AMERICAN CATHOLIC STUDIES
NEWSLETTER
CUSHWA CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF AMERICAN CATHOLICISM

God on the Waterfront

During the Great Depression of the 1930s, hundreds of Americans joined the Communist Party or became involved in one of the many "popular front" organizations it sponsored. Intellectuals and artists opposed to fascism were particularly attracted to the party's ostensible commitment to social justice.

After World War II, anxieties about communist infiltration grew in the United States, and the House Un-American Activities Committee turned its attention to Americans who had been involved with the party in the '30s. The entertainment industry — packed with liberals and left-leaning idealists — offered a compelling target. Dozens of actors, screenwriters and directors were subpoenaed to appear before HUAC, where they had to either "name names," or risk the blacklist and the loss of their livelihoods.

For some, guilt-ridden at having been "duped" by the party, confessing before HUAC offered a welcome moment of catharsis. For others, testifying was tantamount to betraying friends and acquaintances to a system that, in the words of the Senate's own Tydings Committee, ignored "the most elementary rules of evidence and fair play," trafficking in "gossip, distortion, hearsay" and "guilt by accusation alone."

The emotions aroused during this controversial period reverberate half a century later. Earlier this year a storm of protest greeted the announcement that renowned director Elia Kazan would receive a lifetime achievement award from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. Kazan belonged to the party for about 18 months early in the 1930s. Subpoenaed by HUAC in 1952, he chose to name names. For many, this moment taints his entire career. In particular, Kazan's highly acclaimed 1954 film, *On the Waterfront* — which presents testifying before a government commission as an act of heroism — has been singled out as a transparently self-serving attempt to justify his testimony before HUAC.

As historian James T. Fisher explained in a lecture on March 26, "Recovering the Waterfront: The Hidden History of a Film Classic," that interpretation misses the real story behind *On the Waterfront*. Fisher, who teaches theology and history at St. Louis University, is also a faculty fellow with the Cushwa Center's "Catholicism in 20th-Century America" research initiative; he is working on a history of the working-class, ethnic Catholic subculture among dockworkers and their families along the New York-New Jersey waterfront during the middle of the century.

The real story behind *On the Waterfront,* says Fisher, is not McCarthyism but a conflict during the late 1940s and early '50s between the Jesuit labor priest John M. Corridan and fellow Catholic Joseph P. Ryan, "president for life" of the International Longshoremans Union (ILA), whose rank and file was more than 90 percent Catholic.

Assigned to the Xavier Labor School of Manhattan in 1946, Corridan joined the Jesuit fight against the communist threat. The Jesuits offered a positive program for reforming American socio-economic conditions, and

see God on the Waterfront, page 7

INSIDE

• *Sister Joan Campbell* of the Sisters of Loretto at the Foot of the Cross, for her research on the founding of that community in Kentucky during the early 19th century.

• *Virginia Meacham Gould* and *Charles Nolan* of the Archdiocesan Archives in New Orleans, for their research on Henriette DeLille, founder of the Sisters of the Holy Family in 1842, a religious community of African American women. Their research will contribute to two new biographies of DeLille.

• *Seth Jacobs*, a Ph.D. candidate at Northwestern University, for his research, "'Our System Demands the Supreme Being': America's Religious Revival and the Creation of South Vietnam." This study seeks to determine the relevance of the mid-century religious revival to America's support for the Diem regime in Vietnam by examining the intersection of religious history and foreign policy.

• *Sioban Nelson* of the University of Melbourne, for her research on "Nineteenth-Century Catholic Women and the Care of the Sick." Nelson will examine American Catholic nurses in the 19th century, stressing the extraordinary range of the achievements of these religious women and offering an alternative interpretation to that which sees this period as a prologue to professional, modern nursing.

The deadline for applications for Research Travel Grants each year is December 31.

Hibernian Research Awards

This annual research award, funded by an endowment from the Ancient Order of Hibernians, is designed to further the scholarly study of the Irish in America. There are two recipients of the 1999 award.

• *Alison Kibler* of the Centre for Women's Studies at the Australian National University, for her research on "Paddy, Shylock and Sambo: Irish, Jewish and African American Protests against Mass Culture in the United States, 1880–1930." She will examine the ways in which these three ethnic groups attacked ethnic stereotypes in mass culture, opening the theater to a broader range of portrayals and transforming American culture in the process.

• *Christopher Shannon,* an independent scholar, for his research on "The Irish in Us: Religion and Ethnicity in American Cinema, 1907–1946." Shannon, who received his Ph.D. in American studies from Yale University, is currently a junior fellow at the Erasmus Institute at the University of Notre Dame. His project examines Irish-American Catholicism as a case study of how mass media represents ethno-religious traditions in a commercial market.

The deadline for applications for Hibernian Research Awards each year is December 31.

God on the Waterfront

continued from page 1

their labor school sought to train a committed cadre of workers who could combat communist propaganda with a Christian vision of society grounded in the social encyclicals. As historian Joseph McShane has observed, the Jesuit labor schools hoped to create an apostolic "fifth column" imbued with an "action-oriented" spirituality within the Catholic working class.

Corridan believed reforming an economic system designed solely for the convenience and profit of employers was critical to eliminating the unjust conditions that allowed communism to gain ground among the workers. In 1948 he launched a crusade to root out corruption in the ILA. But in the waterfront neighborhoods, religion, community organization, and work were closely integrated, and Corridan's crusade to reform the labor system inevitably challenged the entire ethos and culture of what Fisher calls "the Catholic waterfront metropolis."

The crude, inefficient labor-system dominating the docks troubled Corridan. The waterfront was oversupplied with longshoremen, the full number of whom were needed only rarely. In between, dockworkers were subject to a hiring system that treated them "as if they were beasts of burden," he wrote, "part of the slave market of a pagan era." Corridan came into conflict with the ILA when he became convinced the union was profiting from the dues paid by this surfeit of workers, and had little interest in reforming waterfront labor practices.

The hiring bosses, who doled out work several times a day during the "shape-up," likewise profited from the kick-backs paid by men desperate for work; loan sharks thrived by supplying destitute longshoremen with high-interest loans during lean times. The businessmen who controlled the piers (such as the waterfront's "Mr. Big," William J. McCormack), the union under Ryan's leadership, and local racketeers, found the system congenial. Everyone was pleased, except the workers, who expressed their dissatisfaction by calling a wildcat strike in 1948. Corridan determined to come to their aid.

The priest had little confidence that the waterfront could clean its own house. Rather "the Government of the United States should set up a competent Commission of Inquiry to investigate and solve this cancerous condition." But as Catholic labor activist John C. Cort noted, union racketeers regularly employed violence, and like "most communities where a careless word can cost a life, the natives are extremely close-mouthed, especially in speaking to outsiders." For such a commission to do its work, longshoremen would have to break the waterfront's code of silence and testify against local leaders, often their friends and neighbors.

James T. Fisher

Public attention would, Corridan believed, deprive waterfront thugs of their cloak of secrecy, and encourage informants to come forward. To that end, he collaborated with journalist Malcom Johnson, a non-Catholic investigative reporter preparing a series of stories that ran in the *New York Sun*, "Crime on the Waterfront." It was through Johnson that Corridan first came to the attention of Budd Schulberg, a screenwriter developing a script about the waterfront. Out of Schulberg's and Corridan's conversations came the screenplay for *On the Waterfront*. Schulberg was fascinated by the idea of a priest advocating on behalf of "rank and file longshoremen rebelling against a corrupt social system." Corridan offered to help Schulberg turn the story of his struggle with the ILA into a film: "'Budd,' I said, 'you can do a *Going My Way* with substance.'"

Corridan's crusade pitted the rule of law against venal businessmen, corrupt politicians and union racketeers.

Both Johnson and Schulberg were changed by their collaborations with the priest. Johnson, a jaded New York crime reporter, found himself absorbing some of the Jesuit's passion for righteousness. And Schulberg, a liberal humanist, was transfixed by the vision of social justice he caught from this "fast-talking, chain-smoking" priest, who "swore like the longshoremen and drank with them," but who, he later wrote, "gave me feelings about Christ that I never had before."

Schulberg became enthusiastic about Catholic social teaching when he was writing *On the Waterfront*, and many of his friends thought he would soon join the Church. He did not, but both Schulberg and Johnson readily admitted that Corridan had converted them to the cause of cleaning up the waterfront. Both emphasized that *On the Waterfront* was Father John Corridan's story, that it was intended to aid in his struggle: "The film came from deep involvement with the battles that were going on with the ILA," Schulberg said. Father Corridan "was the inspiration for the film, every word spoken by his prototype in that picture came straight from the mouth of this straight-talking waterfront priest whose contribution to Christian social justice must never be forgotten."

Though Marlon Brando's portrayal of dockworker Terry Malloy's slow awakening to conscience is the main story of the film, it is the Corridan-inspired Father Pete Barry, played by Karl Malden, who encourages Terry's change of heart. As the film opens, Father Barry is himself experiencing a transformation. When a dockworker slated to testify before a crime commission is murdered, Barry realizes that he cannot wait for his parishioners to come to him, but that he needs to treat the whole neighborhood as his church, and take the Gospel to the streets and the docks.

Readjusting boundaries is one of the key themes of the film. When Father Barry expresses disbelief at the indignities of the shape-up, a dockworker explains that the waterfront is different — "like it ain't part of America." The waterfront needed to be brought under the same laws that govern the rest of the nation, Corridan felt, but for that to happen, dockworkers would need to break with local custom and testify before outsiders. *On the Waterfront* shows Father Barry challenging the culture of the waterfront with the imperatives of the Gospel, speaking truth to power and inviting the intimidated dockworkers to imitate him.

The waterfront does not immediately follow Barry's call, however. Violence greets him when he preaches his "Christ in the shape-up" sermon from the hold of a ship after a dockworker slated to testify is killed. Christ sees what you are suffering, and he suffers with you, Barry tells the longshoremen. "Go back to your Church, father!" one of the union henchmen yells, as others pelt him with eggs and cans. "Boys, this *is* my Church!" Barry responds. As there is no place from which Christ's presence can be excluded, so there is no place where a man's basic rights and dignity can be ignored.

Corridan's crusade pitted the rule of law against venal businessmen, corrupt politicians and union racketeers. But the struggle could not be confined to local politics or labor policy, and the conflict soon came to involve two distinct Catholic sub-cultures. For his part, Corridan championed the social justice ideals enshrined in *Rerum Novarum* and *Quadragesimo Anno*, and longed to see the Gospel break into a corrupt and fallen world and restore human rights. Schulberg later likened Corridan's vision to liberation theology.

Corridan was outraged, for example, at local politicians and dock bosses who "profess to be Catholics and assume they can remain in good standing just by showing up for Mass every Sunday." These men "think nothing of treating their fellow human beings like dirt every day in the week. They seem to forget," he continued, "that every man is precious in the eyes of our Lord and that he died for all of us, as brothers in Jesus Christ, and not just for the privileged few."

The dockworkers, on the other hand, lived under an older Catholic culture that had adapted to the economic hierarchies and power inequalities of 19th-century urban America. They possessed, said Fisher, a bare-knuckled "populist realism" that accepted poverty, suffering and injustice as an inevitable part of life. The Catholicism of this world was circumscribed by ethnic custom, devotionalism and private charity, and included a fierce devotion to place as well as a certain loyalty to neighborhood hierarchies.

Above all, waterfront neighborhoods resented outside interference, whether from the government or the Church. While the longshoremen's Catholicism was often sincere, the Church was not the only power to be reckoned with in their world. In fact, though *On the Waterfront* depicts Barry convincing Malloy to testify, the real Corridan met with intense resistance

from longshoremen and their families, who perceived his crusade more as an attack on their neighborhood traditions than an attempt to clean up union corruption.

One "son of a longshoreman" wrote to Corridan in 1953, "I see no reason for making such a big time over the ILA affairs. J.P. Ryan may have overstepped a bit — all the fellows do when they get a bit of power." The writer reminded him that though local union politics had a few "bad boys," its leaders were Catholics, as were many members of the ILA. "It is a disgrace," he concluded, to have Catholics fighting each other in public, and the only solution was for Corridan to admit that he had overstepped. "Please now, for the benefit of all of us who try to follow in the teaching of our religion, back out of this gracefully," the writer implored Corridan.

Corridan told longshoremen in 1954 that he wanted to see them get a new deal so they could improve their temporal and spiritual lives. Reforming the waterfront "will give you a better chance to save your souls," he told them. But the dockworkers saw Corridan appointing himself "savior of the waterfront," and they resented the implication that they needed saving, that their Catholicism or their way of life was somehow deficient and in need of reform. What is more, they had the example of local Church leaders who were ready to honor the boundaries that structured their community, specifically that between religion and labor.

Monsignor John J. O'Donnell, chaplain of the Port of New York and a warm friend of union boss Joseph Ryan, was fondly called "Taxi Jack" by his parishioners. When Ryan was indicted for the misappropriation of union funds in 1953, O'Donnell told the press that he and his friend respected each others' spheres of authority: "He keeps his hands off the spiritual things of my Church and I keep my hands out of his business." Corridan's crusade violated this boundary, and waterfront residents recognized that, with all its problems, the neighborhood as they knew it would not survive if he was successful.

In contrast, O'Donnell enjoyed sponsoring communion breakfasts that brought political, labor and religious leaders together in a symbolic illustration of the symbiotic relationship obtaining between the Church, the ILA, and Tammany Hall. Corridan objected to these displays of solidarity. "This seemingly innocuous social ritual reenacted the bonds of the Catholic metropolis," said Fisher. These rituals illustrated the degree to which Church leaders had put unity above purity, and Corridan was scandalized: "If religion is on the decline as a moral influence in the lives of many people, breakfasts such as these, as much as the corrupt conditions on the waterfront, are a cause."

Reforming the waterfront "will give you a better chance to save your souls," Corridan told the dockworkers.

In his attempts to convince dockworkers of their duty to testify before the commission, Corridan had in fact set himself the daunting task of converting the entire working-class culture of the Catholic metropolis, said Fisher. His attempt at redrawing the boundaries that traditionally structured this culture meant replacing the intricate codes of immigrant Catholicism with those drawn from the more modern idiom of Catholic social justice concerns.

Corridan often cited the admonition of Pius XI as a justification for his crusade: "There are some who, while exteriorly faithful to the practice of their religion, yet in the field of labor and industry, in the professions, trade, and business, permit a deplorable cleavage in their conscience and live a life too little in conformity with the clear principles of Christian justice and charity."

In part, Corridan was attracted to the prophetic challenge of the Catholic social justice tradition because it reflected his own stark perception of the sharp alternatives available on the waterfront. "I was born in this neighborhood," Corridan explained to actor Karl Malden. "When I was growing up there were two ways to go: Become a priest or become a hood." But that was clearly not the case. Plenty of dockworkers, satisfied with the regular workingman's life, did not become "hoods." To Corridan, however, the dockworkers' refusal to stand up and denounce their bosses amounted to a complicity in corruption that was both immoral and insufficiently Catholic.

Corridan hoped to transform regular working men into an aggressive Catholic phalanx that would battle the forces of corruption in the name of social justice. Perhaps predictably, he failed. The longshoremen continued to grant the ILA their allegiance. In 1957 Corridan was reassigned by his Jesuit provincial to LeMoyne College in Syracuse, New York. There he taught economics for several years at a post far from the waterfront. Later, when he was assigned to teach religion at St. Peter's in Jersey City, "he kept his distance from labor issues on the nearby waterfront," said Fisher.

Whatever we may think of the ethno-devotional Catholicism of the waterfront and John Corridan's crusade to bring it into alignment with the principles of the social encyclicals, it is clear that the real story behind Elia Kazan's *On the Waterfront* had little to do with his testimony before HUAC. Rather, testifying was the central moral dilemma in the film because it had been critical to Corridan's attempts to clean-up the waterfront, long before Kazan was subpoenaed.

Corridan failed to convince the dockworkers that they would be better off exchanging the semi-feudal life of their neighborhoods for the more democratic and egalitarian vision he offered them, but the film depicting his quest offers a valuable and compelling glimpse of an ambiguous struggle between two Catholic cultures. The story behind the film is virtually forgotten today, lost in the memories of Senator McCarthy's very different crusade. Fisher's work brings this forgotten story to light as one of the most dramatic and revealing chapters of 20th-century American Catholicism.

— *John H. Haas*