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Father Eugene Cullinane and the Saskatchewan CCF

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Sixty-two years after he was dismissed from St. Thomas More College (STM) at the University of Saskatchewan for his support of Tommy Douglas and the CCF, STM is celebrating Father Eugene Cullinane. On Thursday, November 18th, 2010 at 7:30pm in Room 344 of the College, former NDP Premier Lorne Calvert, Political Studies Professor David McGrane, and Sister Teresita Kambeitz will be speaking at an event commemorating the life and legacy of one of the College's most controversial founding professors. Admission is free.

In early part of Saskatchewan's history, Catholic voters were very loyal to the Liberal Party. The Liberals had opposed the anti-Catholicism of the Saskatchewan Conservative Party and KKK, advocated for immigration from Catholic European countries, and supported Catholic and French education. Further, Catholic Bishops across Canada had warned Catholics against supporting any political party that advocated "socialism." While some Catholics like Joseph Burton successfully ran for the CCF during the 1930s, there was still a stigma attached to any Catholic that openly supported the CCF and Catholic voters were generally hostile to the new social democratic party.

The CCF's popularity was aided in 1943 when Canada's Catholic Bishops declared that Catholics were "free to support any political party upholding the basic Christian traditions of Canada, and favoring needed reforms in the social and economic order." A controversy ensued with some Catholics claiming that the Bishops' declaration gave Catholic voters 'clearance' to vote CCF while other Catholics maintained that the Bishops still disapproved of voting for the CCF. The Bishops did not clarify their true intentions. In any case, the CCF swept to victory in the 1944 Saskatchewan election buoyed by many Catholic voters who clearly felt that voting CCF did not conflict with their religion.

Following the Saskatchewan CCF's victory, a large campaign to brand the CCF as communists who threatened freedom of religion, democracy, and the institution of private property began in earnest all over Canada (See John Boyko's *Into the Hurricane: Attacking Socialism and the CCF*). In the fall of 1945, Father Eugene Cullinane returned to STM after serving as a Chaplain in the Royal Canadian Air Force during World War II. Father Cullinane had taught economics at STM from 1939-1941 and had become intrigued with the CCF's ideas of social democracy through his interactions with students and their families who were CCF supporters.

At that time, it was unheard of for Catholic priests to become involved in party politics. However, Father Cullinane became quite disturbed by what he believed to be the mischaracterization of the CCF as communist and a threat to Catholicism by its political opponents. In fact, he believed that "Christ was and is the world's greatest Socialist, if by Socialism, you mean a social consciousness that makes the welfare of others a primary concern of your life and a primary concern of your country."

Desiring to set an example for Catholics in Saskatchewan and the rest of the country, Cullinane took the unprecedented step of becoming the first Catholic priest in Canada to publicly join the CCF. In early 1946, Cullinane spoke to CCF supporters in Edmonton and North

Battleford as well as speaking to his students about his reasons for joining the party. There was a swift backlash from some members of Saskatchewan's Catholic community and Cullinane agreed to a request from Bishop Pocock of Saskatoon to refrain from any further writing or public speaking on the CCF or socialism.

Outside of the classroom, Cullinane remained silent about the CCF until the 1948 provincial election campaign. The CCF's popularity was lagging going into the 1948 election due to controversy over the aggressive reforms of its first term and the rise of the 'Red Scare' brought on by the beginning of the Cold War and reports of Soviet spying in Canada that was regarded as proof of an international Soviet conspiracy to overthrow all Western democracies. The Liberals' 1948 campaign sought to capitalize on these uncertainties by portraying the CCF's new Crown corporations as leading to a communist, dictatorial "police state." The Liberals depicted the CCF's socialism as a bridgehead to communism and compared Saskatchewan to Czechoslovakia that had recently disappeared behind the Iron Curtain. Adding to the CCF's worries, the Saskatchewan Conservative Party felt that the CCF's 'Red Menace' was so threatening that it united with the Liberals in several ridings by running joint-candidates to avoid vote splitting. Faced with reports of efforts in several parts of the province to influence Catholic voters by linking the CCF's social democracy to Soviet communism condemned by the Pope, Father Cullinane decided to act.

With the knowledge that it could threaten his teaching position and that he was likely to face stiff repercussions from his superiors, Father Cullinane agreed to revise the speech that he gave in Edmonton for publication in the June 2, 1948 edition of *The Commonwealth* that appeared only 22 days before the provincial election. The article, entitled "The Catholic Church and Socialism", was used extensively by CCF campaign workers to convince Catholic voters that voting CCF was not against their religion. The article argued that the CCF's brand of social democracy was vastly different from Soviet-style communism in that it endorsed religious freedom and sought to expand the private property of ordinary citizens through a more equal distribution of wealth. He even contended that the CCF was only party whose ideas were in line with papal teaching. While the CCF lost 16 seats and 5% of their popular vote in the election, they maintained their majority in the legislature and went on to govern until 1964.

The fallout for Father Cullinane was immediate. The Bishop of Saskatoon issued an edict forbidding any political activity by priests in his diocese only 10 days after the controversial article appeared. Cullinane resigned his CCF membership as soon as he received the edict but was still recalled to Ontario by his Basilian superiors on the Bishop's request and was not present in Saskatchewan on voting day. Cullinane never returned to partisan political activity. He taught in Toronto and Rochester for the Basilians for the next eight years and then left the Basilians to live a monastic life at Madonna House in Combermere, Ontario until his death in 1997.

At the event commemorating Father Cullinane, we will be discussing not only his role in the history of the Saskatchewan CCF but also the current relationship between religion and politics in Saskatchewan. STM warmly invites all those who are interested to attend.