

Peggy Roach Remarks
Catholic Social Teaching Seminary Summer
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Today I want to tell you a few stories of the work of two great Chicago priests who supported the rights of workers through all the years of their ministry. They were devoted to a single cause with many ramifications – to fight injustice wherever they found it.

Jack Egan and George Higgins were students at St. Mary of the Lake Seminary at Mundelein College in the late 1930s and early 1940s, under the tutelage of the seminary rector, Msgr. Reynold Hillenbrand, himself grounded in Catholic social teaching. In fact, graduates of the seminary during Msgr. Hillenbrand's tenure became known as "Rynie's boys." He made sure they learned well the social mission of the Church.

I knew these two priests, Jack Egan and George Higgins, as mentors, co-workers and friends. They taught me the meaning and importance of the Roman Catholic tradition of social teaching, based on the foundational principle of the dignity of the human person, from which the rest flows.

People are more important than things, and the measure of every institution is whether it threatens or enhances the life and dignity of the human person.

Following this first principle, they believed

- that how we organize our society - in economics, politics, law, and policy – directly affects human dignity, and the capacity of individuals to grow in communities and to work for the common good of all.
- that human dignity can be protected only if human rights are protected and responsibilities are met.
- that in a society marred by deepening divisions between rich and poor, we are instructed to put the needs of the poor and vulnerable first – in other words, a preferential option for the poor.
- that if the dignity of work is to be protected, the rights of workers to organize and join unions and to collectively bargain for decent working conditions and fair wages must be respected.
- that we stand in solidarity as one human family whatever our national, racial, ethnic, economic and ideological differences.
- that we are called to protect people and the planet, living our faith in relationship with all of God's creation.

These are the basic principles of Catholic social teaching:

- the dignity of the human person
- community and the common good
- human rights and responsibilities
- the option for the poor and vulnerable
- the dignity of work and the rights of workers
- the solidarity of the human family
- care for God's creation

It's one thing to know the principles of Catholic social teaching – another to put them into practice in the church and in society. Msgr. Egan and Msgr. Higgins based their own actions for justice on these principles. They won a lot of battles for justice, and they lost a lot of battles – but never gave up their core obligation -- to fight injustice wherever they found it.

After ordination in 1940, Msgr. Higgins went to Washington's Catholic University and earned a doctorate in labor economics. From that time on, Washington D.C. became his second home. Beginning in 1944, he served the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in their Social Action Department where he worked for the next 36 years. George Higgins was known to union leaders as "labor's priest," never interfering with how the unions were run, but always available for counsel and wisdom when it was requested. He was in for the long haul and believed in a ministry of presence. He was probably best known for his work and support of Cesar Chavez and farm workers in California.

George Higgins possessed a keen intellect and was one of the most well read persons I have ever encountered, so it was a devastating thing when he began to lose his eyesight to macular degeneration in his final years. He was always true to himself and his convictions and spoke his mind. His biographer titled his book about Msgr. Higgins, *Without Fear or Favor*. That pretty much summed up Higgins' mode of operation.

For 56 years, he wrote a weekly column, "Yardstick," covering labor, key social legislation, and church-state relations. The column appeared in diocesan papers all over the United States. It was a teaching tool he used to explain how these principles furthered the everyday ministry of the gospel. He served as an expert at all the sessions of the Ecumenical Council called by Pope John XXIII, now known as Vatican II.

When Kim Bobo drafted the concept paper outlining the work of the Interfaith Committee, Jack Egan insisted she go to Washington and run it by George Higgins. Msgr. Higgins later introduced Kim to John Sweeney, president of the AFL-CIO, who gave the idea his support and agreed to cooperate with the work.

A few years ago, I heard Msgr. Higgins say: "The National Interfaith Committee for Worker Justice is the most effective organization joining religion and labor that I have seen in my lifetime." I recall remarking to Kim Bobo – do you realize what that means coming from George Higgins – he put you in the box seats!

Fittingly, he died on the feast of St. Joseph the Worker back in his hometown of LaGrange, Illinois at age 86. At his funeral Mass at Holy Name Cathedral, his dear friend, Fr. Bryan Hehir, reminded us that Msgr. Higgins' work included civil rights at home, human rights abroad, the role of the church in a democracy, ecumenical leadership – and uniquely, his role in Catholic-Jewish relations. Msgr. Higgins was a public priest, Fr. Hehir said, "engaged in the world, in service of the church, committed to the poor and vulnerable to those who lived in fear or in need. This is the lasting legacy of George Higgins woven from the fabric of 60 years of priesthood."

I know Msgr. Egan's story better because I worked with him for 35 years – from his days as pastor at Presentation Parish in Lawndale in the late 1960s until his death in 2001. Let me try to set the scene for several stories he told me - and some of my experiences in my work with him.

Though they were contemporaries at the seminary, George Higgins was a few years ahead of Jack Egan, who was ordained in 1943. It was fitting that Egan should look up to Higgins as a mentor as well as a friend. It was George Higgins who told Jack in his seminary days, "You have to learn to fight injustice wherever you find it." In Margery Frisbie's biography of Jack Egan, entitled *An Alley in Chicago*, she recalls "Jack accepted what he calls 'that terrible responsibility' when he was ordained. Don't be afraid to stand up against injustices, whether it be in government, industry, labor, throughout the world, the injustices you find within yourself, and also within the Church....Injustice weighs heavily upon personhood." Jack Egan's early ministry was as a parish priest at St. Justin's on the South side of Chicago during the years of WWII. Then he was tapped to begin a marriage preparation program in the Archdiocese of Chicago, called the Cana Conference. He demonstrated a skill for bringing good, smart lay people together, empowering them, and getting a job done.

In 1954 he met Saul Alinsky and found another way of fighting injustice – through community organization. Just as workers needed their unions to collectively bargain for their needs, so people in communities needed to organize to address their issues with community institutions. These were the days of urban renewal projects, and Jack Egan got into quite a fight with the University of Chicago over the Hyde Park-Kenwood urban renewal project. It was a complicated project but looked like a well oiled plan which would get easy approval in the City Council. In studying the plan, it also appeared the major portion of the City of Chicago's urban renewal allocation by the federal government would go to the University of Chicago to insulate and protect its own properties.

As Cardinal's Stritch's representative, Jack Egan testified before the City Council on the need for relocation plans for the families who would be displaced by the renewal project. He proposed that land be cleared only as needed, and that some of the new housing planned be affordable housing for the families displaced. When he testified, he identified the vested interest of the Archdiocese of Chicago – the human beings who lived in the area. In the midst of the City Council's five month approval process, Cardinal Stritch died in Rome, leaving Jack Egan with only minimal grassroots support. He lost the battle with the University of Chicago. And he lost the approval of his mentor and teacher, Msgr. Hillenbrand, who castigated Egan before his peers, labeling him "just a politician." It would be many years before they got their friendship back on track shortly before Hillenbrand's death. Jack Egan said this painful episode in his life and work taught him a valuable lesson. Never again would he approach a community issue without the collaboration of his ecumenical partners.

It didn't take long after the Hyde Park-Kenwood fight for Fr. Jack Egan, Dr. Edgar Chandler of the Church Federation of Chicago, and Rabbi Irving Rosenbaum of the Board of Rabbis to join forces as the Inter-religious Council on Urban Affairs. They spoke together on city issues: housing, transportation, race, urban development. Later Rabbi Marx joined the IRCUA representing the Jewish community.

When Cardinal Meyer came to Chicago to replace Cardinal Stritch, Jack Egan proposed to the new Cardinal that the Archdiocese create an Office of Urban Affairs to focus the Church on problems of the city. With the Cana Conference in capable hands, he moved on to the work of the Office of Urban Affairs and a new role in trying to effect change during the next ten critical years. The Office of Urban Affairs worked closely with

Saul Alinsky in community organization efforts in the city on the issues of changing neighborhoods, blockbusting, real estate practices, and civil rights. Jack Egan had the backing of Cardinal Meyer who permitted pastors in the affected areas to use parish funds to support these community organization efforts. The Cardinal also promised Archdiocesan funds for the enterprise.

Jack recalled a special moment when the commitment was made. "Now, Your Eminence," Alinsky said to Cardinal Meyer, "I hope you realize there will be conflict and controversy when we do this work. We'll have to take on the Daley machine and some other bureaucracies." As Jack remembered, the Cardinal replied: "Mr. Alinsky, if the work is worthwhile, it doesn't make any difference to me whether there is conflict or controversy. Even though you and I don't share the same faith, Mr. Alinsky, there is nothing more controversial than a Man hanging on a cross."

Jack expressed his own philosophy this way: "I have based my life on the premise that there are no Catholic problems, no Presbyterian issues, no Jewish concerns in the City of Chicago. There are human questions and we all better get together to try to cope with them and to bring about a solution." And he tried to tell Mayor Richard J. Daley – community organizations don't substitute for a political system. They help keep the political system honest. They help elected officials do their work of representing their citizen constituents.

In 1962, at the age of 45, Msgr. Egan suffered a near fatal heart attack. His recuperation took longer than he wished, but soon he was back in business, which included the business of the Church. In the three years of Vatican II sessions, Jack Egan used his vacation time to go to Rome for an up close and personal look at the changes coming in the Catholic Church.

Chicago's Cardinal Meyer led the fight for The Declaration on Religious Liberty and it won passage. But before the Council formally ended, the Cardinal was stricken with a brain tumor and died in April 1965.

After the tragic death of Cardinal Meyer from a brain tumor in 1965, many changes were about to happen in Catholic circles. Cardinal Cody was appointed the new Archbishop in June of that year. The Cardinal was heard to say, "I understand there are some troublemakers in the city, and I should go to work and put them in their proper place." The "troublemakers" were some of "Rynie's boys." And they were all to get large, poor, black parishes to keep them from troubling the new Archbishop. Jack Egan would be the first. In his interview with Cardinal Cody assigning him to Presentation Parish on the west side in the Lawndale neighborhood, Jack asked: "What will happen to the Office of Urban Affairs?" Cardinal Cody replied: "You can keep that job. I understand there's not much going on at that office anyway." Jack protested: "I don't know where you got that information, but it's not true." Later Cardinal Cody cut off diocesan funds for the Inter-religious Council of Urban Affairs, and eventually closed the Office of Urban Affairs. The press and many Chicagoans remembered Father Egan's near fatal heart attack in 1962, the work of the Office of Urban Affairs – and Selma, Alabama.

March 7, 1965 was Bloody Sunday when marchers were beaten at the Pettus Bridge as they made their way toward Montgomery, Alabama pushing for passage of the Voting Rights Act before Congress. When they were turned back, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. put out a national call for religious leaders to come to Selma. Jack Egan

responded and joined in a march with Dr. King's lieutenants, Dr. Ralph Abernathy and C. T. Vivian. A wire services photo of them, arm in arm, appeared in papers across the country....and thousands more responded to Dr. King's call to come to Selma.

Back at Presentation Parish, Jack was organizing in another fashion. He visited six seminaries and offered seminarians a summer inner city experience. Some 60 men responded; each one was assigned to a block in the neighborhood. "This is your parish – this block. Jack told them. Knock on every door, meet the people – find out who is ill, out of work, having housing problems, kids not in school, and come back and report your findings, and we will begin a process to meet some of the needs." Two Jesuit seminarians, Jack Macnamara and Joe Putnick, found husbands and wives working two jobs in order to make their high house payments. There was little money left for needed building repairs. Because of their parents' working schedules, children were left to fend for themselves without supervision. Over and over, the seminarians heard the same stories as they met families who had purchased their homes on contract. The seminarians had unearthed the issue of contract buying in their "parish blocks."

Lawndale was a community which had changed from all white to all black in a little over ten years. The area had been redlined by the mortgage houses and the banks, which meant buyers could not get regular mortgages. Prospective home buyers had to deal with real estate operators who had bought up multiple properties in the area, then resold them to black prospects on contract and at much higher prices than the speculators had paid for them. When buying on contract, the buyer has no equity in the home and legally is not the owner until the final payment is made. It was legal, but unjust.

Macnamara and Putnick researched the properties of buyers in the Presentation area and documented the sales of the homes – names of previous owners, what the speculators paid for the properties, the prices charged new buyers. Macnamara's team had evidence that many contract buyers paid an average of \$20,000 more for their homes than whites with access to conventional mortgages. They called it "a race tax." They brought their findings back to a general meeting of the buyers at the parish. Macnamara wanted to fight the injustice and help them get their contracts renegotiated. Most of the buyers were dumfounded by the information, but figured they could do nothing about it. Then Ruth Wells stood up and said she was willing to try to do something about her contract. She became the "Rosa Parks" of Lawndale, and the Contract Buyers League was born.

The fight had many fronts –attempts to renegotiate with the sellers, picketing of the real estate operators' offices, rent strikes, and a federal class action suit charging the contract buyers' rights had been violated. In the end, the buyers' efforts with the sellers plus the lawsuit resulted in the renegotiation of hundreds of contracts, saving the home buyers in Lawndale over six million dollars.

In 1970 Jack Egan accepted the invitation of Fr. Theodore Hesburgh, president of the University of Notre Dame, for a kind of sabbatical year at the University. Jack, not wanting to be out of touch with his multitude of contacts asked me to join him at Notre Dame as his assistant and secretary. The year sabbatical turned into a 13-year stay and profitable work for both of us, primarily in the development of the Catholic Committee on Urban Ministry, which we called CCUM.

For years, a relatively small group of priests in urban ministry around the country had periodic meetings by piggy-backing on other meetings and tried to keep in touch and support one another by phone in the interim. We discussed the possibility of bringing the group to Notre Dame. Jack's feeling at the time was: Let's make something of this group, or have a party, then disband. The seminary on campus where Jack lived offered hospitality for the meeting and overnight lodging for our guests. They came – they didn't want to call it quits. They knew there were others like themselves who needed the kind of support they gleaned from gathering together.

For so many years, those working in social ministry were considered a fringe element in the Church. Their work was dubbed "political," and not the real concern of the Church.

Father Richard McBrien from Notre Dame's Theology Department addressed the group on "the theology of social action," basing his talk on the 1971 document, "Justice in the World," just issued by the worldwide Synod of Bishops. The crux of the document reads: "Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel." Father Egan's friend, Father Larry Kelly leaned over and whispered: "Jack, we were right all along." The synod confirmed their work as "constitutive," that is essential to the work of the Church.

Basic to all CCUM efforts was the conviction that excellent theology was the foundation for effective pastoral and social action work. We firmly established CCUM as a ministry to ministers, to the priests, sisters and lay people working in all aspects of social and pastoral ministry. In addition, it was a forum for the exchange of ideas and discussion of issues through annual fall conferences at Notre Dame a training program for social ministry through the month-long Summer Institutes, and the work of a national training team traveling to various regions of the country. A connector through national field staff, regional representatives and meetings, and through a monthly newsletter, called Connector, and lots of phone calls and mail.

By 1973 every Catholic organization with a social action thrust was represented at our fall conferences. Now other groups were piggy-backing on CCUM conferences! While we were at the University, Fr. Hesburgh sketched out his dream of Notre Dame "in service to the Church." In 1976, he appointed Jack Egan his special assistant and director of the Institute for Pastoral and Social Ministry to implement that idea. We would have to give up our direct relationship to CCUM. Father Philip Murnion, a colleague who shared out commitment to social ministry and justice work, took over as Chairman of CCUM. In his initial address, he noted:

"CCUM is more an attitude, a disposition, a set of relationships than it is an organization. CCUM tries to be a convener of all those who are called by the spirit of justice; to offer hospitality for every issue of justice that demands our attention. CCUM people are coming together throughout the country to make their work more effective for justice. They are church people conscious of a tradition...whether working within church institutions or not, CCUM people acknowledge their relationship to the church and see their work as the extension of the church into every field of social ministry."

Philip Murnion later became one of the staunchest supporters of the Interfaith Committee for Worker Justice.

When Cardinal Bernardin succeeded Cardinal Cody as Archbishop of Chicago, he invited Msgr. Egan to come home and head the Archdiocesan Office on Ecumenism. It was an ideal time for Jack Egan to renew ecumenical and inter-religious ties of former days and to reinvigorate those connections through celebrations of the Vatican II messages of ecumenical and inter-religious collaboration. The founding of the Council of Religious Leaders of Metropolitan Chicago with Cardinal Bernardin was a high point. At age 70, Jack Egan resigned his post with the Archdiocese, recommending that Cardinal Bernardin bring in younger colleagues. Some people said Jack Egan had retired! When Fr. John Richardson, president of DePaul University, heard of Egan's resignation, he made a suggestion. "If you really don't want to hang it up, Jack, we'll give you a base here at DePaul...I would like you to head an Office for Community Affairs...to help us at DePaul understand better the needs of the community, and help the community know that at DePaul we wish to serve our community. You can do this in any way you see fit."

Egan had been a high school student at DePaul Academy and spent a year at the University before entering the seminary to study for the priesthood. Now he had come full circle.

In the last 14 years of his life, Jack Egan served DePaul, and he was free to continue his relationships with community organization as the IAF's metropolitan-wide organization, United Power for Action and Justice, was gearing up in Chicago, as well as to support and encourage the new labor/religion initiatives of the Interfaith Committee for Worker Justice.

In 1999, he took on another cause crying out for justice –reform of the payday loan industry. As most often happened, he answered the call of an individual parishioner – a woman in desperate circumstances, who had two payday loans. For months, she made payments every payday on these loans – with interest amounting to 521% (annual percentage rate) by the time she spoke to him. Yet she was being swept back into poverty. Personally he could help this woman pay off her loans – and he did. But what about the system that brought her to such a state?

He called people – social service agencies dealing with credit problems, labor union and community organization folks, lawyers, public institutions with responsibilities for fraudulent practices, citizen organizations seeking legislative remedies for a host of social problems – and brought together a coalition of groups to seek payday loan reform. The coalition would no sooner get some modest reforms than the industry would find ways to skirt any new regulations.

This was Msgr. Egan's last cause. After his death in 2001, the leaders – all lay people – renamed the work the Msgr. John Egan Campaign for Payday Loan Reform. They remain deeply committed to ending the predatory practices of the runaway payday loan industry in Illinois. "We answered Jack's call," they said – "it's a tough battle, but we will not give up the fight until we have won."

Realize, dear friends, you stand on the shoulders of people like George Higgins and Jack Egan and Philip Murnion - and Bishop DeWitt, and Rabbi Marx, and Rev. Addie Wyatt...and so many others who fought injustice wherever they found it. What do these stories tell you and me? To listen well to people's stories. We will find that injustice as related by an individual may very well call for more than an individual response. Pastoral problems may well lead you to systemic actions for justice. Reach

out - build or join coalitions of like minded people and organizations. You are always stronger acting with others. Find mentors for your work and learn from them and from your colleagues. Know the issues – keep reading and studying the issues so that you become more competent. Keep your eye on the prize – you have to learn to fight injustice wherever you find it. Do not be surprised by opposition – work around it, and rely on colleagues for support in hard times.

For myself, I have found inspiration in the opening words of the Vatican II document on “The Church in the Modern World.” For me, the words sum up the principles of Catholic social teaching.

“The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men and women of this age, especially those who are poor, or in any way afflicted, these too are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts.”

I pray for God’s blessings for each of you. Have a great experience in your work this summer!