



## Carmelite Spiritual Center

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### Life is Worth Giving

JOURNALIST JOHN BOYLE O'REILLY - CHAMPION OF CATHOLIC JUSTICE

by Fr. Kevin Shanley, O.Carm.

It was a chilly evening in the late Fall, with a brisk wind coming off Boston Harbour to remind travelers of the winter soon to come. The time was Nov. 8, 1879; the place was Young's Hotel; and the dinner was for the members of the Boston Press Club.

A brilliant young man, with the determined gait of a seasoned athlete, made his way to the podium to address his fellow journalists about the present and the future of their chosen profession. He was John Boyle O'Reilly, editor of the famed "Boston Pilot" which would become an outstanding Catholic publication for the Archdiocese of Boston.

And this is what O'Reilly predicted for his fellow journalists: "All who teach are ours. The priests of all future dispensations shall be members of the Press. Ours is the newest and greatest of the professions, involving wider work and heavier responsibilities than any other. For all time to come, the freedom and purity of the Press are the test of national virtue and independence.

"No writer of the Press, however humble, is free from the burden of keeping his purpose high and his integrity white.

✓ 4/05

"The dignity of communities is largely entrusted to our keeping; and while we sway in the struggle or relax in the rest-hour, we must let no buzzards roost on the public shield in our charge."

The young journalist sat down to thunderous applause from the audience. The journalists there recognized in O'Reilly the ability to see beyond deadlines and datelines to understand the true mission of journalism: to keep faith with truth and the readers of its many publications.

Few in that 19th Century audience were unaware of the very unusual background of this champion of the Fourth Estate. They knew that he had begun his illustrious journalism career, when at the tender age of nine, to fulfill the contract of his slightly older brother, William, he had become an indentured apprentice <sup>(t)</sup> at the Drogheda "Argus" newspaper in Ireland. His salary was 52~~0~~ a week. Later he became an apprentice for the Preston "Guardian" in England.

But it was as a fighter for justice that O'Reilly found his true mission in life, and an eventual trial and life imprisonment in a Penal Colony in Australia. A daring escape aboard an American whaling vessel eventually brought him to Boston and the editorship of the "Pilot." He was one of the first Fenians <sup>(REBELS)</sup> to escape from Bunbury Penal Colony.

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It was during his editorship that the "Boston Pilot" became the outstanding champion of civil and religious rights for African-Americans, Native Americans, Catholics and Jews. And this at a time when such groups had few, if any, champions for their cause. O'Reilly had not forgotten the injustices imposed on him, or that he was still listed by the British Government as "Escaped Convict #9843." But he used those memories to instill in his staff the understanding that injustice everywhere must be challenged and removed.

But O'Reilly never forget that he was also a journalist, and realized the power of the Press. In a speech at Boston's Peace Jubilee banquet in 1872, he said: "To me, at times, the daily newspaper has an interest almost pathetic. Very often we read the biography of a man who was born, lived, worked and died, and we put the book on our shelves out of respect for his memory. But the newspaper is the biography of a Day. It is a photograph, of twenty-four hours length, of the mysterious river of time that is sweeping past us forever. And yet we take our years' newspapers, which contain more tales of sorrow and suffering, and joy and success, and ambition and defeat, and villainy and virtue, than the greatest book ever written, and we give them to the girl to light the fire."

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### True Champion

Here, indeed, was a true champion of the Press who remembered his own sufferings from injustice, yet determined to use the great force of journalism to destroy discrimination wherever he found it. He wouldn't tolerate the "No Irish Need Apply" notices and criticized them in his newspaper. And this almost a century before the Civil Rights Movement in the U.S.

His <sup>7</sup>editorial paeans of praise for the goodness and greatness of Native Americans and African Americans, when almost all around him were <sup>7</sup>demands for punishment, still ring true today. And his energetic defense of his fellow ~~Irish~~ Catholics, and also of the Jewish minority, made O'Reilly a man for all seasons and people, especially where injustice reared its ugly head.

O'Reilly himself was prevented from returning to Ireland for his Mother's funeral lest he be arrested and returned to Australia and imprisonment. He had to decline an invitation to speak in Toronto, Ont., again for fear of being arrested. And this while he was an American citizen! His courage and fortitude should be an example for journalists today.

### An Untimely Death

Death came much too soon for John Boyle O'Reilly, on Aug. 10, 1890. He was but 46 years old, and he left a great gap on the <sup>(CATHOLIC)</sup> ~~Irish~~ and American horizons.

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In 1896 a monument to O'Reilly was dedicated in Boston with three more than life-sized figures to symbolize patriotism, Ireland, and poetry. But a greater tribute to him was a decoration on his coffin: a tablet with an open book, the offering of the Young Men's Catholic Association of Boston. Across the white pages of the book was wrought in violets a line from O'Reilly's poem "Wendell Phillops"<sup>ii</sup>:

A sower of infinite seed was he,

A woodsman that hewed toward the light."