took over the column in 1945 and wrote for it regularly until 1994 and occasionally since then.² The collection also includes drafts or copies of Higgins's numerous other writings: articles, editorial letters, columns, and book reviews. Msgr. Higgins has been a voracious reader, and there are scores of the latter. To give an example of their range, Higgins reviewed Bishop Francis Haas's *Man and Society* in 1952, and thirty years later he reviewed Rev. Thomas Blantz's biography of Haas, *A Priest in Public Service*.

Of special importance are texts of his addresses, speeches, interviews, testimonies, sermons, invocations, and eulogies. These speeches range from talks to the Association of Catholic Trade Unionists (ACTU) and Catholic Conference on Industrial Problems (CCIP) in the 1950s, to the transcript of a television discussion of the Second Vatican Council on the Catholic Hour in 1966, to his commencement address at CUA in 1980, to a series of talks on the hundredth anniversary of Pope Leo XIII's labor encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*, in 1991. From 1948 to 1973 Higgins also wrote dozens of speeches for Patrick O'Boyle, cardinal archbishop of Washington, D.C. Drafts of those speeches can be found in this part of his papers. Msgr. Higgins's eulogies are of particular and moving interest and include eloquent tributes to many churchmen, from Joseph Cardinal Bernardin to Higgins's colleagues at the Social Action Department, Raymond McGowan and John Cronin. His file of eulogies of labor leaders reads like a who's who of recent American labor history: Phillip Murray, John Brophy, James Carey, George Meany, Cesar Chavez, Lane Kirkland, and Leonard Woodcock.

The last section of the manuscripts and documents of the Higgins collection includes a number of separate groupings, or series, of records documenting particularly critical episodes in his career, including his work with the United Farm Workers and J. P. Stevens textile workers, meetings of the International Labor Organization, the Belgrade Conference on Human Rights, the return of St. Stephen's Crown to Hungary, the Second Vatican Council, the Synod of Bishops in 1971, and his important ongoing efforts promoting ecumenical cooperation between Catholics and Jews.

Finally, the collection includes numerous audio tapes, videotapes, and photographs, as well as degrees, certificates, and awards that Msgr. Higgins has received over the years. The photographs are of particular interest, as they chronicle Msgr. Higgins's decades of interaction with notable and powerful figures such as George Meany, Cesar Chavez, Popes Paul VI and John Paul II, Richard Nixon, William Clinton, and fellow labor priests Raymond McGowan and John Cronin. They also depict his involvement in many seminal events in recent history, such as the Second Vatican Council in Rome and American civil rights crusades in the 1960s, strikes of coal miners in Kentucky and farm workers in California in the 1970s, and support for the Polish Solidarity movement in the 1980s.

2. See the index of "Yardsticks" for 1945 to 1994 compiled by Rev. John A. O'Brien, C.P. and on file in the ACUA.

When George Higgins came to Washington in 1940 to attend graduate school at Catholic University, he joined a Catholic social action movement at the height of its power and vibrancy. Two of his predecessors in this effort, Msgr. John A. Ryan and Bishop Francis J. Haas, provided both intellectual and activist examples that fostered Higgins's already formed notions of the Church's role in achieving social justice. Higgins met Ryan while a graduate student at CUA and described the Minnesota-born priest as "the intellectual architect of American Catholic social action."³ Higgins wrote his 1942 master thesis on the economic thought of Ryan: "The Underconsumption Theory in the Writings of Monsignor John A. Ryan."⁴ Francis Haas was a reader of Higgins's dissertation, "Voluntarism in Organized Labor in the United States, 1930–1940," completed two years later. Higgins called Haas "a master of labor arbitration" and later fondly recalled how Haas "was very good to me. He was active in things like labor arbitration, and he was wonderful in the way he would bring me into things."

The John A. Ryan and Francis J. Haas Papers, located in the ACUA, document the intellectual and activist milieu that Higgins encountered and that fostered his own activism and intellectual growth. Thus, these collections complement the Higgins Papers in important ways. So, too, do the records of the Social Action Department of the NCWC, where Higgins worked with Ryan and for a much longer period with the critically important, if less well-known, Rev. Raymond McGowan, whom Higgins praised as a "pioneer" with "rare vision" in the application of social reconstruction ideals.⁵ The Social Action Department provided Higgins, Ryan, McGowan, and to a lesser extent Haas with critically important organizational resources and a national forum for their social justice crusade. The records of the department, particularly the extensive correspondence of Rev. Raymond McGowan, also help to provide a fuller sense of the larger Catholic social activist tradition that inspired, nurtured, and reflected George Higgins's activism. The department's records as well as the rest of the NCWC's records are also housed in the ACUA.

The John A. Ryan Papers range from the 1890s until his death in 1945 and comprise roughly forty linear feet. Most of the collection, however, is focused on the last twenty years of his life. The collection has seven parts or series. The largest and most important is a professional correspondence series. The overwhelming majority of this material dates from 1925 to 1945 and includes a wide variety of topics and correspondents. There are letters to and from other clergy, politicians, political and social organizations that Ryan supported, publishers, family, and everyday Catholics lauding

3. George Higgins and William Bole, *Organized Labor and the Church: Reflections of a "Labor Priest"* (New York: Paulist Press, 1993).

4. George Higgins, "The Underconsumption Theory in the Writings of Monsignor John A. Ryan," (M.A thesis, Catholic University of America, 1942).

5. Gerard M. Costello, *Without Fear or Favor: George Higgins On the Record* (Mystic, Conn.: Twenty-Third Publications, 1984), 24–25; Higgins and Bole, *Organized Labor*, 30, 33.

or chastising his position. For example, there is one linear foot of letters responding to his most famous speech, "Roosevelt Safeguards America," which was broadcast on national radio in October of 1936, three weeks before that year's presidential election. Ryan's defense of Roosevelt was an impressive and forceful response to Father Charles Coughlin's repudiation of the president. Supplementing Ryan's correspondence is a smaller but interesting run of his research or reference files. Ryan accumulated clippings, articles, speeches, statistical data, occasional correspondence, and original notes, as well as pamphlets and reports for these files, which he drew on to prepare articles, speeches, and other publications. The reference files reflect his principal interests: unions, Ireland, birth control, housing, and post-World War I reconstruction programs. The Ryan collection also includes a substantial body of his writings, sermons, and speeches; a personal journal from his seminary days; his class lecture notes from Catholic University and St. Paul Seminary courses; photos; and a few recordings of his speeches, including his famous response to Coughlin.

Francis J. Haas was born in Racine, Wisconsin, in 1889. He was a priest of the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, professor at Catholic University and later bishop of Grand Rapids, Michigan. The Haas Papers span most of his life but concentrate heavily on his remarkable and unique role as a priest-public servant in the 1930s and 1940s. During the New Deal and Fair Deal eras of the Roosevelt and Truman administrations, Haas served on the Wisconsin Labor Relations Board, National Labor Board, Committee of Long Range Planning (of the National Resources Planning Board), Fair Employment Practices Commission, and the President's Committee on Civil Rights, as well as in the National Recovery Administration and Works Progress Administration. Bishop Haas was, however, perhaps most active and best known as a labor mediator and arbitrator involved in hundreds of labor disputes in the 1930s and 1940s, including the famous Minneapolis Teamsters Strike of 1934. The documents of his professional career include correspondence, reports, clippings, labor contracts, reference materials, press releases, hearing transcripts, committee meeting transcripts and minutes, and report drafts related to his various government posts. There are also fascinating individual files for some of his most important arbitration and mediation efforts, such as the Minneapolis Teamsters Strike and the strikes at Allis Chalmers in Wisconsin. In addition to his professional papers, the Haas collection includes personal papers, seminary lecture notes, sermons, speeches, drafts of some of his publications, photos (largely family pictures), and an audio recording of one of his sermons.

Higgins, Haas, and Ryan shared not only an intellectual center at CUA, but also an activist forum at the Social Action Department. The Social Action Department was an original NCWC department when the conference was established in 1919. The department's purpose was to promote the social thought of the Catholic Church and interpret applications of it to the social complexities of the world. It served as a clearinghouse for the dissemination of the most progressive Catholic thought in the field of social action to the Church's lay organizations, press, schools, religious, and laity. There was a special focus on industrial, international, and interracial relations as well as rural life,

social work, and the study of communism. The principles informing the department's work came from the papal encyclicals and statements of the American bishops on social and economic matters. Soon after its creation the Social Action Department began to sponsor addresses and lectures, publish books and pamphlets, and conduct conferences and institutes.

Higgins served as assistant director of the Social Action Department from 1946 to 1954 and director from 1954 to 1967. Few of his files for his term as assistant director remain, and his files as director are located in his personal papers. Still, the records of the Social Action Department are important for understanding Higgins's career and the context of his work. They include several series of files from the years when Higgins worked at the department, such as general administration files and the records of the Catholic Conference on Industrial Problems and the Catholic Association for International Peace. Particularly useful in understanding Higgins are the department files left by many of his important Social Action Department colleagues: Rev. John Hayes, Rev. John Cronin, S.S., Ms. Linna Brissette, and especially the correspondence of Rev. Raymond McGowan. McGowan was assistant director under Ryan and later director, with Higgins as his assistant. McGowan's influence was evident in almost every sphere of activity in the department.

George Higgins has had a long and impressive career as a Catholic advocate for working people, and he has been honored for that work. Yet the history of George Higgins and the history of the tradition of Catholic Social Action that his work both reflected and enlarged is just beginning to be written. As scholars explore this extraordinary man and the movement that nurtured him and he nourished in turn, they will find many of the resources they need in his papers, the papers of John Ryan and Francis Haas, and the records of the Social Action Department of the National Catholic Welfare Conference housed in the Archives of the Catholic University of America.