

## IN MEMORIAM

*Charles Owen Rice, Labor Priest*

Charles Owen Rice was one of the most influential Pittsburghers of the twentieth century. During his more than sixty years of activism, he was the best known, most outspoken and controversial priest in the Catholic diocese of Pittsburgh. As a Roosevelt New Deal Democrat in political philosophy his whole life, he was anathema to the right; but his most bitter critics and personal enemies were among certain on the left. He was deeply loyal to his church and championed its social teachings before and after they were part of the mainstream. He embraced an old Irish radical tradition of solidarity with the poor and the downtrodden.

Born in New York in 1908, Rice was returned to Ireland for seven years after his mother's death. He returned to the United States in 1920 to live with his father in Mt. Washington. He was a graduate of St. Mary of the Mount high school, Duquesne University and St. Vincent's seminary in Latrobe. As a young priest ordained in 1934, he quickly established himself as an

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activist. Though there were recurrent underlying concerns, Rice's activist life went through five distinct phases.

First Rice, over the radio, in the Catholic press and on the picket line, put the church squarely on the side of union organizing efforts. In the 1930's, as the director of St. Joseph's House of Hospitality where tens of thousands of men were sheltered and fed, he threw himself into the struggle for industrial unionism as a way to humanize capitalism and overcome the poverty he saw around him. Appearing on hundreds of picket lines, starting with the strike at the Heinz plant in the spring of 1937, then the bitter "Little Steel" strike that followed, he became a fixture on the labor scene. He opened the 1938 founding convention of the Congress of Industrial Organization on Pittsburgh's Northside with a prayer that beseeched the Lord to grant labor unity and victory, "for labor's cause is Your cause, its victory Your victory".

Second, Rice was a virulent anti-Communist who was extraordinarily effective because of credibility gained in the struggles of labor. Communism was militantly anti-religious, but also deeply attractive to many working people. He became convinced that the labor movement had to cleanse itself or it would be broken as it had been after World War I. His central goal was to defeat the left leadership of the United Electrical workers democratically, but in his zeal he collaborated with the FBI and in 1949 invited the House Un-American Activities Committee to hold a hearing targeting key union leaders in East Pittsburgh. This gambit failed utterly, the UE left the CIO and the labor movement was permanently harmed, as were many innocent people. This story is brilliantly told in John Hoerr's recent book: *Tom, Harry and Father Rice: Accusation and Betrayal in America's Cold War*.

Third, Rice consistently opposed anti-Semitism in the Church and racism in society. He was a leading Pittsburgh figure in the Civil Rights movement and his name is inscribed among the heroes at Pittsburgh's Freedom Corner. He wrote some of his best columns in the Pittsburgh Catholic from his time as a pastor at Holy Rosary in Homewood, interpreting for his Catholic readers the anger and alienation of the African American community. He was particularly forceful toward the racism of his Irish compatriots. In 1938, in an article entitled, "Catholic Contempt of the Negro Must End", he wrote: "Before any Catholic says: 'The Negro must keep his place,' let him find out what right he or any other lump of the slime of the earth has to assign any race to an inferior place . . . . In God's providence, we shall see black faces shining above us in Heaven, if we haters of men manage to get there."

Fourth, he was a powerful and consistent opponent of the war in Vietnam and many other foreign adventures of the American government. He began writing against the war in 1965, marched arm and arm with Dr. Martin Luther King to the United Nations in 1967 when King took his courageous and probably fatal stand against the Vietnam War. Rice declared that: "We have a national fault in that we associate shame only with losing, and our maturity will come, if ever, when we realize the shameful deed is to misuse our strength against the weak. Win or lose . . . We have sinned and gone mad."

Finally, Rice came full circle and ended his activism standing with labor in the 1970's and 80's. He became a supporter of union reform and labor insurgencies in the miners and steelworkers' unions. He married his mineworker friend Jock Yablonsky and his wife Charlotte, and buried both with their daughter, all victims of a brutal assassination. He spoke out against plant shutdowns and managed to befriend union rebels like Ron Weisen while remaining on good terms with steelworker president Lynn Williams.

Monsignor Charles Owen Rice loved poetry. Up until a year ago, he could still recite hundreds perhaps thousands of lines of Yeats, Keats, Auden, Chesterton, Hopkins, the loves of his youth. He loved attention and relished being attacked for his beliefs. He admired the rebel, consoled the prisoner, and fed the hungry. His ferocious fighting instincts led him to violate his own standards of fairness and decency, but he had the courage and honesty to confess and apologize.

He would sing *Danny Boy* at almost any gathering when asked. He sang it the last time this summer when I visited. I think that the second verse especially stirred him with memories of his mother, whom he barely knew, his Irish clan—his father, brother, uncles and aunts who had gone before him.

*But when ye come and all the roses falling, and I am dead as dead I well may be;  
Go out and find the place where I am lying, and kneel and say an Ave there  
for me.*

*And I will bear soft your tread above me, and then my grave will warm and sweeter  
be; For you shall bend and tell me that you love me,  
And I will sleep in peace until you come to me.*

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