

INTRODUCTION

On the weekend of 14-17 September 1995, scholars from India, Europe, and around the United States gathered at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minnesota to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the death of Msgr. John Augustine Ryan. The theme of the conference was not merely a retrospective of Ryan's work, but also an exploration of the vitality of the tradition he helped to initiate. This volume is a collection, of many of the papers presented at the conference.

Msgr. Ryan was born in Vermillion, Minnesota, just south of the Twin Cities, in 1869. He was educated at the St. Thomas Aquinas Seminary (now the University of St. Thomas) and in 1894 was a member of the first group to enter the new theologate, the St. Paul Seminary (now the School of Divinity of the University of St. Thomas). Shortly after Ryan's ordination in 1898, Archbishop Ireland assigned him to the Catholic University of America in Washington to do graduate studies. Ryan became interested in economics and wrote his doctoral thesis on the idea of the living wage. From 1902 to 1915 he was professor of moral theology at the St. Paul Seminary, leaving to take a position on the faculty of the Catholic University. He remained in Washington until his retirement, becoming one of the most influential churchmen in the country. Shortly before his death on 16 September 1945, he returned to St. Paul.

His interest in public affairs was rooted in his conviction that the church must engage itself in the life of the secular community, or in other words, that faith had a proper role to play in shaping social life. In this he was inspired by the 1891 encyclical of Pope Leo XIII, *Rerum novarum*, which described a role for the church in responding to the new crisis created by the rise of industrialism.

This theme, that moral theology failed in its task if, it could not generate practical applications, was a constant throughout Ryan's professional life. In 1911, for example, he drafted a controversial bill that was introduced into the Minnesota state legislature requiring a minimum wage, one of the first in the country. A few years later, shortly after the end of the First World War, he wrote a document addressing the issue of "reconstructing" American society that argued for such (now common) policies as unemployment insurance, social security, public housing, restrictions on child labor, and the rights of women in the workplace. Ryan's proposals were adopted by the bishops of the United States in 1919 and became a foundation of their efforts in the public policy arena for decades after. In 1920, the bishops established the National Catholic Welfare Conference (which evolved into the United States Catholic Conference) and named Ryan to be the director of the Social Action Department, a position he held until his retirement.

The next two decades were increasingly busy for Ryan, who became the principal Catholic spokesman for social reform in America. In 1932 he was asked to become an

informal advisor for Franklin D. Roosevelt, then running for his first term as president. Many of the elements of the Bishops' Program of 1919 found a place in Roosevelt's plans and Ryan became an outspoken advocate for the president. In fact, journalists gave him the title "The Right Reverend New Dealer." In 1937 he became the first Catholic priest to deliver the benediction at a presidential inauguration.

In his day, Ryan was considered something of a socialist, and fiercely criticized for his positions. Critics insisted that his views were contrary to the teaching of the church. However, when Pope Pius XI published the social encyclical *Quadragesimo anno* in 1931, Ryan found his views vindicated at the highest level. Indeed, the pope himself named Ryan a monsignor two years later. And while he is best known for his work for social reform, it is worth remembering that his attention was not simply focused on issues of political economy.

The essays collected here were written with Ryan in mind, though they range further than his work did. The authors are conscious of being heirs to a tradition (to which Ryan was a conspicuous American contributor) of applying Christian social thought to practical problems. Attention is paid not only to questions of public policy and economics, but also to many emerging issues in the management of business. Within the past fifty years business organizations have grown dramatically in influence and importance and we are certain that Ryan himself would have marked and commented upon that growth.

In yet another way the papers of the conference reflect the influence of Msgr. Ryan and others like him. He was a pioneer in developing an interdisciplinary competence, in his case in theology and economics. His ability to bring together two different fields, and the fruit he was able to harvest from doing so, continue to serve as an inspiration to those who hope to bring Christian social thought to bear on contemporary problems. Indeed, the conference itself, which brought together scholars from such diverse fields as engineering, philosophy, theology, economics, and business administration, was a product of his example. Our purpose in publishing these essays is to celebrate Msgr. Ryan's legacy and to contribute to an exploration of its relevance for the future.