



"I MARVEL AT THE WAY HE'S BEEN ABLE TO PLEASE EVERYBODY."

The Church: 1970

Let's Praise Msgr. Higgins

By Fr. Andrew Greeley



It is necessary occasionally that we praise men, and now, for no other reason than that I happen to feel like it, I propose to praise one man: Monsignor George Higgins.

I propose to praise him (though heaven knows he will be upset by such praise) as a man, perhaps not for all seasons, but certainly for this season in the American Church. George Higgins is not, alas, a man for this season because he represents the principal forces at work in the American Church. Quite the contrary, the sort of person he is and has been for the last thirty years stands as a powerful and symbolic judgment against many of the current trends in the Church. George Higgins is a man of reason in a time of rampant romanticism, a man of competency in a time of arrogant and flagrant incompetency, a man who, as Monsignor John Tracy Ellis points out, may be the best informed priest in the American Church at a time when being uninformed is considered high virtue.

A young priest from his own archdiocese once remarked to me, "We young priests" (which is usually an introduction to an arrogant statement) "respect the things that men like Higgins stood for, but we feel that we have absolutely nothing to learn from him."

Good heavens, yes! George Higgins does not have a beard, or even sideburns, and cuts his hair short; he does not smoke pot, but only long black cigars; he is not self-righteous or moralistic; he has a passion for facts and for clarity; he is incapable of taking himself seriously (and probably has stopped reading this column long before this paragraph).

He does not engage in broad, sweeping generalizations; he does not seek to have others condemned without due process; he does not play games of cops and robbers with the FBI; he does not imagine that he is Dietrich Bonhoeffer reincarnate; he does not think that society can be persuaded, much less remade, by liturgical gestures. Good Lord, no! Of course the young clergy have nothing to learn from George Higgins.

Nor are the middle-aged Catholic liberals particularly happy with the Monsignor from Chicago. He has not deserted the

labor movement, as they have. He does not publicly bare difficulties he finds remaining in the priesthood as their heroes must (even if he did have such problems, which one doubts, he would not be given to exhibitionism). He is obviously respected in Washington by business, labor, government, and the press because of his competency and his intellectual sophistication.

And, oh, yes, George Higgins' ultimate crime is wit — the somber, middle-class Catholic rebels can abide just about anything but a priest with a sense of humor.

I remember at a press conference during the Vatican Council, a very distinguished journalist turned to me and said, "You know, of all the men up there Higgins is the only one who understands what a newspaperman has to look for."

I have used George Higgins as a symbol of intelligence, sophistication, balance, and competence, all of which are desperately needed in the American Church, and I have used this symbol to belabor the romantic left, which is conspicuously lacking in all such qualities. But one could just as readily use the symbol to belabor the right. In any Church that was properly run a man possessing all these qualities (in addition to piety, and I absolutely refuse to embarrass the Monsignor further by discussing that subject) would be a bishop, an archbishop, even a cardinal. The chances of George Higgins becoming any of these in the present order of reality are very thin indeed; and I think that this fact is a terrible judgment on the inability of the American hierarchy to permit outstanding men to rise to leadership positions. It is not so much, I think, that the king-makers doubt Higgins' orthodoxy; rather they are afraid of him. He is much too bright and you really can't run the risk of putting someone with his intelligence and his competence in a position of major authority and responsibility.

It is no small feat to be simultaneously irrelevant to the romantic left and terrifying to the timid right. One suspects that George Higgins will be remembered long after those who find him either irrelevant or frightening have vanished from the scene.

On The Right Side

Is Saigon Safer?

By Father Paul J. Cuddy



Marj Snow is my statistician friend whom I got to know in 1956 in Morocco. She has worked and lived in the East and Far East continually for over fifteen years. Her roots are in Massachusetts, but her adult life has been pretty much in the Far East, with an occasional return to the United States. On September 10, she wrote from Saigon. The letter came in 5 days. Her letter is surprising.

"Dear Father,

"... Yes. I'm still in Saigon and would actually bid on another assignment if one presented itself, but overseas slots are becoming more and more scarce and I still maintain that old wanderlust. Then too, the situation in the cities at home is so frightening these days I hesitate to cope with it unless I have to. I made a trip back home last Fall and was impressed with how fearful people are of going out at night. Strange to tell even with the recent epidemic of purse snatching and pilfering (I had a small kit containing two rings and my watch taken from my purse while swimming). I still feel far safer on Saigon streets than I would at home. The Vietnamese simply don't go in for rape, mugging and violence in general."

Just where Marj Snow went

when she was home (the USA) last year I don't recall. The East and Ohio, for sure. Washington and New York, probably. But wherever she was she did experience that terrible insecurity suffered by law abiding citizens.

In our 13,000 population of Hornell where law and order are reasonably observed, breakdown of order seems hardly real. In the big cities, it must be very real. For example, this morning's Buffalo COURIER EXPRESS (Sept. 18) gives these cheerless captions, all on page one:

1. Off-Campus Incident Triggers UB Tussle. Two Cops Slabbed. Pair Held; 2. Bomb Calls, Nude Mark UB Opener; 3. Two Pull Ruse, Grab \$50,000; 4. Gangs Injure Six In 2 High Schools (in Buffalo).

I suppose it depends on one's point of view about death as a blessed event or a fearsome event, but the front page also lists the Buffalo dead. I think the paper needs a psychologist who might at least supplant the death notices with the birth notices, which are an occasion for joy for most people, abortionists excepted. The one cheerful note on the whole front page was: Orchestra Contract Approved, an amicable

agreement between the Buffalo Philharmonic and the Musicians Union.

Marj Snow has lived wider experiences for more years than most of our people who violently oppose practical steps needed to restore security and order in the country. I wrote back to her.

"Yes. We do have a partial breakdown in law and order, and the rights of the good citizen are jeopardized and impaired. The avowed anarchists and those who openly declare their intent to destroy the government I can understand. But another group are a mystery. They proclaim a queer gospel that we must preserve freedom, but we must have policemen without self-protection; National Guardsmen called to protect persons and property and to control mobs, but without arms; police under surveillance of suspicious groups.

"Libertarian groups are too often more zealous for protection of thugs, murderers, mobs and bomb-throwers than they are about the rights of the law-abiding. I am sending you THE AGE OF REVOLUTION, by the French historian, Henri Daniel-Rops. There are many parallels. Let me know when you return home. We must recall old times, and discuss today."

On the Line

Book Details Nasser's Life

By Bob Considine



No American reporter ever made a more determined study of the late Gamal Abdel Nasser than Dan Kurzman, the award-winning foreign correspondent whose latest book "Genesis — 1948" (World Publishing Co.) offers us views of the Egyptian leader not mentioned in the standard obits.

Nasser's emergence as a public figure, for instance:

"Nasser was born in a dusty, mud-hut village of upper Egypt. The son of a postal clerk, he had from an early age despised the king and the pashas who lived in gaudy palaces and played in Cairo's lavish gambling establishments with the profits squeezed from some of the world's most exploited peasants. But he detested them most of all for their role as 'tools' of British imperialism.

"In his burning revolutionary fervor, Nasser joined as a youth the Young Egypt Party, an ultra-nationalist, green-shirted group with close links to Mussolini's fascism. And he regarded as a badge of honor the bandage he wore on his head after being clubbed by policemen in a student riot against the government and British imperialism."

In February, 1942, the Nazis took Benghazi and took dead aim at Cairo. The British, taking charge, made a prisoner of Farouq until he appointed a

pro-British premier. Capt. Nasser, outraged, called together several other young officers and formed a Free Officers' secret society with the purpose of eventually seizing power.

Nasser was wounded in July, 1948, while taking part in an attack against an Israeli position. He was shot in the chest and, while in the hospital, seeing many others needlessly wounded, swore that if he ever came to power in Egypt "I shall think a thousand times before dragging my men into war..."

Major Nasser and Capt. Yeroham Cohen, aide to the great Israeli Commander Gen. Yigal Allon, became friends near the end of the war of 1948. Cohen advanced towards Nasser's position in an armored car flying a white flag. He was a Yemenite Jew, and had served Allied intelligence in World War II disguised as an Arab. He spoke flawless Arabic.

They faced each other, unarmed, at 15 yards. "Why have you come here?" Nasser demanded coldly.

"I have come as the personal representative of the commander of the front," Cohen said. "I wish to arrange a meeting between our two sides."

"You wish to demand our surrender?" Nasser asked. "We will never surrender. We are here to defend the honor of our army."

Cohen, a tough swarthy man, smiled and changed the subject. It developed that Cohen's

thesis at Oxford concerned the origins of the Egyptian nationalist movement and the British occupation. And from that, came the talks.

The two were to meet many times after that, drawn together by their hatred of Egyptian politics and British rule. They became prisoner-of-war authorities, distributed food, attended religious ceremonies over their buried dead, deploring war. Nasser hoped that Cohen would be named first Israeli ambassador to Egypt, when all was done and forgotten.

Kurzman writes:

In February, 1950, Gamal Abdel Nasser and Yeroham Cohen met in El Auja and drove together to Faluja so that Nasser could point out the location of Israeli graves. As they walked among the graves, Nasser asked, "Do you remember, Yeroham, when we sat on the grass and I told you I didn't think I would ever see my wife and daughters again?"

"Yes, Gamal. And I told you that you would not only see your daughters but would have a son as well."

"Well, I've got a son."

That night, Cohen, on returning to Tel Aviv, sent a package of baby clothes to his Egyptian friend. It was too bad, he reflected, that a man like Gamal Abdel Nasser was not running Egypt.

Three years later, Nasser was running Egypt, and he became Israel's most dangerous foe in the Middle East. Now death silences his reason.