

Thomas McGrady:
Eulogy to an Honest Man
(December 14, 1907)

It is a strange and pathetic coincidence that almost at the very moment I completed the introduction to the brochure of Thomas McGrady on *The Catholic Church and Socialism*, now in press,¹ the sad news came that he had passed away, and the painful duty now devolves upon me to write the word “finis” at the close of his work and add a few words of obituary eulogy.

It is not customary among socialists to pronounce conventional and meaningless panegyrics upon departed comrades; nor to pay fulsome tribute to virtues they never possessed. Mere form and ceremony have had their day — and a long and gloomy day it has been — and can have no place among socialists when a comrade living pays his last reverent regards to a comrade dead.

Thomas McGrady was born at Lexington, Kentucky, June 6, 1863. In 1887, at 24 years of age, he was ordained as a Catholic priest at the cathedral of Galveston, Texas. His next pastorate was St. Patrick’s church, Houston, followed by his transfer to St. Patrick’s Church, Dallas, Texas. In 1890 he returned to his Kentucky home, beginning his pastoral service there in Lexington, his native city. Later he went to St. Anthony’s church, Bellevue, Kentucky, and it was here, in 1896, that he began his first serious study of economic, political, and social questions. He was first attracted by Henry George’s single tax, but abandoned that as inadequate after some socialist literature fell into his hands, and he became convinced that nothing less than a social revolution, and the abolition of the capitalist competitive system would materially better the existing industrial and social condition of the people.

Father McGrady, who always had the lofty courage of his convictions, now avowed himself a socialist. He drank deep at the fountain of socialist literature and mastered its classics. His library contained the works of the standard authors of all nations.

It was at this time that Father McGrady was at the very pinnacle of his priestly power and popularity. He was young, just past thirty, brilliant and scholarly. His magnetic personality was irresistible. Tall, fully six feet,

splendidly proportioned, commanding, he was a magnificent specimen of physical manhood. He had a massive head, a full, fine face, florid complexion, clear features, and the bluest, kindest and most expressive of eyes.

Widely and deeply read, cultured in the genuine sense, sociable, and sympathetic, Father McGrady attracted friends by an irresistible charm, and held them by the same magic power.

He was an orator and a wit, a scholar and a humanitarian. He had the exquisite fancy of a poet and could dally, according to mood, with a daisy or a star.

In his heroic and finely molded physical proportions, his large and shapely head, clear complexion, and expressive eyes, he resembled strongly Robert G. Ingersoll.

This resemblance was accentuated by the kindly and infectious humor, the brilliant flashes of wit, the terse and epigrammatic speech, and the keen and incisive satire of which both were master.

These two men, had they not been separated by the cruel and hateful prejudices inherent in capitalist society, and all its conventional institutions, would have been the boonest of friends and loved each other as brothers.

Father McGrady soon began to feel that his new convictions did not fit his old conventicle. Honesty and candor being his predominant characteristics, the truth that dawned upon his brain found ready expression from his eloquent lips. He took his congregation into his confidence and told them frankly that he was a socialist. Thenceforward every discourse attested that fact. He was warned by the bishop, threatened by the archbishop, but his flock closed around him, a living, throbbing citadel. He ministered to them in their suffering, comforted them in their sorrow, solemnized their nuptial vows, baptized their babes, tenderly laid to rest their dead, and they truly loved him.

But the conviction that the orthodox pulpit and the forum of freedom were irreconcilable, and that as a priest he was in the fetters of theology, grew upon him, and in spite of the pleadings and protestings of his followers he resigned his pastorate and withdrew from the priesthood. The touching scene attending his farewell sermon has never been described, and never will be, in human speech. The congregation, seeming more like one great family, under Father McGrady's tender and affectionate ministrations, felt stricken as if by an unspeakably sad personal bereavement, and

sat in silence as they paid homage to their departing friend and pastor in sobs and tears.

The tremendous public reception given the modern Saul at Cincinnati, across the Ohio from his Kentucky home, is vividly remembered by thousands who struggled in the crush of common humanity to get within sound of his voice. He was now a full-fledged social revolutionist, and like his immortal prototype of many centuries ago, the common people heard him gladly.

The formal abdication of the priesthood by Father McGrady created a great sensation. The dignitaries of the church affected pious rejoicing. The recreant priest had long been a thorn in their complacent flesh. It was well that the holy church was purged of his pernicious influence.

Columns of reports appeared in the daily papers, and the features of the converted priest, with which these accounts were embellished, became familiar to hundreds of thousands. A socialist priest was indeed an anomaly. Vast concourses of people were attracted by the mere mention of his name. When he was announced to speak, standing room was always at a premium.

McGrady was now at his best. The deep convictions he was now free to express flowered in his speech and his oratory, like the peals of a great organ and the chimes of sweet bells, moved and swayed the eager masses. Everywhere the eloquent exponent of socialism and pleader for the oppressed was in demand. His fame preceded his footsteps. Auditoriums, theaters, and public halls were taxed to their capacity. The eloquent socialist evangelist was now one of the commanding figures of the American platform. He was doing, superbly doing, the grand work for which he had been fitted as if by special providence. From the Atlantic seaboard to the Pacific slope his resonant voice was heard and the multitude were stirred by his burning message of social regeneration.

It was in the midst of these oratorical triumphs that the first distinct shock of organized opposition was felt. The capitalist press as a unit, and as if by preconcerted action, cut him out of its columns. The sensation created by McGrady's leap from the Catholic pulpit to the socialist platform had been fully exploited as far as its news value was concerned, and now the renegade priest, as his *whilom paters*² in Christ, who profess to love their enemies, call him, must be relegated to oblivion by being totally ignored. The church he formerly served so faithfully now began to actively pursue him. Where he was announced to speak priests admonished the

faithful, either openly from the pulpit or covertly through the confessional, not to stain their souls by venturing near the Antichrist. But this form of opposition, however vexatious, trying and difficult to overcome, but aroused the latent spirit of the crusader and intensified his determination. In the fierce fires of persecution, fed and fanned by religious ignorance and fanaticism, he was tempered for the far greater work that spread out before him, rich and radiant as a field of promise.

“Unhappy man!” as Hugo wrote of Marshal Ney,³ who bared his breast to the leaden hail of English foe on the field of Waterloo, “Thou wast reserved for French bullets!”

Notwithstanding that McGrady was attracting vast audiences, including many who had never before heard the philosophy of socialism expounded, the very ones most desired, and without whom progress is impossible; notwithstanding the door receipts almost uniformly recouped the treasury of the local Socialists by a substantial net balance, certain “leaders,” whose narrow prejudices were inflamed by the new agitator's success and increasing popularity in the movement, began to turn upon him, and sting him with venomous innuendo or attack him openly through the socialist press.

Paradoxical as it may seem, he was denied the right to serve the socialist movement — by socialists.

Among the first charges brought against him — not by capitalists; they were too wise, if not too decent, to utter such a palpable untruth, but by men calling themselves socialists — was that he had joined the movement as a “grafter,” and was making socialist speeches for “the money there was in it.”

A baser falsehood, a more atrocious slander was never uttered.

Had McGrady been a miserable grafter instead of a great white soul, he would have remained in the pulpit. His people worshipped him and his “superiors” held out the most glittering inducements if he would only abandon his wicked and abominable “economic heresies.” The eloquence and power of the young priest were widely recognized in church circles. A brilliant future spread out before him. He could easily become the petted and pampered favorite of the fathers. But he spurned the life of ease and luxury at the price of his self-respect. The positions of eminence he might attain by stifling his convictions sank to degradation from his lofty point of view.

Turning his back upon the wealth and luxury of the capitalist class he cast his lot with the proletariat, the homeless and hungry, the ragged and distressed, and this he did, according to some socialists, to “graft” on them, and the cry was raised, “The grafter must go!”

It was this that shocked his tender sensibilities, silenced his eloquent tongue, and broke his noble and generous heart.

Those socialists who vilified him as a “sky pilot,” and as a “grafter,” who declared him to be “unsound,” “unscientific,” and who indulged in similar tirade and twaddle, ought now to be satisfied. Their ambition has been realized. They scourged the “fakir” from the platform with whips of asps into a premature grave and he will trouble them no more. May they find it in their consciences to forgive themselves.

There is a deep lesson in the melancholy and untimely death of Comrade Thomas McGrady. Let us hope that so much good may result from it that the cruel sacrifice may be softened by the atonement and serve the future as a noble and inspiring example. While it is the duty of every member to guard the movement against the imposter, the chronic suspicion that a man who has risen above the mental plane of a scavenger is a “grafter” is a besetting sin, and has done incalculable harm to the movement. The increasing cry from the same source that only the proletariat is revolutionary and that “intellectuals” are middle class reactionaries is an insult to the movement, many of whose staunchest supporters are of the latter type. Moreover, it would imply by its sneering allusion to the “intellectuals” that the proletariat are a brainless rabble, reveling in their base degeneracy and scorning intellectual enlightenment.

Many a fine spirit who would have served the movement as an effective agitator and powerful advocate, stung to the quick by the keen lash in the hand of a “comrade,” has dropped into silence and faded into obscurity.

Fortunately the influence of these self-appointed censors is waning. The movement is no longer a mere fanatical sect. It has outgrown that period in spite of its sentinels and doorkeepers.

Between watchful devotion, which guards against imposters and chronic heresy hunting, which places a premium upon dirt and stupidity, and imposes a penalty upon brains and self-respect, there is a difference wide as the sea. The former is a virtue which cannot be too highly commended, the latter a vice which cannot be too severely condemned.

Thomas McGrady was an absolutely honest man. Almost ten years of intimate and varied relations with him enables the writer to

conscientiously pay him this tribute — to place this perennial flower where he sleeps.

No attempt is made to convert our deceased comrade into a saint. Could he speak he would not be shorn of his foibles. Like all great souls he had his faults — the faults that attested his humanity and brought into more perfect relief the many virtues which adorned his manly character and enriched his noble life.

Thomas McGrady found joy in social service and his perfect consecration to his social ideals was the crowning glory of his life and the bow of promise at his death.

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¹ Thomas McGrady, *The Catholic Church and Socialism*. (Wayland's Monthly no. 92.) Girard, KS: Appeal to Reason, Dec. 1907.

² *Former fathers*, that is, his former church superiors.

³ Michel Ney (1769-1815) was one of the original eighteen Marshals of the Empire named by Napoleon. He commanded the III Corps of the Grande Armée during the ill-fated 1812 invasion of Russia. After Napoleon's final fall in 1815, Ney was arrested, tried for treason and convicted, and executed by firing squad, at which he famously gave the final command for the execution party to fire into his own chest.