On June 18, 1887, thousands of protesters paraded through the streets of lower Manhattan near Union Square. Nearly all the participants were members of labor unions, political clubs, ethnic associations, and reform societies. The loudest cheers from the throngs of onlookers were reserved for the 1,500 members of St. Stephen's parish, for the parade was organized on their behalf. The signs they held aloft told their story: “Our purses will be opened when our pastor is restored,” “We are loyal Catholics and loyal Americans,” and “Tammany Hall can never crush our glorious Fr. McGlynn.”

The rally was protesting the suspension and impending excommunication of Reverend Edward McGlynn, a priest who had earned a reputation over the preceding decade as a vociferous champion of the poor and espousal of radical social ideology. In an archdiocese known for its authoritarian hierarchy, the mass rally in support of McGlynn was an event without precedent and one that revealed the many conflicting interests and concerns that challenged the Catholic Church in New York during the Gilded Age.

Edward McGlynn, the seventh child of Donegal immigrants Peter and Sarah McGlynn, was born on September 27, 1837, in New York City. Unlike so many of the Irish that surrounded them, the McGlynn family lived in middle-class comfort, as Peter ran a successful contracting business. In 1851, the year following Edward's graduation from the Free Academy (later renamed City College), he was selected to study at the Urban College of the Propaganda in Rome as preparation for entering the priesthood. After nine years of study in which he
distinguished himself as a scholar, speaker, and student leader, he earned his doctorate in philosophy and sacred theology and was ordained in March 1860.  

Returning to New York to begin work as a parish priest, McGlynn reported to St. Joseph’s Church in Greenwich Village. There, he fell in with a circle of liberal priests called the “Accademia” that met regularly to discuss “untouchable” subjects such as celibacy, papal authority, the Latin Mass, religious orders, and parochial schools. While the group eventually disband under pressure from the archdiocese leadership, the friends McGlynn made and the radical perspective he developed as a member stayed with him for the rest of his life.  

After short stints at St. Brigid’s, St. James’s, St. Ann’s, and a makeshift chapel at the military hospital in Central Park at the end of the Civil War, McGlynn was appointed assistant pastor at St. Stephen’s church on East 29th Street in 1865. Within a year, he was named pastor, a position he was to hold for the next 22 years.  

From the very outset of his tenure at St. Stephen’s, McGlynn distinguished himself as a socially liberal and independent-minded cleric, dedicated to aiding the poor and helpless of his parish. McGlynn did not have to look far to find them, for St. Stephen’s was one of the largest and poorest parishes in the city. From all accounts, McGlynn’s tireless efforts gained him the undying admiration of his parishioners. Many took to referring to him as soggarth aron, Irish for “precious priest.”  

Significantly, McGlynn never opened a parochial school. Nor did he ever attempt to do so, even though successive archbishops beginning in 1842 had made establishing parochial schools a priority second only to building more churches. McGlynn’s resistance on this issue indicated his support for one of the key ideas of an emerging liberal Catholicism: that American Catholics would be better served by entering the American mainstream rather than by maintaining the defensive and inward-looking separatist ethos they understandably developed in the mid 19th century in response to nativist hostility.  

The plight of his flock was never far from McGlynn’s mind. He wrote of the “never ending procession of men, women, and children” who came knocking on his door, “begging not so much for alms as for employment...and personally appealing to me to obtain for them an opportunity of working for their daily bread... I began to ask myself, ‘Is there no remedy? Is this God’s order that the poor shall by constantly becoming poorer in all our large cities, the world over?’”  

McGlynn believed he found that remedy in 1881, when he received a copy of a new book, Progress and Poverty, by Henry George (1839–1897), a man fast emerging as one of the
St. Stephen's church, New York, c. 1870, engraving, published in Frank Leslie's Illustrated
Father McGlynn employed Italian painter Constantino Brumidi (1805-1880) to decorate the church interior.

McGlynn became pastor of St. Stephen's in 1865.


Rev. Dr. Edward McGlynn, c. 1896, from Moses King, Notable New Yorkers of 1865-1899 (New York; Boston, 1899)
From 1895 until his death, McGlynn served as pastor of St. Mary's Roman Catholic Church, Newburgh, New York.

REV. DR. EDWARD MCGLYNN
FORMER PASTOR
ST. STEPHEN'S CHURCH (ROMAN CATHOLIC)
TOP
First Labor Day Parade, Union Square, 1882, from Frank Leslie's Illustrated
More than 30,000 Knights of Labor and craft union members responded to a call
issued by New York City's Central Labor Union to march in support of an eight-
hour workday and other labor demands.

RIGHT
W. T. Smedley (1858-1920), In Mulberry Bend, 1893, published in Harper's
Monthly, June 1894
New York's teeming immigrant neighborhoods housed workers who
responded to McGlynn's speeches.

FOLLOWING SPREAD
C. J. Taylor, Between Two Popes, published in Puck, January 19, 1887
McGlynn is depicted between the figures of Pope Leo XIII and Henry George (also
dressed in papal garb). In his hand he holds a summons from Rome, which, by
refusing to answer, ultimately cost him his parish.
nation’s best-known social reformers and critics of laissez-faire industrial capitalism. In vivid, apocalyptic language that invoked the moral authority of both the Founding Fathers and Jesus Christ, the book warned that growing social inequality threatened American democracy and republican values. “This association of poverty with progress,” asserted George, “is the great enigma of our times.” George identified land monopoly as the cause of social inequality and proposed a “single-tax” that effectively abolished private property but preserved the virtues of the capitalist system. The book became a bestseller among workers and middle-class reformers.

The book appealed to McGlynn as “a poem of philosophy, a prophesy and a prayer.” Suddenly, he had found the solution to the riddle of why poverty grew worse even as the nation experienced remarkable material progress. McGlynn soon became George’s most zealous champion. But unbeknownst to him, church officials in America and Rome were already considering putting Progress and Poverty on the Vatican’s Index Librorum Prohibitorum, or List of Prohibited Books.

Remarkably, the first outlet for McGlynn’s budding radicalism was the Irish Land League, which flourished between 1879 and 1883. Irish nationalism surged in the late 1870s, when Ireland plunged into a serious agricultural crisis and thousands faced starvation and eviction. Founded by nationalist Michael Davitt in 1879, the league demanded major reform of Ireland’s landlord-dominated land system.

The movement quickly spread to the United States, where by 1882 activists established nearly 1,000 American Land League branches, from major cities such as New York and Chicago to the mining districts in Pennsylvania and Butte, and raised more than $500,000. In contrast to earlier nationalist activity, the league became a mass movement, rather than an obsession of a small band of radicals. Its members included upper-class professionals and poor factory workers alike. It even included many priests—quite remarkable given the longstanding hostility of the Catholic Church toward nationalist movements.

While many Irish Americans joined the league out of devotion to Ireland, many like McGlynn did so because they were drawn to the movement’s social radicalism. Henry George, for example, was neither Irish nor Catholic, but he joined the league. He and McGlynn saw in the condemnation of landlord exploitation in Ireland an effective critique of industrial capitalism in the United States. Patrick Ford, the Irish-born editor of the Irish World and Industrial Liberator, the nation’s largest-selling Irish weekly, shared this view. “[T]he struggle in Ireland,” he frequently reminded his readers, “is radically and essentially the same as the struggle in America—a contest against legalized forms of oppression.”
McGlynn emerged as an important and revered speaker at Land League rallies in New York. He was not afraid to express his radicalism in blunt terms. "If I had to choose between Landlordism and Communism," he told a rapt audience at a rally in Union Square in August 1882, "I would prefer the latter.... It is intended for the welfare of the masses."13

Unfortunately for McGlynn, the speech gained the attention of Cardinal McCloskey and, more ominously, authorities in Rome. In the 1880s, Church officials on both sides of the Atlantic had grown increasingly concerned about the influence of radicalism on American Catholics, specifically the works of Henry George and the rise of the massive industrial union the Knights of Labor. Cardinal John McCloskey resisted Rome's urging that he silence McGlynn and instead secured from him a promise not to speak at any more Land League rallies.14

In the fall of 1882, McGlynn met George for the first time, and each took an instant liking to the other. "Already captured by Progress and Poverty," remembered McGlynn, "I was now captured by its author." George wrote that he quickly "learned to reverence his [McGlynn's] deep and inostentatious piety, his broad Catholic spirit, and his devotion to the cause of the poor." This meeting marked the beginning of a long and fruitful relationship.15

Their big moment came in 1886, when public officials in New York (indeed, nationwide) responded to a record numbers of strikes and boycotts by arresting more than 100 labor leaders. Outraged, the city's Central Labor Union (an organization spawned by the Land League in 1882) established the United Labor Party and nominated Henry George as their candidate for mayor.16

McGlynn was thrilled by the prospect of a George candidacy, but his support for the radical reformer soon brought him into conflict with the new archbishop, the ultraconservative Michael A. Corrigan (1839–1902), who placed a high premium on priestly obedience and opposed anything that smacked of heresy or communism. Corrigan ordered McGlynn not to campaign for George, but the radical priest stuck to his principles. "I, in view of my rights and duties as a citizen, which were not surrendered when I became a priest, am determined to do what I can to support Mr. George," he wrote in remarkably defiant terms, "and I am also stimulated by love for the poor and oppressed laboring classes, which seems particularly consonant with the charitable and philanthropic character of the priesthood."17

McGlynn's defiance earned him a suspension from his priestly duties for two weeks, but he continued to appear in public with George. McGlynn's identification with the labor campaign, even though silent, became crucial as church officials began to openly condemn George and his teachings.18

11 Irish World, July 1, 1882, 3. See also Irish World, July 8 and 15, 1882, 1; January 6, 1883, 8; Irish American, March 21, 1880, 4. The New York Times, February 27, 1883, 8.
18 The Standard, January 8, 1887, 2.
**TOP**
Henry George for Mayor of Greater New York, 1897; Memorial button, 1897; lithographed metal
Single-tax advocate Henry George (1839–1897) ran unsuccessfully for mayor of New York in 1886 with McGlynn’s support. George ran again in 1897, but died before Election Day.

**BOTTOM LEFT**
Archbishop Michael Augustine Corrigan, D.D., 1897, frontispiece photogravure, from *Celebration of the Episcopal Jubilee of The Most Reverend Michael Augustine Corrigan, D.D. ...* (1898)
Liberal McGlynn and conservative Archbishop Corrigan collided over McGlynn’s support for Henry George’s politics, which were condemned as heretical.

**BOTTOM RIGHT**
Ajax Defying The Lightning: A New Attraction at the George-M’Glynn Show, c. 1887, engraving
Dr. McGlynn’s continued support of Henry George resulted first in his removal as pastor of St. Stephen’s and then in his excommunication.
TOP LEFT
Frederick Oppen, "Cold, bitter cold!" from Puck, January 1888
Support for McGlynn and his Anti-Poverty Society declined following his excommunication.

TOP RIGHT
Anti-Poverty Society souvenir, 1887
As "the people's priest" and president of the Anti-Poverty Society, McGlynn attracted crowds to his weekly Sunday night revival-style meetings with calls for social justice.

BOTTOM
"The Power Behind The Pope," from Judge, February 1887
Judge supported McGlynn; in its view, Tammany Hall, which lost votes to George in the 1886 campaign, was the power behind church authorities.
The latter effort took an astonishingly bold turn a few days before the election when one of Corrigan’s lieutenants, Vicar General Monsignor Thomas Preston, provided Tammany Hall with a letter condemning George’s ideas as heretical. Tammany made thousands of copies of the letter and distributed them to Catholics as they left church on the Sunday before the election. “They think his principles unsound and unsafe, and contrary to the teachings of the church,” Monsignor Preston wrote, speaking for the archdiocese’s clergy.19

On Election Day, George outpolled the Republican candidate, the 27-year-old Theodore Roosevelt, but lost narrowly to Tammany Democrat Abram Hewitt. George and his supporters, such as McGlynn, hoped this strong showing was the sign of greater things to come, perhaps even the establishment of a national reform or labor party and a presidential campaign in 1888.20

But within months, the United Labor Party began to splinter, and McGlynn found himself under the archbishop’s heel. The latter ordeal began to unfold in January when, at the request of Corrigan, the Vatican called McGlynn to Rome. McGlynn refused to go, and Corrigan removed him as pastor at St. Stephen’s. Corrigan lobbied Rome even more vigorously to have McGlynn severely disciplined, if not excommunicated, and George’s works placed on the Index. “Georgian economics are a civil disease bordering on madness,” he wrote to Cardinal Simeoni, prefect of Propaganda Fide in Rome. He asserted that McGlynn believed that “the savior of society is not our beloved [Pope] Leo but his friend George, pontiff of a democratic church without dominion or tiara.”21

The struggle between McGlynn, the representative of the liberal wing of the Catholic Church, and Archbishop Corrigan, the paragon of conservative, ultramontane clericalism, was no mere local affair. It both represented and deeply influenced a similar debate raging at the national level—namely, that over the right of Catholics to be members of labor unions (in particular, the Knights of Labor) and to embrace social and economic reforms. It was soon transformed into an unprecedented episode of antiauthoritarian protest by the working-class parishioners of St. Stephen’s.22

Two days after Corrigan removed McGlynn as pastor, more than 7,000 protesters gathered at the church and established a formal boycott of the parish. That same evening, they held a mass rally, where speakers voiced a consistent theme upholding clerical authority in religious matters but vehemently denouncing the use of such authority to suppress the political activism of Catholic priests and laymen. Union leader John Bealin drew a clear parallel between abusive employers and an abusive hierarchy. “When men attempt to better their condition by organizing their trade they are blacklisted, they are driven from the shop and the streetcar; and now we see a priest, the only one among the thousand who dare to speak the truth, struck down by his superiors,” he said.23 Demonstrations continued on a nightly
basis at St. Stephen’s, and the boycott of the collection plate caused contributions to the debt-ridden church to plummet.

To provide himself with an alternative pulpit, McGlynn soon founded a group called the Anti-Poverty Society. In late March, before a crowd of thousands at the Academy of Music on 14th Street, McGlynn gave what became his most famous speech, “The Cross of the New Crusade.” In compelling oratorical style, McGlynn called for joining Christian morality with secular reform to bring social justice to the suffering masses. No longer could Christianity be a faith concerned only with the next life, argued McGlynn. The Anti-Poverty Society began holding weekly Sunday-evening revival-style meetings and soon drew crowds of 2,000 to 3,000 people. Alarmed, Corrigan soon forbade Catholics from attending the meetings, even going so far as to deny two people Catholic burials on account of their participation.24

The creation of the Anti-Poverty Society, with its explicit message of social justice and opposition to hierarchical authority, and the radical agitation of the poor parishioners at St. Stephen’s were events unprecedented in the history of the archdiocese. They cheered those who viewed the Church as a major obstacle to future efforts by working-class Catholics to come to terms with the jarring changes being brought about by Gilded Age industrial capitalism. Here, New York Catholics were making a profound statement: They would not choose between their worlds of faith and of work. They would remain good Catholics—after all, they were demanding the reinstatement of their pastor—while at the same time affiliating with a secular movement aimed at bettering their earthly condition. “I think they will have to excommunicate one or two besides Dr. McGlynn,” mused one official of the Anti-Poverty Society. “They will have to excommunicate some millions of American Catholics.”25

On July 3, 1887, a cable arrived from Rome announcing McGlynn had been officially excommunicated from the Church. For Catholics, there was no more severe a penalty than excommunication, and many who willingly had defied the hierarchy and had participated in Anti-Poverty Society meetings were now given pause. Risking the wrath of a pastor or archbishop was one thing; suffering the ultimate sanction in Church law—and thereby forfeiting any chance of eternal salvation—was quite another. In the bid for the allegiance of working-class Catholics between progressive labor activists and conservative church officials, the latter had just raised the stakes.26

Ultimately, that proved sufficient. While unprecedented in its size, scope, and duration, the organized defiance of clerical authority in support of McGlynn did not endure. After an initial outburst of indignation over McGlynn’s excommunication, many supporters began to have second thoughts. The latter included journalist Patrick Ford. After nearly 20 years distinguishing himself as an outspoken advocate of radical social reform in Ireland and America, he openly broke with George and McGlynn for what he deemed their anticlerical-
ism. Within weeks of the excommunication, quietly returned to St. Stephen’s parish. So, too, did the contributions to the collection plate. The power of the Church proved to be too entrenched for anger over one priest’s persecution to overcome it.

For the next five years, McGlynn worked on behalf of the poor through his Anti-Poverty Society. Eventually in 1892, the Vatican, without Archbishop Corrigan’s prior knowledge, removed the order of excommunication. Forced to accept the return of his nemesis, Corrigan exiled McGlynn to St. Mary’s parish in Newburgh, New York. He retained a devoted following at St. Stephen’s, however, and returned there for special occasions to a warm reception. McGlynn died in Newburgh on January 7, 1900. 27

The McGlynn affair ended in 1892, but it left a lasting imprint on the Catholic Church in New York and, to a degree, on the nation. At its core, it exposed the inadequacy of Catholic social teaching in the face of expansive laissez-faire industrial capitalism. Indeed, this revelation was so troubling that it prompted Pope Leo XIII to issue, in 1891, Rerum Novarum (On the Condition of Labor), an encyclical letter that supported moderate Catholic social reform and upheld the rights of Catholics to join labor unions. That document paved the way for the rise of progressive Catholics, most famously Father John A. Ryan (1865–1945), who explored the notion of a living wage in his dissertation, published in 1906. 28

Change of a different and more tangible form, however, occurred on the ground. While few Catholics were prepared to embrace McGlynn’s quasi-socialist radicalism, their support for the Land League, Henry George’s U.L.P campaign, and McGlynn in his struggle with Corrigan indicated that they were searching for an effective alternative to the conservative, fatalist, offer-it-up approach to poverty and exploitation that had sustained them in the era of Archbishop John Hughes. That outlook, a product of virulent anti-Catholic nativism, traditional Irish peasant values, and Jansenist theology (a movement that emphasized original sin and human depravity), lost credibility in the Gilded Age. Diminished nativism (relatively speaking), greater assimilation, and upward mobility among Catholic immigrants in the 1880s—combined with intensified suffering and anxiety associated with industrialization—led New York Catholics to seek meaningful solutions. Ultimately, this new outlook found expression most concretely in the transformation not of the Church but rather of the one institution far more susceptible to the influence of everyday Catholics: Tammany Hall.

The divergent examples of two working-class Catholics will illustrate this point. In 1886, Thomas Flynn was an enthusiastic supporter of Henry George and McGlynn. When the latter was excommunicated, Flynn renounced his Catholic faith in protest. His daughter, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, became one of the nation’s most prominent radicals and head of the Communist Party in the United States. Yet despite her lifelong effort to bring about revolu-
bring about revolutionary political, social, and economic change, she operated on the radical fringe of American life and ultimately exerted only a minimal influence.29

We find a far more representative response to the McGlynn affair in the experience of the Smith family. In 1886, Alfred E. Smith, Sr., stuck with Tammany Hall and voted a straight Democratic ticket. He died soon thereafter, a faithful Catholic to the end. In the same way that Elizabeth Gurley Flynn grew to embrace her father’s radicalism and anticlericalism, Smith’s son, Alfred, grew up devoted to the Catholic Church and the Democratic Party. Yet Smith’s choices positioned him to become, beginning with his election to the State Assembly in 1903, the lead figure in the transformation of Tammany Hall from the conservative organization that turned a deaf ear to working-class demands in 1886 to a major agent of progressive social legislation. Indeed, Al Smith, the man who eventually became the first Catholic elected governor of New York and the first Catholic candidate for president nominated by a major party, emerged in the early 20th century as the face of an urban progressivism that sought to ameliorate the sufferings of the poor. Smith’s career, therefore, reflected the inculcation of the broad vision, if not to the same radical degree, of liberal social policy espoused by Father Edward McGlynn in the city’s Catholic culture.

Dr. McGlynn at the unveiling of a monument to Henry George, Greenwood Cemetery, August 1898. Dr. McGlynn gave a funeral address for George in 1897, and characterized him as having "the heart of a hero."