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# IN MEMORIAM: ROBERT F. DRINAN, S.J. (1920–2007)

## Father Drinan's Revolution

HAROLD HONGJU KOH\*

Father Bob Drinan was not one of those lawyers who loved human rights but couldn't stand human beings. What made him special was his unique ability to fight fiercely every day for human rights, while just as fiercely loving every human being he met. Like other happy human rights warriors—like Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu—Bob Drinan lived his life both as a fearless advocate and as a joyous human being. I know, because I benefited from both faces of Bob Drinan: the generous man who loved human beings and the scholar-advocate who loved human rights. It was because of Bob that my father became a lawyer, and it was because of Bob that the global human rights revolution that has been my life's work became possible.

Incredibly, my family's debt to Bob Drinan began more than fifty years ago, when he was dean of Boston College Law School. I say "incredibly," because for most law school deans, becoming dean marks the pinnacle—and often the end—of your legal career. But Father Drinan was a prodigy. His deanship came when he was only thirty-six, at the start of what would be a remarkable half-century as a professor, dean, politician, ethicist, and human rights activist.

My family first met Bob Drinan in the late 1950s when my father, a South Korean graduate student, had just received his doctorate from Harvard Law School. Because of the precarious political situation in Korea, my father felt he also needed an American law degree, should he ever need to practice law in this country. My dad visited Dean Drinan at Boston College Law School and explained his situation. As a law dean now, were I to get a similar visit from a foreign student, my first impulse would probably be to tell the student to go to the admissions office to fill out an application. But to our amazement, Father Drinan agreed to enroll my dad in Boston College's evening law program, on the spot and with no application form! Those were the days when deans had real power! At the end of his meeting with my dad, Father Drinan said simply, "Mr. Koh, you are in and I am happy to have you study here!"

Three years later, the man who was running for Prime Minister of South Korea asked my dad to join his political campaign. As my father was on the campaign trail in Seoul, he called home repeatedly to see whether his BC Law

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\* Dean and Gerard C. & Bernice Latrobe Smith Professor of International Law, Yale Law School; U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, 1998-2001. © 2007, Harold Hongju Koh. These remarks were delivered at the funeral service for Father Robert F. Drinan, S.J., at St. Ignatius Church, Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts, on February 3, 2007.

School grades had arrived; he was thrilled and relieved to learn that he had passed and would get his degree! That fall, after his party won the election, my dad proudly visited Father Drinan again, to tell him that he had just been appointed Acting Ambassador from Korea to the United States. I remember that visit well, because my parents brought me along—I was just six years old, and I squirmed throughout the meeting. My parents made me wear a necktie because I was seeing the Dean. I remember asking: “Is Dean Drinan like Dean Martin?” And they told me, “No, Harold: Dean Drinan is much more important.” And of course, they were right.

Now roll the clock forward nearly forty years, shortly after I was confirmed as Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights. A friend who was a student at Georgetown University Law Center invited me to speak in Father Drinan’s human rights class. When I entered the classroom, Father Drinan leaped up like a leprechaun and said, “Mr. Secretary, you’re so kind to come.” Just as he had done four decades earlier, he made me feel like a million dollars.

I told him that we had met before, reminded him of his past generosity to my parents, and of the first meeting we had had so many years earlier. He roared with laughter, threw his arms around me and said, “Harold, were you that little boy wearing the necktie? I felt so sorry for you having to sit there listening to us grown-ups!” That tells you why this man was so beloved by generations of parishioners, students, and constituents: because like Jesus, he instinctively saw every scene from the perspective of the smallest and meekest person in the room.

I tell this story not because it is so unique, but because it was so common. If you read through the Georgetown and Boston College Law School websites, you will see tribute after tribute from people like me, whose lives Bob touched in his human and humane way.

Let me close with this thought: Father Bob Drinan was not just a great guy; he was a genuinely great man. As a dean, a congressman, and a law professor, he helped lead the human rights movement for more than half a century. He traveled on humanitarian missions around the globe and inspired scores of human rights organizations, linking the human rights movement to the movements for international labor rights, for domestic racial equality, for democracy at home and abroad, for demilitarization, and for a livable environment. In Congress, he helped to enact the key human rights legislation of the post-Vietnam era. As a professor, he wrote a dozen books, taught thousands of students, and advocated fiercely for human rights in the Soviet Union, South Africa, El Salvador, Chile, the Philippines, Cuba, and Darfur.

He was a voice of conscience at the historic 1993 Vienna World Conference on Human Rights, and he was always ahead of the curve. His last great book, *The Mobilization of Shame*,<sup>1</sup> calls for a Right to Food, for regional tribunals for human rights, and argues compellingly that the death penalty violates interna-

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1. ROBERT F. DRINAN, *THE MOBILIZATION OF SHAME: A WORLD VIEW OF HUMAN RIGHTS* (2001).

tional law, all things which still may come to pass.

He approached everything in life with optimism and good humor. I last saw him in October 2006, when I had the honor of speaking at the dedication ceremony for the Father Robert F. Drinan, S.J., Chair in Human Rights at Georgetown University Law Center. At the dinner afterwards, Bob rose and said, "People ask me how I got so much done in my life. The answer is simple: celibacy." The place exploded with laughter and love for a man who understood that all his accomplishments ultimately came from sacrifice.

Father Robert Drinan lived his life as a member of the Society of Jesus. He followed Jesus, as an advocate for the underdog, as a teacher, and as a man of compassion. Like many theologians, he believed in human rights as natural law: the simple, radical faith that all humans are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights, among them life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

And so, the celibate Bob Drinan became a father in more ways than one. He became a father to the many he touched, and a father of the global human rights revolution. Perhaps more than anyone in his generation, he understood that the global fight for human rights is ultimately about caring for human beings. And that is why history—and all of us—will never, ever forget him.