

In Remembrance of Robert F. Drinan, S.J.

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Our beloved colleague and friend, Robert F. Drinan, died on January 28, 2007, at the age of 86. With his passing, our profession and country have lost a great leader and an extraordinary human being.

I met Robert Drinan as a first year law student at Boston College Law School in September 1969, before he left the following spring to serve in Congress. I had no idea when we met that he would be such an influence, such a moral force, and such a dear friend for the next 38 years, not only to me, but to virtually all with whom he came in contact. I feel blessed to have known him.

Robert Drinan served our nation and world in many capacities – as Jesuit priest, law professor, law school dean, author, Member of Congress, American Bar Association leader and, above all, advocate for human rights. To many, he was the conscience of the legal profession and, as the first priest ever elected to Congress, the conscience of that institution as well.

He was born in Boston in 1920, graduated from Boston College, and was ordained a Jesuit priest in 1942. In 1955, he became a professor at Boston College Law School, and served as its Dean from 1956 to 1970. As a student there, I witnessed how the law school under his leadership reflected not only academic excellence, but also his insistence on inclusion of all in the legal profession, regardless of color, gender, faith or orientation.

He helped to create or lead numerous organizations that minister to the suffering and needs of human beings.

He was devoted to this Association, serving as a member of this House and in many leadership positions, including as chair of the Section of Individual Rights & Responsibilities, Section of Family Law, Standing Committee on Professionalism, Standing Committee on World Order under Law, and others. At his death, he was a member of the Board of the ABA Center for Human Rights, which he had helped to found.

The Death Penalty Moratorium resolution adopted in 1997 by this House originated with Bob Drinan. If he had had his way, the resolution would have been to abolish the death penalty. After long discussions, those of us involved in the effort persuaded him that the ABA's support of a Moratorium, importantly, would enable the states to evaluate the fairness of their administration of the death penalty to ensure that life is not taken without justice first being done. He reluctantly agreed, but expressed his hope that the death penalty would be abolished in our lifetime.

The death penalty was just one of many legal and moral issues to which Bob Drinan dedicated his intellect, and his heart. Those issues, which included the eradication of hunger throughout the world, and the protection of human rights, civil rights and civil liberties, all had one thing in common: his devout belief in the worth and dignity of each human being.

In 2004, the Association awarded him its highest honor, the ABA Medal.

This was not the first time the ABA had honored him. In 2001, the Section of Individual Rights & Responsibilities created an award to honor individuals who have rendered exceptional service to the Section and to its mission. The customary practice is to name such awards for persons no longer living, but in this case the ABA Board of Governors made an exception, so that the award could be named for Father Drinan. The Section Council then unanimously decided that he should be its first recipient, and as Section Chair I was honored to present the award to him at the ABA Midyear meeting before a large and adoring audience of his friends and colleagues.

In the days following his death Robert Drinan was the subject of many tributes and media commentaries throughout the nation -- from large cities to small hamlets -- praising his accomplishments and mourning his loss.

A High Mass was celebrated in our nation's capital, Washington, DC, where he had served five terms in Congress and then taught at Georgetown University Law Center for the past 26 years. During the Mass, congressional colleagues, including Senator Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts, and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, who affectionately acknowledged Bob Drinan as her role model, mentor, and close friend, recalled the steadfast moral leadership he had provided our nation during one of its darkest periods -- the Vietnam War and the impeachment and resignation of a president.

On February 2, Bob Drinan came home to Boston for the last time. His body lay in state in St. Mary's Chapel on the Boston College campus, where hundreds came to give him their last respects. The Funeral Mass was celebrated the next day at St. Ignatius Church, a stone's throw from the old Boston College Law School building where he had taught and served as Dean for sixteen years.

On a sunny but cold New England morning, the large church overflowed with old friends, faculty colleagues, former students and dignitaries who shared moving and humorous memories of Bob Drinan, both personal and professional.

Congressman Barney Frank of Massachusetts, commenting on Bob Drinan's moral leadership in Congress and his extraordinary legal scholarship, remarked that Father Drinan "wrote more serious books than his Congressional colleagues ever read," and that his colleagues affectionately referred to him as "Our Father who art in Congress."

Bob Drinan had gravitas as a scholar and leader, but such warm and endearing personal qualities as well – a gentle and sometimes mischievous sense of humor, a genuinely caring heart, and true compassion. He never forgot the students he had mentored, or the countless persons in all walks with whom he worked during his life, and always remembered asked about their children and loved ones by name.

He will be remembered for the depth of his intellect, and for his devotion to those who are poor, hungry, and without hope.

He will be remembered for the love that flowed so freely from this servant of God to all people and from them back to him.

And he will be remembered for his firm conviction that the law is an instrument for social justice -- a conviction that has guided countless law students, lawyers, and leaders for more than half a century and that will continue to guide us for generations to come.

I conclude by quoting from the eloquent remarks that Bob Drinan delivered in this House when he was presented the ABA Medal:

*This award this year honors all the religious, moral and spiritual forces that have created Anglo-American law and that are now working continuously to emphasize and energize the profound theological truths and values that are at the heart of our jurisprudence. This award reminds us that we are all moral architects.*

*The 61 recipients of this award remind us of the moral giants who have enriched our profession. We walk in their footsteps and tremble at their noble mission.*

*[T]he central and core purpose of the ABA is to emphasize the rule of law, the dignity of every human being, the preciousness of international human rights and the sacredness of the law of which we are all ministers.*

*Our sacred mission in the world was described 2000 years before Christ in the opening paragraph of the first written code of law in the world. The message of Hammurabi: the purpose of the law is to protect the powerless from the powerful.*

Robert F. Drinan, in your own words:

We will remember you as a moral giant who enriched our profession.

We will walk in your footsteps, and tremble at your noble mission.