

# The Very Reverend John J. Curran

The Labor Priest

WHEN?  
1859—1936

WHERE?  
Wilkes-Barre, PA.



Roosevelt center left,  
Curran center right

EVENT  
Breaker boy to community  
advocate

VOCABULARY  
breaker boy  
slate picker  
sexton

By the time The Very Rev. Monsignor John J. Curran died, he had friends from every walk of life—the poor and rich, the influential and those with no influence at all, those who were of different faiths—Protestants and Jewish, and those who were not religious. His friendship circle included labor and civic leaders, poor immigrant and miner families, and President Teddy Roosevelt. He was well-respected and loved by his parishioners at St. Rose’s church in Carbondale, at Wilkes-Barre’s Holy Savior (founded by Curran) and St. Mary’s his last parish where he served thousands of worshipers each Sunday (Roberts 101).

Curran was the son of Irish immigrants John and Helen McKeon Curran. They made it to Luzerne County in the 1840s to escape the devastation of the great famine in their homeland.



Born in 1859 right before the American Civil War broke out, Curran was able to spend a year in school after his parents moved to Avoca when he was 7. As was the case with many young immigrant boys, however, he left school to work in the mines to help support his family of 10 children (NY Times). He worked as a breaker boy or slate picker hunched over a coal chute picking out the slate as it rushed past. The summers brought oppressive heat, winters bitter cold, and the enveloping dust made it hard to breathe. Hours were

long and the boys were often nicknamed “red tops” as their fingernails were crushed and left bleeding by the end of the day. Curran was employed by the Pennsylvania Coal Company where he eventually made it to the depths of the mine as a mule driver.

Nonetheless, Curran was determined to pursue education and attended night school for eight years until his siblings were able to help support the family (Harvey-Smith). By the time he turned 16, he was able to go back to public school. Eventually he attended Wyoming Seminary where he graduated with honors in English and mathematics. He continued his education at St. Vincent’s in Latrobe, PA., before making his way to Grand Seminary in Montreal to study for the priesthood (NY Times).

Although his pastoral duties occupied much of his life, the coal industry and the miners who worked in it were a major focus of his time outside of his parish. Curran was an outspoken advocate looking for better working conditions, better pay, and unionization on behalf of the working men earning him the nickname “Labor Priest”. His support of striking miners started

when he was 10 when he marched with them. His dedication to their cause deepened as he witnessed their hardships firsthand while leading parishes in Wilkes-Barre.

His fame was firmly rooted in local mining history during the strike of 1902. The work stoppage by 140,000 miners lasted over six months and by the Fall of that year the price for anthracite doubled, and in some places, quadrupled. Cities as far as Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Chicago as well as points in-between faced a critical shortage of coal---the main fuel for trains, hospitals, factories, and homes.

Miners wanted a 20% pay raise as they earned only \$375 per year and had to buy all their goods at the company store that charged inflated prices. They also wanted an 8-hour day instead of 10 hours and recognition of their union. Curran worked diligently with President Theodore (Teddy) Roosevelt to help resolve the issue between the miners and the mining corporations. Miners did get a 10% pay raise and a 9-hour day but the union was not recognized as a bargaining group. Curran became an integral part of the negotiations working with the president of the United Mine Workers (UMW) Johnny Mitchell as well as Roosevelt. George Baer and J.P. Morgan were two of the representatives of the coal owners. The strike and its negotiation marked the first time a president intervened in labor negotiations and helped to change public perceptions about unions. Curran's day-to-day efforts including meeting with those involved on each side, letter writing, working to establish respectability for the miners and his insight into the issues shared with the Roosevelt commission was essential to the resolution of the strike.

The 1920s and 30s were tumultuous times in the valley due to labor unrest and divisive fights between competing unions and disgruntled union members. On Good Friday in April 1936, bombs wrapped in cigar boxes were delivered to several members of the community. One of those was delivered to the sexton at Curran's church, Michael Gallagher, who was killed when he opened the box. Curran's very good friend, Thomas Maloney, former president of the Anthracite Miners of Pennsylvania, also received a bomb. He and his four-year-old son were murdered when he opened the box. Upon hearing about his friends, Curran collapsed. Many believed that the news of the tragic deaths hastened his own. A fire broke out in the rectory destroying his prized historical treasures (Roberts 104). He died November 8, 1936, at age 77 remembered by many as both shepherd and advocate in a turbulent age. He is buried in Saint Mary's cemetery in Hanover, Pa.



#### ONLINE RESOURCES

[NY Times Rev. John J. Curran](#)

#### PRINT RESOURCES

Harvey, Oscar Jewell, and Ernest Gray Smith. *A History of Wilkes-Barré* Wilkes-Barré: The Smith Bennett Corp. 1929.

Roberts, Ellis. *The Breaker Whistle Blows*. Scranton: Anthracite Museum Press. 1984