



Americanizing the Church: John J. Burke

By William John Shepherd

John J. Burke, C.S.P., was a dedicated, spiritual, and intellectual priest with a talent for administration, politics, and diplomacy. A true son of the Church he was also a committed American patriot who worked tirelessly to unify his Church and give it a national voice and presence. His diligence, integrity, and compassion made him a respected figure and influence for Catholics and non-Catholics in America and beyond in the early twentieth century though now, sadly, he is little remembered by the Church and the nation that he served with devotion and perseverance.

FORMATIVE YEARS

John J. Burke was a native of New York City born June 6, 1875, the sixth of nine children of Irish immigrants. Burke's father, Patrick, was a native of Trim, near Dublin. He had little education but was an honest and hard-working horse-shoeing blacksmith by trade. Burke's mother, Mary Regan, was a native of Mallow, near Cork. She was a convent educated 'queen' of her family viewed as a near saint. Burke was born in 'Shantyoplis' near the Cathedral, though the family thereafter moved to Seventh Avenue near Fifty Sixth Street, not far from the later Carnegie Hall.

Both of Burke's parents were devoted church members and through them he made contact with the Paulist Fathers in New York, where he served as an altar boy. Educated on the Lower West Side at the Jesuit run St. Francis Xavier High School and the College of St. Francis Xavier,

graduating from the latter in 1896, he joined the Missionary Society of St. Paul the Apostle, a religious community known as the Paulists and founded by Isaac Hecker in 1858. Burke studied at the Paulist seminary at The Catholic University of America (CUA) in Washington, D.C., and was ordained at the University Chapel in Caldwell Hall on June 9, 1899. He remained at CUA for two more years to earn a licentiate in theology, which was then somewhat equivalent to a doctorate, in 1901.

Burke's parents inspired in him a devotion to family so he maintained close relationships with his brothers and sisters, especially Thomas, who was also a Paulist, and with sisters Elizabeth and Mary. Thomas spent more than two decades as a missionary preacher before being elected Superior General of the Paulists and consulted with John on personal as well as religious issues. Sister Elizabeth, who reminded John of their mother, was a college graduate who became a teacher. Another sister, Mary, also was a teacher though she gave that up when she married John Salmon. They had three daughters, and John Burke was close to two in particular, Elizabeth and Mary Salmon, maintaining a lifelong correspondence with both.

CATHOLIC WORLD

Burke briefly did parish work in several cities and was on a parish mission in Iowa before joining the staff of the Paulist *Catholic World*, one of the most notable Catholic journals of the time, as assistant editor in 1903. The following year he succeeded Rev. Alexander Patrick Doyle

as editor, though he wrote no formal editorials until 1909, but otherwise holding this important position until 1922. He was especially close to the two women who served as his secretaries, first, Helen Lynch, a religious of the Cenacle, and her successor, Grace Murray. As editor, he strove to promote original ideals of Paulist founder Isaac Hecker. He published works by literary notables like Anglo-French writer and disputant Hilaire Belloc and American essayist Agnes Repplier. He also promoted social reform through articles by scholars such as sociologist William J. Kerby and moral theologian John A. Ryan, both CUA professors.

While serving as *Catholic World* editor, he also directed the Catholic Publications Society, later named the Paulist Press, and was a founder of the Catholic Press Association in 1911. Like Hecker, Burke believed that there was a 'Catholic truth' that could save humanity, and that arbiters of this truth were lay people exemplifying it in the secular world. He also believed in a converging path of American and Catholic values that inspired him with a vision of a unified national church. He supported national organizations and in 1917 founded both the Chaplain's Aid Association to supply priests for the military and the National Catholic War Council (NCWC) to coordinate Catholic war efforts while representing Catholic views to the government during World War I.

NATIONAL CATHOLIC WAR COUNCIL

The War Council coordinated nearly seven hundred Catholic organizations to address the challenges of war. It was responsible for providing meals and accommodations for thousands of young men and boys, working as a conduit between the government and Catholic universities and colleges, and supporting the establishment of both student army training camps and Boy Scout clubs. It was also responsible for enabling women to conduct visitor's houses in the camps that provided meals to servicemen and their guests. In addition, it also

facilitated an increased role for women in the war effort with secretarial opportunities within the war camps.

Burke had a primary role as chairman of the NCWC Committee on Special War Activities directing various subcommittees that mobilized Catholic lay persons, monitored legislation, and undertook postwar reconstruction. He also created an ecumenical group known as the Committee of Six that included Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish representatives to advise the U.S. War Department on how to maintain morality in military camps. Additionally, he continued to be involved with the Chaplains' Aid Association, now a sub-committee of the War Council, which was in constant contact with military chaplains at home and overseas, supplying their needs for religious paraphernalia such as prayer books, hymnals, and altar decorations. For all of this, the United States War Department recognized Burke's immense service to his country by conferring upon him the Distinguished Service Medal in 1919. He tried to give his medal to Grace Murray, his loyal assistant at the *Catholic World* who had managed the journal in his place while he directed the War Council, but she graciously refused it.

NATIONAL CATHOLIC WELFARE COUNCIL (1919-1922)

Burke continued working in a similar vein after the war. In 1919, the American hierarchy, prompted by Peter J. Muldoon, Bishop of Rockford, Illinois, organized itself as the National Catholic Welfare Council, the successor to the National Catholic War Council also known (confusingly) as the NCWC. It worked to promote Catholic social work, education, and immigration work. The hierarchy implemented its decisions through an Administrative Committee of bishops operating in turn a secretariat in Washington, D.C. Burke was selected as general secretary to supervise NCWC departments in their national Catholic activities from this base in Washington, D.C.



Burke in 1918.

Unfortunately, some American bishops, such as Cardinal O'Connell of Boston and Archbishop Messmer of Milwaukee, opposed the NCWC fearing canonical usurpation of their dioceses as well as opposing national episcopal organizations as the legal status of such had not been addressed in the 1917 Code of Canon Law. This opposition succeeded in having the Vatican order the suppression of the NCWC in February 1922. The NCWC defended itself however, sending bishops Joseph Scrembis (Cleveland) and Henry Moeller (Cincinnati) to Rome to plead its case. In the end, Pope Pius XI revoked the suppression although requiring that the NCWC change its name from 'Council' to 'Conference' so that there would be no confusion of the national organization with a worldwide council

NATIONAL CATHOLIC WELFARE CONFERENCE (1922-1936)

The newly reconstituted NCWC was immediately faced by a major act of organized anti-Catholicism with the Oregon School Bill, narrowly approved by state voters in the November 1922 elections, declaring that all children could only attend public schools. Supported by the Ku Klux Klan and the Masons, this was a serious blow against freedom of education in general and parochial schools in particular. Burke and the NCWC

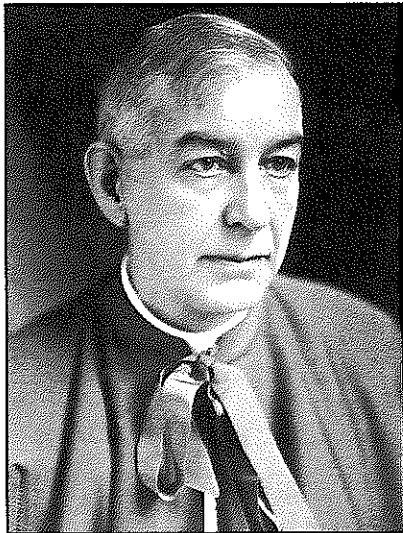
took the lead in mobilizing a broad spectrum of support, including the ACLU, to mount a public campaign in opposition. Happily, on June 1, 1925 the Supreme Court of the United States unanimously ruled against the Oregon School Bill. The NCWC's performance in this fight helped prove the contention that the American Church needed a national office to represent its interests.

Having interacted with President Woodrow Wilson as head of the War Council, Burke continued to engage Wilson and his successors in matters of import to American Catholics. This ranged from congratulating Warren G. Harding in 1922 for a speech he gave on religious toleration as well as his efforts with the arms limitation conference in Washington to lobbying and providing advice to Calvin Coolidge and Herbert Hoover, respectively, over troubles in Mexico in 1927 and Haiti in 1929.

Burke was especially concerned about religious freedom in Mexico, working closely with Ambassador Dwight Morrow and meeting privately on several occasions with President Calles of Mexico. As a result, he had a tremendous impact in bringing temporary peace to the church-state hostility in Mexico.

Burke and Fr. John A. Ryan, head of the NCWC Social Action Department, were both enthusiastic supporters of Franklin D. Roosevelt and his New Deal economic reforms. In fact, according to records at Catholic University, Burke was held in such high regard by Roosevelt that he actually wrote the drafts of several letters that FDR sent to American prelates as well as the speech he gave at Notre Dame University in December 1935 on the occasion of his receiving an honorary degree from that Catholic institution of higher education.

At Roosevelt's request Burke would sometimes deliver verbal messages to personages such as the Apostolic Delegate and Burke would confer with the President, on occasion, at the White House, most notably in August 1936 in regard to how to deal with the stinging attacks that another Catholic priest, Charles Coughlin,



Burke in 1936.

was making against Roosevelt during the 1936 presidential campaign.

In recognition for his NCWC work the Vatican conferred on Burke an honorary Sacred Theology doctorate in 1927 and made him a domestic prelate (monsignor) in 1936. He did have

some critics though, especially Michael J. Curley, Archbishop of Baltimore, who resented the very notion of a simple Paulist priest being viewed as a spokesman for the American Catholic Hierarchy of the United States.

SCHOLAR

Burke was also involved in scholarly endeavors as time allowed, during his years as editor of *Catholic World* and with the NCWC. He translated and published, in 1927 and 1931, respectively, two French works related to the mystical body of Christ, *Christ in the Christian Life According to Saint Paul* by J. Duperray and *The Doctrine of the Mystical Body of Christ According to the Principles of the Theology of St. Thomas* by Abbe Anger.

Burke also wrote a book on mystical body meditation, *Christ in Us*, in 1934. Additionally, he wrote on the Psalms and composed poetry that he often sent to friends. He also gave many sermons, especially at conferences and other religious events.

CONCLUSION

Burke died aged sixty-one on October 30, 1936, shortly after being made a prelate. Though he had been ill, his death was a shock to both the Catholic community and the nation at large. He

was widely mourned with numerous press releases, sermons, memorial pamphlets, and other tributes.

His loss was particularly felt by his Paulist confreres with whom, despite his intense schedule, he had still managed to sustain close relationships. Of course, they respected him for his devoted service to the Church as a representative of their Order, but they also appreciated his private antics as an avid practical joker. He was also remembered fondly by the women of the Church with whom he had worked so closely in his various endeavors and whose talents and work he had so much appreciated.

Burke had ordered that in the event of his death the contents of his personal file be destroyed. However, his faithful secretary, Iona McNulty, who had served him for nearly twenty years, consulted with Mary Hawkes of the National Council of Catholic Women about this matter. They agreed to return all of Burke's letters to the senders and many of these were destroyed, but many others were subsequently donated back to the Paulist Order's archives in northeast Washington, D.C., near Catholic University where National Catholic War Council and National Catholic Welfare Conference records are preserved.

Author's Note: The author is a senior archivist in the archives of the Catholic University of America who has worked closely with the Burke-related NC War Council and NC Welfare Conference records, especially with the creation of the online guides at www.archives.lib.cua.edu/findingaid/NCWarCouncil.cfm and www.archives.lib.cua.edu/findingaid/ncwcogs.cfm

For additional information he recommends John B. Sheerin's biography of Burke and various published works as well as a forthcoming Burke biography by Douglas Slawson.

Potomac Catholic Heritage

THE CATHOLIC HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF WASHINGTON



SEE HIM THROUGH

**HELP US TO
HELP THE BOYS**



**NATIONAL CATHOLIC WAR COUNCIL
KNIGHTS OF COLUMBUS**

United War Work Campaign - Week of November 11-1918

About Our Cover

This World War I poster titled "See Him Through" was part of the National Catholic War Council's effort to stimulate increased Catholic contributions to the government sponsored United War Work Campaign in which the NCWC took part.

The constant solicitation by those participating in war work was becoming increasingly ineffective by late 1918. As the number of requests for money multiplied, the public tended to give less. So the Navy and Army's Commission on Training Camp Activities—the organization responsible for the direction of volunteers in the war zone—called for two national collections in a United War Works Campaign that combined the work of numerous organizations including the NCSC, the YMCA, the Jewish Welfare Board, and the Salvation Army. The funds collected in this national effort were distributed to the participants.

The effort proved very successful. The NCWC, for example, received from the United War Work Campaign far more money than it collected on its own.

Agreeing to participate did not cancel the various organizations' obligation to address the need for funds to their members. This poster is just one of the Catholic efforts to stimulate Catholic interest. The Knights of Columbus, the most active NCWC association serving on the battlefield during the war, actually matched the advertising effort of the rest of the NCWC.

Table of Contents

~ 3 ~

For God and Country

~ 8 ~

Sleuthing the Sepulchers

~ 11 ~

Remembering

Immaculate Conception Schools

~ 17 ~

The Gift of Oratory

~ 21 ~

Patrick O'Boyle

and the March on Washington

~ 24 ~

A Challenging Campus Ministry

~ 28 ~

A Washington Experience

~ 31 ~

Americanizing the Church:

John J. Burke

~ 35 ~

Suggested Reading