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“God’s Human Rights Lawyer – Father Robert Drinan”

We shall not again see the likes of Father Robert Drinan, who died this week at age 86. Professionally he was one of a kind. Bob – or *Bawb*, as the former Massachusetts Congressman would introduce himself – was both priest and politician, a combination later banned by the Vatican, which forced the feisty champion of human rights to choose between callings in 1980.

He chose the priesthood. But just as he was no ordinary politician -- he had run for Congress to oppose the Vietnam War -- he was also no ordinary priest. A lawyer as well, he crammed his remaining decades with teaching at Georgetown law school, writing books and articles on human rights, and testifying before Congress on human rights matters for the American Bar Association.

I had the privilege of coming to know him during what seemed to me his most energetic years – his 70’s and 80’s. We both served on human rights committees within the ABA. On issue after issue, there was Father Drinan, demanding that we do something about it, and now!

Bob was not always precise on technical points. But what he lacked on details he more than made up for in passion and vision. Someone else might be more punctilious in delineating the jurisdiction of an international human rights court. Bob would tell you why the court was vital for victims of massacres and deserved American support.

Bob’s enthusiasm was evident even in the title of one of his books: *Cry of the Oppressed: The History and Hope of the Human Rights Revolution*.

In personal relationships Bob was attentive and unrelenting. A couple of years ago he learned of my move from Northwestern to Notre Dame Law School. He was alarmed: how would I survive among the unrepentant conservatives on our faculty? It was practically as if I would be in physical danger.

Even after I assured him that we liberals, too, have a place in South Bend, whenever I saw him thereafter, his first question was always the same: How are they treating you at the law school? And his gaze would not relax until I assured him that I had not been sacked or excommunicated.

One of my Notre Dame colleagues met Bob more than forty years ago. At the time my colleague aspired to be a Jesuit. Entering the dining room at a retreat center, he noticed a priest whom he did not know seated at a table by himself. Lest the poor fellow be left alone, my compassionate colleague cheerily introduced himself, sat down and engaged Bob Drinan in conversation.

Only later did my colleague learn that Bob was alone, not for lack of friends, but because he was on silent retreat. Perhaps Bob did not wish to embarrass the young novice by waving him away.

Or it may be – and this would be my bet – that the voluble Bob saw a good Christian excuse to break his silence, and grabbed it.

Being a priest gave Bob a longer term view than most of us enjoy. Many Americans may recall the public drama of his having to choose between Congress and the Vatican in 1980. One of Bob's research assistants at Georgetown later asked him about his decision not to run for reelection. Expecting an answer that would reflect regret over opportunities missed, she was surprised by his response: "Look, soon the Pope will be gone, and then I will be gone, and it really will not matter at all. Life presents dilemmas and one has to make the best choice possible at that time and then live with it."

He answered with no apparent bitterness or anger, she recalls, just as a matter of fact.

Bob knew better than most of us that there are larger issues than his own life. On a beautiful sunny day in Washington last weekend, as Bob lay dying a few blocks away, I had the pleasure of joining perhaps 150,000 other Americans in what may have been the largest antiwar demonstration since the Vietnam War. Other figures from the Vietnam era – Jesse Jackson and Jane Fonda – were there to speak out against the war in Iraq.

Bob, of course, could not be with us. If he had, he might have reminded us of what he wrote in one of his most recent articles, for the ABA publication *Human Rights* in 2003:

“Every war prompts Americans to go against the very essence of the Constitution for whose truths they are waging that war: ... The United States should adopt a policy of being a friend who shares its legendary resources and wealth with the 800 million persons in the global village who are chronically malnourished. ... This cannot be done so long as the United States relies almost exclusively on its military prowess for its foreign policy. Lawyers of America have to act as moral architects who will restrain the impetuous policies of the government that teach that violence, armed conflict, and military might can solve the moral, spiritual, and human problems that overwhelm much of humanity.”

I missed Bob's presence last Saturday. But in a larger sense his momentary absence did not matter. Father Robert Drinan had already made his point, giving a lifetime so that other children of God might have a better chance to live in peace and dignity.

Doug Cassel's commentaries are generally broadcast Wednesdays during the noon hour of the Worldview program on Chicago Public Radio, 91.5 FM, and rebroadcast at 9 PM in the evening. Views expressed are personal views of the author and not necessarily those of Notre Dame Law School, the Center for Civil and Human Rights or Chicago Public Radio.