

Our Cardinal, Our Guidance Counselor

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Cardinal O'Connor was the greatest guidance counselor the New York City Board of Education has ever had.

That may be an odd title to give the archbishop of New York, but as a member of the board which holds in trust the education of our public school youngsters, it is one of the few I can add to the many he already has.

Our students go to their guidance counselors when they are perplexed by the choices they must make in their lives, or when they need to borrow the ear of a truly compassionate, self-forgetful person. Our guidance counselors intervene in our students' lives when they see our young people charging head-long down a path to self-destruction.

So His Eminence was for us. We could turn to him when sorting out the conundrums we face as public educators, not for orders or easy, quick answers, but for inspiration, and the refreshing thoughts of a man calmly, solidly grounded in an other-centered morality, who drew his ideas from a rich understanding of people's needs.

And His Eminence raised his voice in warning when he believed we might act in the name of political expedience, or with a false compassion based on sentimentality, or when we were about to settle for the easy answers of an easy morality because we did not have enough faith in our young people's ability to rise to the challenges of a life well-lived.

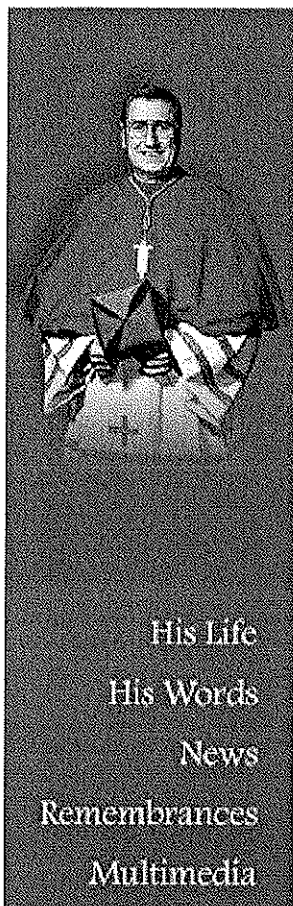
As archbishop, he wrote often of the need for our public schools to imbue our children with the "American values" he himself had learned as a small boy attending public schools in Philadelphia, values like honesty, respect, chastity and purity, and a reverence for human life, the values of the then-legal Ten Commandments. Though the Cardinal was a deeply thoughtful, well-read man, he seemed almost as bewildered as a confused child when speaking of those who want to remove these values from our schools. He did not seem so much to disagree with their position as to be unable to grasp why anyone would object to these commandments as an outline of morality for everyone.

He pleaded with the Board to believe in our young people, to believe that they are worth believing in, and not to sell them short or sell them out, whether that meant choosing to teach them to aspire to chastity through

abstinence, or rejecting curricula that treated true marriage as merely one option among many for family life.

He never failed to remind us of our duties to *all* of our children. It is no surprise to those who know something of the Cardinal's life that he was a champion of education for God's special little ones, the developmentally disabled and handicapped. As a scrappy little Irish kid, he used his fists to defend a mentally retarded girl who was being teased by neighborhood bullies. Later, he began his priestly career by touching the lives of the mentally retarded. He respected all human life, but he seemed to care most for those who needed the most care, and his advocacy on their behalf was never lost on us, who must oversee the public schools' special education classes.

Finally, the Cardinal ever reminded us of the principle enunciated by St. Thomas More, that martyr, philosopher, saint and government administrator of long ago: "When statesmen forsake their private consciences for the sake of public duty, they lead their country by a short route to chaos."



His Eminence John Cardinal O'Connor, D.D., Ph.D. IN MEMORIAM • 1920-2000

His Life

New York's Cardinal O'Connor

On May 3, John Cardinal O'Connor, the Archbishop of New York, died at his official residence behind St. Patrick's Cathedral. But his legacy lives on...his words, his concern for the sanctity of life, efforts on behalf of the poor, the sick and the homeless, his defense of the unborn, his concern for his priests and his support for New York's Catholic schools.

"Every priest would like to be remembered as a priest and all that it conveys, rather than as a public figure with all that it conveys," Cardinal O'Connor once reflected when asked how he would like to be remembered. He then added, "I regularly go down to the crypt under St. Patrick's Cathedral and I look at the tombs of my predecessors. Right in the center is the next marble block with no inscription. That's reserved for me. And all that's important when I move into the crypt is that I have served New York as a very good priest." And a very good priest he was.



The Cardinal will be remembered as a strong and faithful shepherd. At a time when Catholics in America were increasingly inclined to take a "cafeteria stand on matters of faith and morals", Cardinal O'Connor continued to proclaim Church teaching on birth control, abortion and homosexuality.



The one teaching of the Church that defined his ministry was the sanctity of life...at any age and at any stage. He is best known for his stand against abortion. To him, it was simple: Abortion is murder. It is a sin. But he did more than just talk about it. He was committed to the right to life and showed his concern by wearing on the lapel of his black clerical suit a tiny red rose with its stem spelling out "I-i-f-e". He participated at the annual Right to Life March held in Washington, DC, and formed a religious community, the Sisters of Life who are dedicated to protecting the sacredness of all human life beginning with the infant in the womb to those vulnerable to the threat of euthanasia. In addition, he repeated an offer many times to any woman in need: "go to him for help rather than abort her child". The Archdiocese of New York and Catholic charities responded

by providing hundreds of women with medical assistance, housing, adoption and legal services, as well as, the Cardinal himself counseling women in difficult situations.

Cardinal O'Connor, the fourth of five children, was born in a row house in a blue-collar Philadelphia neighborhood on January 15, 1920. His father, Thomas O'Connor, was his hero and his mother, Mary Gumble O'Connor, experienced both a sudden blindness and recovery that impacted Cardinal O'Connor with a sensitivity to disabled people for the rest of his life.

He attended public schools until he was a junior in high school. Under the Christian Brothers of West Catholic High, he was inspired to take up a religious life. He entered St. Charles Borromeo Seminary in Philadelphia at age 16 and was ordained nine years later on December 15, 1945, a month before his 26th birthday. Cardinal O'Connor and his 21 classmates promised to return for a reunion every year on that date, and the Cardinal kept that promise except for his years in Korea and Vietnam, and last year because he was ill.

After ordination, he worked as a diocesan priest for seven years. His days and nights were full with teaching at a Catholic high school, night school for adults, hosting a weekly, Catholic, radio news program, and volunteering in two psychiatric hospital wards.



In 1953, Cardinal Spellman, Archbishop of New York, who was also responsible for providing the Church's chaplains to the U.S. Armed Forces, pleaded for more chaplains. Cardinal O'Connor responded and entered the Navy. When he retired 27 years later, he had risen to Rear Admiral and Chief of Chaplains of the US Navy. Later as an Archbishop and member of the Episcopal Commission that spent two years drafting the American bishops' 1983 pastoral letter on war and peace, he influenced the bishops in America to tone down criticism of U.S. nuclear policies.

After leaving the Navy in 1979, he was made an Auxiliary Bishop and assigned to the Military Vicarate under Cardinal Terence Cooke of New York. In May 1983 he was appointed Bishop of Scranton, Pennsylvania. He held that post less than a year before being chosen to succeed Cardinal Cooke - who died of cancer - as the Archbishop of New York. He was elevated to Cardinal in May 1985.

On his 75th birthday, as required by Church law, he submitted his resignation, but Pope John Paul II asked him to stay on and he did for another five years. On January 16, 2000, the Sunday Mass at St. Patrick's Cathedral celebrated the Cardinal's birthday, one day after he turned 80. As he entered the Cathedral, Cardinal O'Connor received a standing ovation from the 3,000 people gathered. During his remarks, the Cardinal said his Sundays in the Cathedral had been among his happiest times.

During his years in the Archdiocese of New York, Cardinal O'Connor was active in many areas – from ministering to both the rich and down trodden, to preaching it was important to live your faith in both politics and even on the baseball field. He would donate his Social Security benefits to a black scholarship fund and give blood to the Red Cross and ask others to "give" too. In the quiet of the night, he was known to visit AIDS patients at an archdiocesan hospital and could be found listening to them, cleaning their sores and changing their bedpans.

Perhaps one person who touched his life most deeply was Mother Teresa. He once stated, "Mother Teresa offered me one of the most precious gifts that I have received by telling me, 'Only if we share the light of Almighty God do our lives become truly meaningful.' " It is interesting to note that the last public appearance of Cardinal O'Connor was at St. Patrick's Cathedral on March 5, 2000, when he spoke about Mother Teresa.



The Funeral Mass for John Cardinal O'Connor was held on Monday, May 8, 2000, and he was buried in the crypt beneath the main altar of the Cathedral at St. Patrick's in New York.

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