

"SOME TWENTIETH-CENTURY MEN OF GOD"

III. Richard Cardinal Cushing

INTRODUCTION

When President Kennedy was inaugurated in 1961, the Roman Catholic Cardinal from Boston - Cardinal Cushing - gave the invocation. Some of us who watched on television tended to be critical. For the Cardinal's rasping voice and his rather long prayer did not seem to add to the proceedings which included some memorable words by a young John Kennedy and a poetic valedictory by an old Robert Frost.

But in the decade that followed, many of us had occasion to revise our first impressions. The more we came to see and hear of this peppery, personable, pioneering prelate from Boston, the more we admired him. And when in November of 1970, Richard Cardinal Cushing died at the age of 75, Protestants and Catholics alike felt that one of God's good men had been taken from this earthly scene.

DEVELOPMENT

As our custom is in this biographical sermon series, let us see first the outline of his life. Richard James Cushing was born in the year 1895 in the area of South Boston, the son of Irish immigrants. His father was a blacksmith for the Boston Elevated Railway who worked 76 hours a week for a grand total of seventeen dollars. Yet the son remembered more happiness than hardship in that home. He said, "We were ordinary people, but comfortable". And he added: "Religion was as much a part of the family as eating or breathing. It was never talked about much....it was a simple fact of life".

Richard Cushing was almost a high school drop out. He was not exceptionally brilliant, and his studies required time. But he also felt the need to work outside of school hours to reduce the family's financial burden. During the course of his junior year, he was summoned with his father to the high school to discuss his dismal academic record. The ultimatum of the authorities was that he must either drop his night job or drop out of school, and they seemed to lean toward the latter as the preferred choice. So did young Cushing. On the way home, he stormed to his father:

"They can have their diploma. I'll get a day job and help out at home". To which the father's reply was resolute: "You'll stay in school. Give up the night work now, and get back to your studies. Do the best you can. 'Tis all God asks".

Years later a Cardinal of the Church was to say, "If my father had taken a different attitude, I would not be where I am today. I would never have finished high school".

So a youth grew in wisdom as well as stature. After high school, he went on to Boston College, and after two years there, decided on the priesthood as his vocation. So to St. John's Seminary he went to complete his formal education. He recalls among his teachers one who impressed him most of all - with a repeated exhortation, "Take your priesthood seriously, but never yourself!"

Ordained in 1921, he became Father Cushing. After a short stint as a curate in two local parishes, he was assigned to the Office of the Propagation of the Faith in the Boston Diocese. In our Methodist Church, we would call it the Division of World Missions. Either way, it is the missionary arm of the church - and this is where the young priest wanted to be - either on the missionary field or at home interpreting mission needs to people and raising funds to support and expand missions. It was in the latter role that the church decided that he was most needed and most effective. It was a labor of love, as he visited the parishes in the diocese - preaching and pleading for money for missionaries in China, Africa, Latin America.

And through it all, emerged the image of a man who was intensely human, honestly interested in people, compassionate, generous to the point of poverty. An aide once remarked, "When he dies, we shall throw out his toothbrush and thus dispose of his estate."

In 1944, he was named Archbishop of the Boston Diocese, and then he was the man in charge of more than 300 parishes and more than a million Catholics. Boston was happy - for the people loved this man. ~~The Catholic Weekly paper correctly predicted, "He will remain utterly un-pompous!"~~ He struck a rather revolutionary note for a Roman Catholic prelate when he said to his priests (and to himself):

"Being shepherds, we have to lead our flocks - yet we are not by right the overlords of our people - we are their servants!"

Not only foreign missions, but also home missions were now claiming his time and zeal. He embarked upon an ambitious campaign to build churches, schools, and hospitals, homes for orphans, retarded children, old people. And again he knew how to raise money. Most of it came from rank and file middle class people in the parishes who responded to his appeals. But he also established rapport with a motley crew of benefactors - Protestant, Jew, and Catholic - who trusted him and entrusted him with portions of their worldly goods for whatever charitable use he saw fit. Among them, of course, were the Kennedys. They worked with him hand and glove and pocketbook in building a retarded children's hospital in Brighton in 1946. The young Senator Kennedy turned over the royalties from his books to Cushing's charities. And, of course, the world came to see and know the Cardinal best through his ministry in the tragic Kennedy crises. Yet he resented any implication that his chief vocation was private chaplain to the Kennedys. "They never made me" he would growl in irritated response to that charge.

INFLUENCE OF POPE JOHN

If anyone outside himself and God made him what he became, it was probably Pope John XXIII. They each responded to the other. Said the man in Boston of the man in Rome, "I had never heard of him before he became Pope. Then when I saw him going to the prisoners, to the old folks, to the laborers, even to the Communists, I said, 'Good God - that's my man'....."For this is my own concept of the priesthood". The Pope recognized a kindred spirit in Cushing - made him a cardinal - and there developed a close friendship and spiritual kinship between the two men.

At the first session of the Vatican Council, Cardinal Cushing felt quite out of it. He didn't understand Latin very well, so half the time he didn't know what was going on. Said he, "Why even the Russian observers at the Council were better off than I was. At least they had interpreters. When the Bishops addressed the Council in Latin, for once in my life, I kept my mouth shut". But at the second session, with the pope dead, Cushing felt a responsibility to become a leader of the liberalizing forces. He learned enough Latin to speak out for the declarations on religious liberty and the exoneration of the Jews. He won the applause of the Council, the ultimate approval of the declarations, and a new respect of much of humanity.

He came back to New England to reflect upon the changes in his own life-style. He was often to be found speaking in Protestant Churches and Jewish synagogues. He encouraged churches to use the mass in English. He challenged some of the positions of his church with regard to mixed marriages and birth control. Sometimes he was in step with the new spirit in the church; sometimes he seemed to be running ahead of it.

For the last fifteen years of his life, his health was precarious. He had an operation for a malignancy. He had ulcers. He suffered from asthma, and emphysema. But with all the strength and energy that he could muster, he kept on going. He wished that he could resign his Boston post and spend the last years of his life as a missionary in Latin America, but neither his health nor His Holiness would permit it. Finally in 1970, he did resign - knowing that the end was near - and two months later he was gone.

A COMPLEX MAN We are clearly too close to him in time to accurately appraise his role in history. There seem to be some inconsistencies about this man - he could be warmly gracious, or he could be coldly gruff. He was a life member of the NAACP, yet he also had some kind words to say about the John Birch Society. He was the soul of personal integrity, yet when a TV documentary exposed police corruption in Boston, he complained that somebody had "betrayed" Boston. Said one of his laymen, "The Cardinal is a very complex man.....he has you cheering for him one moment and he sort of embarrasses you the next". But without trying to raise him to sainthood, there seems to be far more to cheer about than to embarrass us. Suppose we look then at some of the qualities that shine through to reflect the Master whom he faithfully tried to serve.

I. SENSE OF HUMOR One thing about him that touched most people was his ~~great~~, his delightful sense of humor. This was something that most responded to. I think it was Sir Walter Scott who once wrote:

"It is a great disgrace to religion - to imagine that it is an enemy to mirth and cheerfulness, and a sever exacter of pensive looks and solemn faces."

Cushing of Boston was never guilty of that kind of "disgrace to religion". He generally could see the light and laughing side of things, and whether in the midst of a solemn assembly or a pastoral visitation, he so often wore his impish grin and invoked smiles from those around him.

And he had a wealth of stories to illustrate his concerns and convictions. He warned against an over-display of religion, including making the sign of the cross on the part of Catholic athletes. It reminded him, he once said, of the boxer from the CYO who crossed himself over and over again before the bell rang. "Will that help him win?" someone asked the CYO chaplain. "Sure" said the priest, "It will if he can fight!"

The Cardinal poked fun at himself, especially the colorful trappings and the vestments that went with his high office. "Glad rags" he called them, and once started out a TV program with the scriptural introduction, "Fear not - it is I". He gave a visitor a portrait of himself, beaked in all of his official robes. "Here" he said, "have a comic valentine....nobody will know who it is....they'll probably think it's Napoleon". His favorite attire, even while a cardinal, was the ordinary clerical garb of the priest.

And even when he took strong stands on controversial subjects, he had people laughing even if they angrily opposed him. Someone once asked him if he favored ordaining women to ease the shortage of priests, and he replied:

"I've supported many lost causes in my lifetime, but this one is not for me. I could never confess my sins to a woman. It would be like doing it on television."

Gloria Steinem and Cardinal Cushing would have made an interesting match.

One of the things that endeared this man to others was that he never took himself too seriously, and the sunlight of God's grace and love shone through him in sparkling reflection. A happy, joyous Christian, he reminds us of Augustine's specifications: "A Christian is an alleluia from head to foot".

II. HUMAN-NESS Second, I would mention his human-ness. Although high in the church, he never became pompous or pretentious, and he never lost the common touch. The pictures that we have of him as a cardinal - and you can be sure that they were not staged - show him equally at home dancing an Irish jig with an octogenarian in a Catholic home or riding a merry-go-round with a child in his arms. One day at a reception a dirty-faced four year old nuzzled up, gazing up at him wide-eyed. "Hello, little girl and what your name?" he asked her. "Mary" - "my that's a nice name". As he patted her on the head, she looked up and with a natural child-like question, said, "What's your name?" He replied, "Richard".

He never forgot his lowly origins in life, and where once Walt Whitman had written, "I myself became that wounded soldier" Cardinal Cushing would say, "I myself became that working man - or foreigner - or prisoner - or stranger - or olderster - or youngster". He was like the Man from Nazareth in that "the common people heard him gladly". And he is a 20th century reminder of the humility and the human-ness of Jesus - a reminder to all of us that this is part of what it means to be a person in Christ.

III. OPENNESS AND GROWINGNESS Third, and perhaps most important of all, I would lift up his openness and his growingness. The Cushing of 1965 was not the Cushing of 1935. When he came back from the Vatican Council, he said: Whereas the tendency with most of us, as we grow older...

"Nothing like this has ever happened before. I am accepting invitations from ministers and will make these talks in an ecumenical spirit".

And as often as he could he preached in Protestant churches and in Jewish synagogues. At the Methodist Church in Sudbury, Massachusetts, he started his sermon by saying, "I accepted this invitation because of the godly examples of two men named John - John XXIII - Pope, and John Wesley". About the ecumenical movement he said:

"Organic unity of the faiths is not possible in the foreseeable future, but the ecumenical movement can achieve the unity of love. In the past we have been living in our ghettos. We have hardly talked with one another, and sometimes we were fighting".

He was the same catalyst for change in his own church. He strengthened the role of the laity. He encouraged a mass that people could understand. He challenged some of the traditional social positions of the church. And he pioneered in the name of the truth and the light of Jesus Christ as he was given to understand it. He kept growing until the day of his death, and he beautifully fulfilled Paul's word: "Speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head".

There have been some tragic chapters written in Christian history by people who were afflicted with a kind of infantile paralysis of the mind and arthritis of the spirit. The Catholics wrote their share in their treatment of Galileo, Huss, Luther, Wycliffe, and Protestants did no better in their dealing with Michael Servetus, Roger Williams, and Anne Hutchinson. There are groups and sects that even today are completely intolerant of those who differ. And indeed there is something within most of us that is suspicious of difference and resistant to change.

And then a glowing, growing spirit like Cardinal Cushing moves across the stage and reminds us that no one group - no one person - has an exclusive monopoly upon all the truth of Christ - that Christian maturity means trust and tolerance, openness and growth - not that convictions are unimportant. They are. Cushing had his strong convictions. We are not to be so openminded that we stand for nothing. Indeed, we are to stand for the truth as we are given to see the truth, but woe be to us if we act as though we know it all and have it all - with nothing more to learn - nothing more to change. There is so much still to learn and do and be. As Paul reminds us of this in those words:

"We are to grow up in every way into Him who is the head, unto Christ - from whom the whole body.....when each part is working properly, makes bodily growth and upbuilds itself in love".

CLOSING Behind this series of three sermons that ends now has been the belief that God is still showing himself in assorted ways and places and lives - as we saw two weeks ago in a German Lutheran preacher by the name of Bonhoeffer who stood up to Hitler - last week in a black Baptist preacher by the name of King who challenged the conscience of America - and finally in an Irish immigrant who became a Catholic Cardinal - who laughed and danced a jig and cared for people and turned some old walls into solid tables. Thanks be that the Acts of the Apostles are still being written, and that indeed God entrust a little of that writing to each of us.

LET US PRAY And now, O God, may something of that spirit that was in this man, thy servant, be also in us - his humor, his human-ness, and his willingness to grow in new ideas. In thy name, we ask this. Amen