Waterfront Priest

"THE MOST CYNICAL AGNOSTIC COULD NOT HELP BUT FEEL THE PRESENCE AND POWER OF CHRIST WHEN FATHER CORRIDAN DESCRIBES THE WATERFRONT."

BUDD SCHULBERG

LAST winter, when waterfront racketeering was front-page news, a tall, intense, youthfully balding New York Irishman wearing the cassock of a Jesuit priest aroused the curiosity of millions of TV and radio fans of Dave Garroway, Tex and Jinx, and other prominent programs.

"The mob is tryin' to scare the men off from giving the Crime Commission the facts on waterfront extortion, kick-backs, shakedowns, pilferage and all the rest of the mess that's been infecting our great port of New York," Father John Corridan told his audience. "They're boastin' already that when the Crime investigation is gone and forgotten, there'll be bodies floatin' in the river. Well, that's a good sign, in a way. It means the fast-money crowd who muscled in on our honest hard-working longshoremen are feelin' shaken and desperate. It may not come today or tomorrow or next week, but little by little the harbor workers, and the union leaders and the politicians are waking up. It's a long, uphill pull, but one of these days we're going to see law and order, job security, regulated hiring and union democracy raise our longshoremen to the level of dignity reached in other key industries."

"Is he real," a friend of mine actually asked me after having seen Father Corridan on the Garroway show, "or is he a young Pat O'Brien made up as a priest for a movie part?"

I laughed, but sympathetically, for I had had a similar reaction three years earlier. At that time, in the course of some research for a forthcoming movie, I asked some newspapermen how I could get the feel of the waterfront as it really is. Much to my surprise their answer was: "Go down and see Father John Corridan, the waterfront priest. He's been on top of it for years."

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Next day I was having lunch at Billy the Oysterman's with this chain-smoking, ruddy-complexioned man in his early forties who looked fit enough to swing a hook with the best of them. He was too full of his subject to do much eating. It seemed to me the most unusual talk I had ever heard, combining the gritty language of the dock-workers, with mob lingo, the facts and figures of a trained economist and the teachings of Christ.

Listening to Father Corridan with growing amazement, I felt myself entering a world I would not have believed possible in America, just as I might have cried "fake!" if I had seen a movie about a Catholic priest who becomes a leader among rough-and-tumble dock-wallopers, as tough in his own way as the Mickey Bowers, Anastasias, Clementes and other criminal elements who have been allowed to gouge longshoremen and grab off an illegal three hundred and fifty million dollars annually from the port.

For the past six years, as assistant director of the Xavier Labor School, Father Corridan has put in as much as eighteen and twenty hours a day studying the waterfront problem. He has studied the figures pier by pier. He has talked to hundreds of longshoremen in his small office, which is littered with waterfront clippings and reports. He has gone into the homes of the dock workers to talk over the meat-and-potatoes problem with their wives. He has talked to cops, district attorneys, Port officials, union officers, rank-and-file leaders, State Employment people, Congressional investigators, Government labor authorities.

Call off a pier on either side of the river and Father Corridan can tell you who controls it; he's got the name and number of the hiring boss, the boss loader and the treasurer of the local who never bothered to keep books. He has traced their political connections. For years, while there was a general hush-hush policy regarding the fabulous "Mr. Big," William J. McCor-

mack, who parleyed a horse-and-wagon into a hundred-million-dollar waterfront empire, Father Corridan has been studying the connections between him and such unsavory characters as strong-arm specialist Albert Ackalitis and the notorious gunman Linky Mitchell.

FULL of the nervous intensity of the waterfront he serves, Father Corridan understands, and hopes by this understanding eventually to correct, the brutal and desperate measures used by hunters and hunted alike in the industrial jungle of New York harbor. "What I try to do—what all the waterfront priests try to do—is to help 'em learn how to defend themselves, how to bargain for themselves, in a lawful, intelligent way. What they need down here, if we're ever to see this mess cleaned up, is their own, strong, honest organization. That way they won't get pushed around by the union racketeers, the shipping companies or the Commies."

That's the key to the unique labor class Father Corridan conducts at the Xavier Labor School in the Chelsea area that has been spearheading the revolt against the Anastasias, the Bowers mob and the other labor racketeers who have been terrorizing the waterfront. Men come in off the docks in their work clothes, their faces still grimy from the hold or sweating from the heavy work. Because the Jesuit is known for his fearless stand against mob rule on the docks, attending his class is not considered healthy by the bully-boys who have muscled in on so many locals. "Sometimes our men have to slip in the back way after dark," says Father Corridan.

During one of his talks a heckler kept interrupting. As a Corridan man described it, "Father John had his number right away. He spotted him as one of the boys. So right in the middle of his talk he stops and goes up to this sharp-looking character. Cool as a cucumber, he says, 'I know who sent you, so go back to your bosses and deliver this message for me: tell 'em that if anything happens to the men I'm trying to help here, I'll know who's responsible, and I'll personally see to it that they are broken throughout this port. They'll pay and I'll see that they pay.' "

Father Corridan doesn't talk religion to the longshoremen who slip into Xavier to plan their resistance to open crime and union corruption. "It's straight bread 'n butter, dollars 'n cents," he says. " I try to pick the men who are natural leaders and who have the guts to talk up for honest trade unionism on the docks. I try to put them wise to the stuff they ought to know."

It was Corridan, for instance, who enlightened the men as to their rightful claim to some ten million in unpaid overtime under Article 7B1 of the Wage-Hour Law. He wrote a letter to every Senator and to all the key Representatives explaining in detail the legal and moral justification for the longshoremen's case, at the same time urging a thorough investigation of the chronic infection that has paralyzed the greatest harbor in the world.

The only way that the priest touches on religion directly in his labor class is to ask his students what they consider the basis of economics. Invariably, they name "money," "bread," "profit," or "labor supply." And invariably Corridan's answer is, "Man." "Only man is capable of knowing and loving," he says. "In other words I teach 'em the dignity of man." The Christian strictures against man's inhumanity to man are brought up to date in the Pope's encyclicals on social justice and Father Corridan always has this in the back of his mind, but, as he says, "We don't want to bog 'em down with a lot of theories, religious or otherwise. These are men with a problem—the problem of how to live like human beings—and they're looking for help in how to solve it. They want practical stuff, not a lot of heavy water."

The antiquated system of hiring known as the "shape-up," (outlawed in England over a century ago, Corridan points out) is not only un-American, a menace to our efficiency and security, but un-Christian, Father Corridan believes.

Christianity, for him, is not merely abstract dogmas but a living force. The most cynical agnostic could not help but feel the presence and the power of Christ when Father Corridan describes the inhuman conditions he has seen on the waterfront. "I figured out, on a basis of yearly income and man-hours, that there is about enough work to support seventeen thousand longshoremen and their families," he says. "There are more than twice that many shaping-up. The uncertainty, the humiliation of having to stand there and beg with your eyes for work twice a day while ex-cons look you over like you were so much meat in the butcher-shop—no wonder the men who get passed over at the morning shape wait for the bars to open and see how many belts they can get into 'em before they shape up again at noon." In a memorable sermon on the docks, one of the few times when he revealed the spiritual passion behind his interest in human welfare on the waterfront, he said:

> I suppose some people would smirk at the thought of Christ in the shape-up. It is about as absurd as the fact that He carried carpenter's tools in His hands and earned His bread by the sweat of his brow. As absurd as the fact that Christ redeemed all men irrespective of their race, color, or station in life. It can be absurd only to those of whom Christ has said, "Having eyes, they see not; and having ears, they hear not." Because they don't want to see or hear. Christ also said, "If you do it to the least of

mine, you do it to me." So Christ is in the shape-up. . . .

He stands in the shape-up knowing that all won't get work and maybe He won't. What does Christ think of the efficiency argument of the shape-up? . . . Some people think that the Crucifixion took place only on Calvary. Christ works on a pier and His back aches because there are a fair number of the "boys" on the pier. They don't work, but have their rackets at which so many wink. What does Christ think of the man who picks up a longshoreman's brass check and takes twenty per cent interest at the end of the week?

Christ goes to a union meeting. Sees how a meeting is run. Sees how few go. Sees how many don't speak. Sees a certain restraint. At some meetings He sees a few with hundred-fifty dollar suits and diamond rings on their fingers . . . drawing a couple of expense accounts. . . . Christ walks into a tenement and talks with the wife of a longshoreman. Her heart is heavy. . . .

As an audience, there's nothing tougher than longshoremen. They're edgy and suspicious, quick to smell a phoney. They gag easily on verbal syrup. They've *had* the silver-tongued orators, from the president of their International up and down, trying to sweet-talk them out of their rights. Their name for former Mayor O'Dwyer was "Weeping Willie." "Maybe we don' have too much education," a docker told me in a Chelsea saloon, "but you don' hafta go t' collich t' know who's with ya and who ain't. Father John is with us. He ain't tryin' t' sell us out like these itchy-finger boys posin' as organizers. And he ain't signin' us up for some phoney peace pledge like the Commies either. He's one of us. We believe in God up there and a fair shake down here."

CORRIDAN didn't learn about gnawing poverty and the cause of humanity out of any book. His father, an immigrant from County Kerry, died when John was nine, leaving his mother Hannah to raise five boys. "The old man didn't leave any money—he was an honest cop," the priest explains. "He was always pounding beats in out of the way places like Rockaway because an honest cop cramped their style."

Mrs. Corridan worked as a cleaning woman, helped out by a small pension and Child Welfare. The boys learned how to handle themselves in the scrappy, competitive world of the hungry West Side. They had to hustle for every nickel in the incessant free-for-all of tenement life. The only way the Corridan boys could get enough money to see a movie was by pooling their few pennies and hoping to run them up into dimes and quarters in a street-corner crap-game.

One time young John made pass after pass and the money was beginning to bulge in his pocket when he looked around at the hard faces of the bigger boys with whom he was playing and realized they were never going to let him take his winnings out of the game. Recklessly, and apparently carelessly, he began to lose the money back faster than he had won it. When he convinced the bullying crap-shooters that he was "cleaned," by showing them his empty pockets, he was at last allowed to go on his way. His brothers followed him listlessly; they had set their hearts on that movie. But when they got around the corner John reached down into his knickers—way down—and produced three all-important dimes. He had pushed them through a hole in his pockets before ostensibly playing back into the game the whole of his winnings.

One Christmas there wasn't enough money in the house to buy any real presents for the Corridan boys. John didn't care so much for himself—he was now eleven and prematurely wise in the ways of the tenement. But he worried about his little three-year-old brother. He knew the tot had asked Santa Claus for a fire-engine—he had been talking of nothing else for weeks. As Christmas approached, the little boy's eagerness, and confidence that Santa would answer his prayers reached such proportions that John felt himself overwhelmed with temptation.

He went to a toy-store—a chain-store, he recalls, for he had figured with a Robin Hood's logic that they could best afford to absorb the loss— and priced a beautiful red fire-engine. Two dollars. He hid out until the store was closed, then sneaked up to the cash-register and jimmied it in a way he had learned from the hoodlum element of the neighborhood. The drawer shot open. "I looked at all that money," Father Corridan remembers. "I could have taken it all. But I just wanted that two dollars."

Later John had the problem of telling the priest in confession. "That was a turning point for my relations with the Church," Father Corridan says now. "Seeing how much that fire-engine meant to my little brother and knowing what an empty Christmas it would have seemed if Santa had let him down, I made up my mind that if the priest really gave me hell I was through with the Church. So I went to confession that day with my knees trembling." The priest was understanding. "I did penance," Father Corridan recalls, "but I didn't have to give the fire-engine back."

When he grew up to become a priest himself, he never forgot this incident. He does not condone dishonesty and disrespect for law. But he feels his own brief adventure in using bad means to a good end helps him to understand the desperate measures his parishioners can sometimes be driven to when poverty pins them to the wall, especially when their families are made to suffer for reasons of greed and indifference.

"I'm an apple-eater," he says, referring to the early days of the depression when he and his brothers saw the humiliation his proud, hard-working mother suffered at the hands of officious social workers. Yes, Father Corridan doesn't have to draw on any books or second-hand knowledge when he describes the life of a longshoreman's wife in her cold-water railroad flat, pinching pennies to feed her kids. That's why he made up his mind that he would serve God among the poorest of His children, and that he would devote his life to social justice.

Five years ago a group of rank-and-filers came to Xavier and said, "Father John, a strike is brewing on the waterfront, whether the official leadership knows it or not. The men want a welfare fund and a vacation clause. If we don't try to get it for 'em, the Commies will grab the issue and try to make themselves the heroes."

Characteristically, Father Corridan's response wasn't to fly off the handle in an emotional way. First he sat down with an experienced insurance man and worked out a practical welfare plan on the Blue Cross model that could be operated for less than four cents an hour. Then he went down to Washington and managed to see Cyrus Ching, then head of the National Mediation Board. Corridan did not rely on a spiritual, humanitarian appeal. He had carefully marshalled the facts and figures to prove his case. The needs of the dock-workers had never had such specific presentation. When the strike did break out, just as the priest knew it would though official leaders had refused to take it seriously, he wrote an article for the Jesuit magazine *America* detailing the case for the longshoremen. Then he had twelve thousand reprints of it distributed on the waterfront.

The program Father Corridan laid out responded exactly to the long-frustrated desires of the majority. His name became a by-word on the waterfront. When the Conciliation Service met to settle the strike, a copy of his article was placed before every negotiator. When the Board approved both the welfare fund and vacations with pay, Father Corridan was widely credited with having won something for the men that they had been after for twenty-five years.

He just grins when you mention this. "All I did was tip the Conciliation boys off to the pitch."

HOLDING services for striking longshoremen three years ago, Father Corridan offered this prayer: "For those longshoremen who are straight and are good family men, God be praised; for those who slip every once in a while and lose hope, God have mercy; to *those responsible,* God grant the grace to see things as Christ sees them on the waterfront, for the time is growing short when God will have no mercy."

A year or so ago, when another rebellion against gang-ridden union officialdom broke out in the Chelsea local that Xavier men have managed to influence after the collapse of the old "Cockeye" Dunn mob, and a spirit of protest spread up and down a waterfront that union racketeers could no longer control, the Jesuit was back in the news again. At daybreak he was on the waterfront leading the aroused dock-workers in prayer:

"God grant that our government will order you back to work in honor. May God protect and preserve you this day."

"You think these fellows are Communists," Corridan grins at you. "Strange breed of Communists who never miss Mass and who come to me and our Catholic Labor School for help and advice. Better not call 'em that, unless you want to get belted. Joe Ryan wishes they were Communists. Then he could wrap himself in the old flag and have it easy. Actually, he's the one who's playing into the hands of the Commies. Because these are loyal and decent, God-fearing Americans who don't need or want the Communists to win their battles for them. The way to stop Communism—Xavier men taught by my "boss" Father Philip Carey have done it in the teamsters union, the telephone and lots of others—the way to stop 'em from capturing these unions is to find out what the men really want, what their real beefs are, and then fight for it fairly and squarely and even harder than the Commies do."

One of Father Corridan's staunchest disciples is a gnarled and battle-scarred veteran of thirty years on the mid-town docks who admits he would do anything the waterfront priest asked him—even if it meant laying down his life in the cause of honest unionism. Twice he's been left to die with cargo hooks in him after standing up to the underworld goons who prey on the dockers. Recently Father Corridan wanted to get him off the docks because he feared the scrappy old veteran might be knocked off in one of those typical waterfront "accidents"—a crane slips or a truck backs up unexpectedly, something like that.

But this embattled old man said to me, "What've I got to worry about? Like I told the old lady, 'Any day I don't come home, just call Father John. He'll look after everything. Long as I'm sure he's gonna be with me at the end to give the last rites and ease me into the hereafter, I figger I'm on velvet." This was no speech. The way he said it, it was the simplest thing in the world. Then his wizened, scuffed-up, weather-beaten face split in a funny grin. What he said next had something spiritual about it, but it was waterfront style. "Sure the mob is tough, but Father John's tougher. One of these days he's gonna run 'em right into the river. That Father John, he really knows the score."