

BISHOP JAMES T. MCHUGH
THE AUSTERITY AND VIGOR OF THE CHURCH MILITANT

By: David L. Gregory, Professor of Law, St. John's
University, New York City; General Counsel, The Catholic
League for Religious and Civil Rights

On Friday, December, 7, 2001, more than two hundred people gathered at the Nassau County Community College - State University of New York Center for Catholic Studies. The occasion was the magnificent on-site symposium to celebrate the legacy of Bishop James T. McHugh, upon the first anniversary of his death (December 10, 2000).

He was the third Bishop of the Diocese of Rockville Centre, encompassing Nassau and Suffolk Counties on Long Island, New York, among the ten largest dioceses in the nation. As is evident from the Symposium proceedings, he was a pastor truly beloved by the people, although he was the Bishop of the Diocese for less than one year.

Perhaps most important, he was the leading pro-life voice among the Catholic hierarchy in the United States for more than three decades.

I live and work in Queens, New York City, within the Diocese of Brooklyn and Queens. Alas, therefore, in a juridical sense, Bishop McHugh was not "my" bishop. He was, however, the bishop of all of the people of the Church, and an inspiration to all people of good will.

I met Bishop McHugh on only one occasion. Fortuitously, his last major public academic address was delivered at my invitation. On July 10, 2000, he was the keynote speaker for the Third National Conference of the Religiously Affiliated Law Schools, which I chaired at the St. John's University School of Law in Queens, New York City. Bishop McHugh delivered a magisterial, thoughtful talk on that wonderful occasion, entitled "The Value of the Religiously Affiliated Law School," subsequently published with the Conference Symposium papers in Volume 74 of the *St. John's Law Review*, pages 577-590 (2000).

On June 30, 2000, I had the opportunity to present the Conference Symposium papers, including the text of Bishop McHugh's talk, at the Jesuit Curia and to Archbishop Joseph Pittau, S.J., the Secretary of the Congregation for Catholic Education in Rome. Archbishop Pittau told me that Bishop McHugh was an interesting and wise choice to keynote that important national conference.

On the day of the on-site Conference, July 10, 2000, Bishop McHugh met informally with the symposiasts well before the formal commencement of the program. He was a straightforward man of the people. After presenting his superb keynote address, he could have understandably made a gracious exit. In addition to the plethora of administrative demands daily made upon any bishop of a large diocese, he was battling cancer; he had less than five months remaining on this earth. I was, therefore, rather startled when Bishop McHugh simply and inconspicuously took a seat among the general audience for the remainder of the conference. During the luncheon, he could have accompanied St. John's Law School Dean Joseph Bellacosa in a walk across campus to meet with the St. John's University President, Rev. Donald J. Harrington, C.M. But, rather than meeting with the local dignitaries, or to spend the lunch period in the office of the University President, Bishop McHugh instead chose to remain with the conference attendees. He did not sit at the head of the main table. He sat near a corner, off the dining room's beaten track. It obviously became the center of the room, and the bishop was surrounded immediately and primarily by law students. The many law school deans and professors noted how quickly the students gravitated to him, and sought him out. Throughout the lunch, they continued the conversation that he had invited and initiated in his keynote address.

After July 10, 2000, I never saw Bishop McHugh again in this life.

For many years, I had read much of what he had written. For months, I had heard of his valiant work as the Bishop of the Rockville Centre Diocese from friends living in Nassau and Suffolk Counties. On our one and only meeting on July 10, 2000, he powerfully impressed me as a vigorous leader of the Church Militant. He was a vigorous warrior for the Church, but utterly without bombast or extravagance. His vigor was austere, stringent, and rigorous. He had powerful intellectual and analytical gifts. He could have been a world-class scholar. His vocation, however, took a somewhat different track. While drawing fully upon his scholarly and intellectual abilities, he was, first and foremost, a practical and eloquent pro-life advocate. He was always seeking realistic avenues to implement the culture of life, but without compromise or acquiescence. He invited dialogue and reflection, but without surrender or concession. When I met him on July 10, 2000, he physically was dying, but he was far more alive and more thoroughly robust than most in the proverbial pink

of good health. These personal attributes were deeply embedded, and they were further refined throughout his vocation by the sacrament of holy orders. He was, in the best senses of the word, a true Crusader. “Dynamic orthodoxy” has been perhaps overly-used as a rhetorical device since the days of G.K. Chesterton. It is, obviously, redundant, because it is the very nature of Catholic orthodoxy to be vibrant and dynamic. Likewise, analogously, I will always remember Bishop McHugh as dynamically orthodox, and, more immediately, perhaps, as a vigorous and austere champion of Heaven. On July 10, 2000, we had lunch, but he spent the entire time talking with my law students. One day, I hope, I will be able to join him again for the eternal banquet feast in Heaven.

To preserve the spirit of joy so manifest at the on-site Symposium in Bishop McHugh’s honor on December 7, 2001, the conference papers are conversational and meditative satellites, revolving around the key note paper by Richard Doerflinger. To preserve the dialogic spirit of the conference, the papers have been only lightly edited to conform in stylistics. The substantive components of the papers are preserved and presented in their entirety, honoring profoundly and humbly this vigorous, austere leader of the Church Militant.