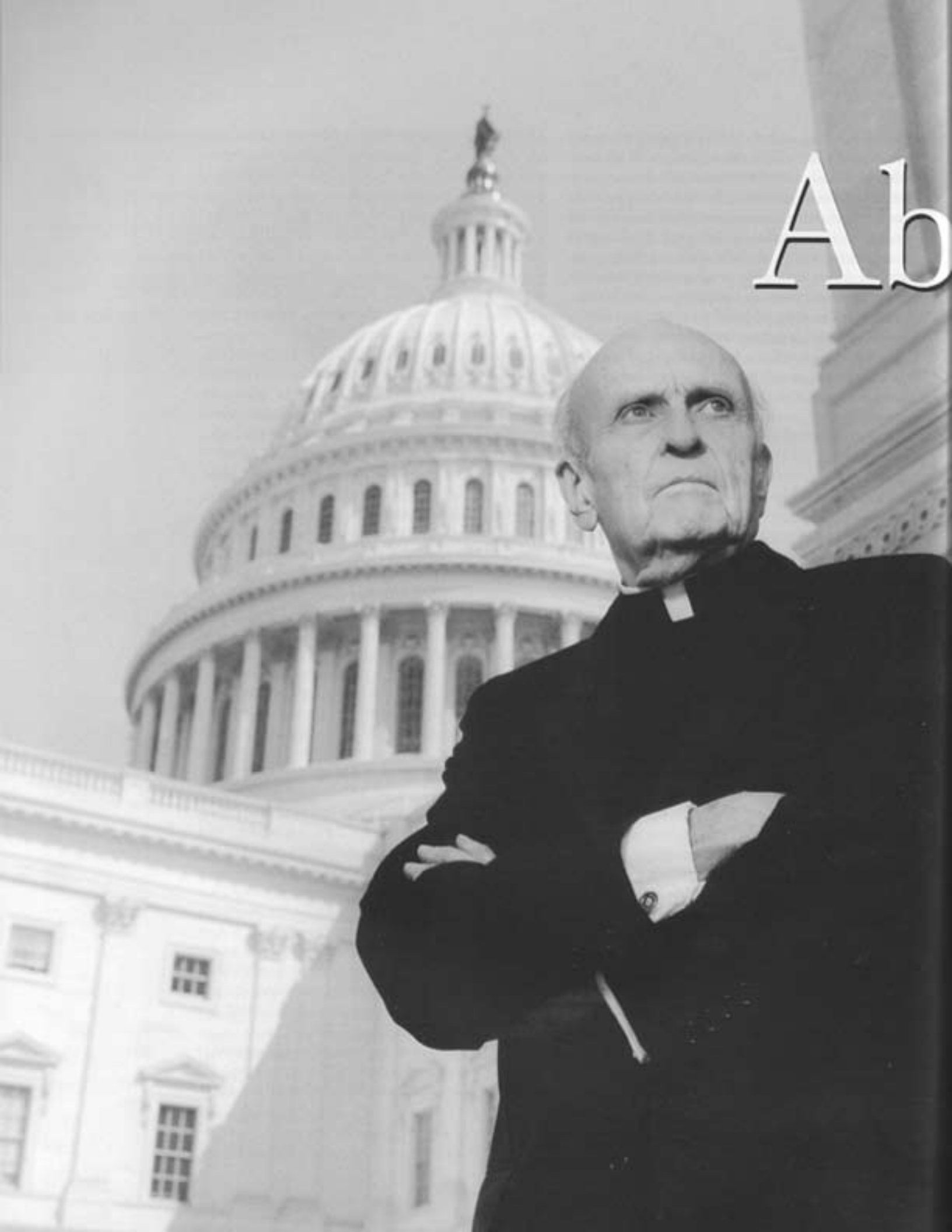


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# Drinan

**Over 74 years, Robert F. Drinan, SJ, '42,  
has gone from priest to lawyer to  
dean to congressman to icon.  
He has never changed**

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BY CHARLOTTE BRUCE HARVEY

**H**ow did you get so liberal?" I ask.  
Fr. Drinan scowls.  
He slings his feet up onto his desk. He wriggles down in his swivel chair until he is almost horizontal—his head barely visible over the towers of paper before him. He steeple long, bony index fingers in front of his nose. Then with a vengeance he plants one black loafer atop the other, heel-to-toe, and flexes his bottom foot until it practically makes a U-shape.

"I'm no liberal," he scoffs. "I'm a Democrat."

His eyes flash. "You've got to have a minimum wage," he says, brightening, "and Social Security and the right to organize a union—*everybody* agrees to that."

He clasps his hands behind his head and grins. No contest.

"Everybody?" I ask, thinking of the millions of

Americans who last November threw a Democratic Congress out of office.

"Sure," Drinan shrugs.

Checkmate.

Last February when I arrived at Georgetown University Law Center to interview Robert F. Drinan, SJ, '42, MA'47, I described to him the kind of story I hoped to write: a portrait of him at 74, reflecting on the past 50 years and assessing America's moral direction, particularly in light of last year's election. Where have we been? I asked. Where are we going? Where should we be going?

"Ah, the contemplative monk," Drinan said, with a Woody-Woodpecker-style burst of laughter. "That's one of the fantasies, you know."

I sighed.

What I knew of Drinan was the icon: the Boston College vice president and former Law School dean who ran for the House of Representatives to get the United States out of Vietnam. The first priest to be elected a voting member of Congress. The member of the House Judiciary Committee to draft the first resolution calling for Richard Nixon's impeachment. The Roman Catholic priest who voted to allow Medicare funding for abortion. (If it was legal for the rich, it must be for the poor, he reasoned.) The congressman who gave up his office after the pope told him to in 1980. The champion of human rights, disarmament, justice. The indefatigable idealist.

Indefatigable—that should have been the tip-off. Fr. Drinan is an activist, not a poet-philosopher. His lexicon runs more to fits of fury, waves of generosity, gusts of humor, than to ponderous musings on things past and future. He is too busy with too many causes. "His mind works on multi-track play," says George Higgins '61, JD'67, the reporter-turned-lawyer-turned-novelist, a friend since the 1960s. "Impatient?" Higgins roars at the suggestion. "Oh, yeah: speed-of-light impatient. If he'd been born into another religion, he'd be a whirling dervish."

**T**all and sharp-shouldered, Fr. Drinan is built like a knife. "He's always looked half-starved," says English Professor Francis Sweeney, SJ, a close friend since seminary. With Drinan's trademark fringe of white hair, clerical collar and black suit, he is instantly recognizable in any crowd of Washington bureaucrats or pols. "I've never seen him without the collar," Fr. Sweeney muses vaguely—"well, maybe on vacation." Still, there is nothing formal about the man. His overcoat is so chafed it's hard to tell whether it started out

navy or black; his pants are rumpled; there are crumbs on his shirtfront. For the past 25 years he has lived in the same room at Woodstock Theological Center; he joined the Jesuit community there while in law school at Georgetown in the late 1940s and returned after he was elected to Congress in 1970. "I don't think he cares at all about material things," Higgins says. "Madonna and Fr. Drinan have nothing in common."

At a time when most of his peers have retired and many have died, Fr. Drinan shows no sign of slowing, much less quitting. He gleefully describes watching a *New York Times* reporter pull up his obituary on the paper's computer to check a date. "I'd better die soon, or they'll have to rewrite that obit," Drinan says, with a dry gust of laughter.

It's no joke. He's performing at the same break-neck pace he did at age 35, when he was named dean of BC Law School; he spent the next 14 years jacking up admission standards and crisscrossing the country to recruit the best students and faculty he could find. Now a law professor at Georgetown, Drinan teaches two courses a semester, specializing in constitutional law, civil liberties, arms control and international human rights law. "I've taught more than 4,000 lawyers. Only four have been disbarred—and two of those were for sex crimes," he says, chuckling. "We're not responsible for those." He founded the *Georgetown Journal of Legal Ethics* eight years ago and serves as faculty advisor.

Over the years, Drinan has written nine books—about the Vietnam War, about civil rights, about the need for an independent Israel, about the relationship between church and state. Since leaving Congress in 1981, he has used the press to draw public attention to the atrocities that irresistibly catch his eye. He's the Ralph Nader of human rights, pointing a finger when women are sterilized in China or whole families are "disappeared" in Argentina, challenging the U.S. government and the United Nations to come down harder on regimes that trample what he sees as the most basic of rights. A former contributing editor to the Jesuit weekly, *America*, he now writes a column for the *National Catholic Reporter* and another for Religion News Service, a wire service that distributes it to hundreds of U.S. newspapers. Drinan's writing is like his nature: quick, abrupt, packed with statistics and polemics. "He has certain things he thinks are obvious, and he uses his writings to advocate those points," says BC Theology Professor David Hollenbach, SJ. "While he can be analytical, he's not philosophical. He's a real activist."

Fr. Drinan serves on the governing boards of a

wide range of legal and humanitarian organizations, including the American Bar Association, the American Civil Liberties Union, Bread for the World, Helsinki Watch, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the Union of Councils for Soviet Jews. He answers his office phone himself to take a steady stream of media calls and lecture requests—and to gossip: his face lights up at news of a promotion received, a baby born, a post sought in the Clinton administration. Writing letters of recommendation for former students and staffers might as well be his hobby. Receiving honorary degrees might be another: he has more than 20 to his name. This March, Georgetown saluted him with a fundraising dinner. The honorary planning committee read like a Who's Who in Liberal Politics: Al Gore, Tom Foley, Tom Harkin, Joe Kennedy, Barney Frank, John Kerry, Barbara Mikulski, Ed Markey, Patsy Mink, Paul Sarbanes, Pat Schroeder, Sargent and Eunice Shriver... The list went on and on.

Fr. Drinan travels—sometimes weekly, sometimes more—to give speeches, to attend meetings and conferences, to lead spiritual retreats, to see what is really happening around the world. As a congressional delegate and as a representative of humanitarian groups, he has traveled throughout Southeast Asia and Latin America, to China, to the Philippines, to Israel, to the Soviet Union. He has overseen elections in Armenia and Panama, and he is now planning a trip to South Africa. Among those who travel for work, tales of Drinan sightings abound: always in airports, usually writing long-hand on a yellow legal pad in his bold, hurried script. ("I'm writing all the time," he says, "not always to get published, but I write just to clarify what the hell I believe.") No one tells of seeing Drinan staring wistfully into space or chatting idly with the people seated around him—unless there is a small child nearby.

After resigning from public office, Drinan donated his papers to the Congressional Archives at BC, where they occupy about 500 cardboard boxes in the basement of Burns Library. In one of those files is a snapshot of him at a picnic, holding the ankles of a child, wheelbarrow-style. "I wonder what I was doing to that child," he wrote back to the friend who sent it. "I hope he survived."

If Drinan thrills in the company of children, he is pained by adult small talk and dullness. When I ask a routine question, he rolls his eyes. "You can do better than that," he snaps, crossing the room to switch on the old rabbit-eared Sony next to his desk: "Wanna see how OJ's doing?"

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**F**r. Drinan believes the Declaration of Independence the way a fundamentalist Christian believes the Bible—absolutely and literally. To him, it is self-evident that all people are created equal, their rights are sacrosanct, and the rights of the little guy, especially, need to be protected. "He really believes Thomas Jefferson's words," says Fr. Hollenbach. "To him, that is the literal *truth*, not just an interesting idea."

Drinan's critics consider him a liberal crank who sees injustice everywhere, but Hollenbach says there's more to Drinan. "His reactions come from a deep compassion for the needs of people who are hurting," Hollenbach says. "He's been to a lot of those countries, and he knows firsthand people who've had real troubles." Drinan's "legal and political responses are direct," Hollenbach says, "and so may look knee-jerk to those who don't know him. But they come from *knowledge*."

Drinan's response to injustice is primitive, instinctive, Hollenbach says: "These cases stand out in such contrast to his religious vision of what should be, and in contrast to the comfortable lives he sees the rest of us living. Whether it's anti-Semitism, or human-rights abuses against mothers in Argentina, or nuclear weapons, he sees these things and says, 'This just shouldn't be.'"

William Leonard, SJ, now retired from BC's Theology Department, is one of Drinan's oldest and closest friends at BC; he was teaching poetry when Drinan was an undergraduate. "I never had him in class," Fr. Leonard concedes. "I can't imagine Bob reading poetry!" Fr. Leonard believes that Drinan's motivation to solve injustice is grounded both in sensibility and in the gospels. "I think it comes from a very real conviction that we are bound to one another, that we cannot fob off our responsibility," he says. "Bob cannot just walk by someone in pain, saying, 'Oh, that's too bad.'"

The topic for Drinan's advanced constitutional law class February 16 is the 14th Amendment—the right to equal protection under the law. He opens by announcing that he's just returned from Miami,



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where the ABA—"not usually considered a liberal group," he notes—"took the side of the angels," voting against both mandatory school prayer and California's Proposition 187.

It's a perfect segue into Drinan's presentation of *San Antonio v. Rodriguez*, a case challenging a Texas law that capped the percentage of personal income that is taxable for education. As a result, poor school districts—taxing their residents to the maximum—could raise only about half what rich districts spent per child on education. "It's the tyranny of the majority," Drinan intones. A student challenges him: "Where is there a constitutional right to equal quality of education?" As the discussion heats up, Drinan refers time and time again to the concepts of fairness and justice. Juxtaposed against the tight legal verbiage and logic of his students, his words sound old-fashioned, even quaint. He's making a truth claim; they want logic. To Fr. Drinan, each of these cases is about real people with real problems. His students are talking about ideas.

Midway through the class Drinan calls for a break, and as students mill around in the halls I head for the restroom. In front of the sinks stands a woman, naked from the waist down. I falter, transfixed by the sight of a wide, leathery-looking, purple scar cutting across the brown skin of her left buttock. She's homeless, I think; she has no place to wash. As I enter the toilet stall, a female custodian barks at the woman: "Put your clothes on! What do you think you're doing in here?"

"What does it look like I'm doing?" the woman yells. "I peed on myself."

While the woman dresses, I linger by the sinks, watching a student touch up her lipstick, then fix her hair. I think about what it means to be a witness. Drinan is a witness, I conclude; but is his message getting through?

As I walk back to the class, I ask some students what they think of it. "Too emotional," one woman says. "A friend of mine transferred to another section where she's much happier; it's calmer, more based on reason. In here, everything comes down to right and wrong. The class on abortion was awful; people were yelling at each other."

Drinan walks over and asks the group, with a nod toward me, "Is she a true believer?" I feel lost in the middle ground.

Toward the end of class, when Drinan advocates expanding the protections covered by the 14th Amendment, a student blurts out, "I think you're going down a slippery slope."

"I like slippery slopes," Drinan retorts.

I think about the homeless woman by the sink.

**F**r. Drinan is talking about Vatican II, about the excitement of reading the *New York Times* each day in the early 1960s while the council was meeting, about the eagerness with which he and other young priests awaited news of the proceedings. He shows no wistfulness for what he calls the Dark Ages. He's not one who longs for the texture of the Latin Mass. Or "the dumb Eucharistic fast," he growls. "Who invented that?"

From an overstuffed bookshelf in his office, he pulls a faded red volume—the documents of the council. Its back is long broken, the binding frayed. Drinan's fingers dance through the pages, stopping at a section on international organizations. "This hit me when it came out and it still does," he says, "that the Church should be collaborating at the highest levels; that there is an urgent need for all nations to cooperate fully and intensely in an exploration of how we can distribute to the human community what is needed. Especially the rich nations have this obligation . . . This influenced me to run for Congress. That's where Christians should be."

In Congress Fr. Drinan made good on his promise to try and end the Vietnam War, sponsoring early legislation to curb U.S. military involvement. He chaired the House Subcommittee on Criminal Justice and helped revamp U.S. criminal law. He oversaw the disbanding of the House Internal Security Committee, the successor to the House Committee on Un-American Activities. He fought passionately on behalf of Soviet Jews and Israel. Three times he was reelected, with strong backing among Jews, blacks, liberals, women and working-class whites in Massachusetts's 4th District. In the spring of 1980, just as he was gearing up for the fall elections, Drinan received word that the Vatican was going to enforce an old rule prohibiting priests from holding political office. In each of the previous elections, he had applied for, and automatically received, a dispensation.

"I remember a conversation, sitting in his room," says Fr. Leonard. "Bob said he'd just been told to resign. 'I don't know what to do,' he told me. I said, 'You're going to do what you should do. You're

going to resign.' I told him that his influence would be much greater because of his obedience—because he was willing to be selfless, to be plowed under. That took not only courage but a high degree of holiness. That's an unfashionable word these days, but I believe it's true . . . People might have been tempted to write Bob off as a radical before that decision—but not after."

On May 5, 1980, Fr. Drinan announced that he would not run in the fall. The news made international headlines. Some journalists suspected that the Vatican's intent was to clip the wings of South American priests who were increasingly active in politics; others, including the British magazine *The Economist*, speculated that Drinan himself had drawn the Vatican's eye with his liberal stances—especially on abortion funding.

The Drinan archives contain two large cardboard boxes marked "PJD" for "Pope John Decision." Actually it was John Paul II. The boxes are stuffed with a variant of condolence letters—hundreds and hundreds of them. Some are typed on heavy ivory stock, engraved with the names of fancy New York law firms. Others are handwritten in Palmer-method script on tiny, flowered notecards, signed by nuns. There are letters from heads of churches and synagogues, universities and Fortune 500 companies. There are letters from schoolchildren whose classes he had visited.

The vast majority of those letters express dismay at the pope's decision and pride in Drinan's response. Priests and nuns wrote to say that, in making such a sacrifice, he had affirmed their own vows. A Jewish constituent and friend wrote, "The decision of the Church—which we must protest but you must obey—cannot erase the inspiring ideals given all of us by Pope John and Vatican II and personified in your service to the country." But others vented their rage on paper. "What manner of Deity would silence our nation's strongest voice for justice, for peace, for compassion, and not least, for common sense?" demanded one constituent. "I shall never be able to forgive those who have stolen so much from our small supply of hope."

On December 18, 1980, Drinan nearly skipped the annual White House dinner-dance for members of Congress. "I was cleaning out my office," he says. "It was a bad scene." When he got to the party, he says, "Jimmy Carter leaned over and said to me, 'Father, God wants us both to do something different next year, and it will be more important.'"

One of the odder documents in the Drinan archives is his FBI file, which he requested under the Freedom of Information Act while in Congress. Buried among bland internal memos, there's a note suggesting a link to Jane Fonda. There's a letter from a concerned citizen warning that Drinan had lectured to some potentially seditious group. There's a letter from Special Agent James L. Handley, demanding that Drinan retract a statement, widely quoted in the media, that the FBI "gets the lowest grade of lawyers." Handley noted that the Bureau employed a number of graduates of BC Law School, many educated during Drinan's tenure as dean.

Reading it, I felt a pang of pity for Special Agent Handley. The file contains no evidence that Drinan ever apologized. He just moved on to bigger fish. A UPI report says he'd called John M. Mitchell "the most dangerous attorney general that we have ever had." The Mitchell problem, Drinan told CBS, was more important "than whether FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover should be replaced."

The Bob Drinan who emerges from the file is a green-headed gadfly, relentlessly dive-bombing sacred cows—some worthy of his assault, some not. After Hoover, he took on Nixon, drafting his resolution for impeachment on July 31, 1974—the Feast of St. Ignatius—to the annoyance of fellow Democrats who wanted to wait for more conclusive evidence of the President's guilt. But Drinan had seen enough. Why wait?

He hasn't changed. As he sits in a straight-backed chair in the faculty law library down the hall from his office, a CBS cameraman clips a tiny microphone to Drinan's lapel. The TV lights bleach his face, and for a moment he looks like one of those skulls Georgia O'Keeffe used to paint—sere, pale, fleshless. When the videotape begins to roll, though, Drinan's eyes glitter and he delivers a vibrant, seasoned sound bite explaining why the Senate and House chaplains should be abolished. The chaplains have all been white, male, Protestant, he argues; each costs the government \$130,000 a year to "mumble a few wishy-washy prayers at the beginning of each session." The chaplains are beholden to the politicians who pay their salaries, Drinan reasons. If the jobs were voluntary and speakers rotated through, the chaplains would be free to speak their conscience—like the prophets of old.

Like Drinan himself.

*Charlotte Bruce Harvey is this magazine's senior editor.*