

The workers' prophet

Family, friends, officials honor 'Waterfront priest'

By [Peter McDermott](#)

"He would go 200 yards beyond the last rope," said the Rev. John O'Brien about his first cousin, the Rev. John Corridan S.J. "He was a great swimmer."

He was recalling family vacations seven and eight decades ago in the Rockaways with the man who later became known as the "Waterfront Priest."

His willingness to go "beyond the last rope" still symbolizes for O'Brien his kinsman's intrepid nature. And indeed Corridan, the bane of lifeguards in his youth, went on to infuriate gangsters, as well as complicit union bosses, politicians, cops and church fathers.

Corridan, a Jesuit, won national fame battling for workers' rights and against mob influence in the International Longshoremen's Association and was the model for the priest, Fr. Barry, played by Karl Malden in multiple-Oscar winning 1954 film "On the Waterfront."

Family, friends, law enforcement officers and brother Jesuits gathered last week at Pier 40 on West Houston St. in Downtown Manhattan, to honor the legendary priest and to christen the "Rev. John M. Corridan," the first ever police launch of the Waterfront Commission of New York Harbor

"It gives us visibility and mobility," Lt. William Brown, the commander of the 500-horsepower boat, told the Echo.

The christening was a departure from tradition as police departments usually name vessels and vehicles for fallen officers. But Corridan, who first came to public attention in articles written by investigative journalist Malcolm Johnson in 1949, was by any measure an extraordinary figure, one who figures prominently in the history of the Waterfront Commission.

Johnson's 24-part Pulitzer-winning series in the New York Sun caught the attention of novelist and screenwriter Budd Schulberg who became fascinated with the priest. He researched some articles of his own about dockside corruption and eventually wrote the screenplay for "On the Waterfront," which starred Marlon Brando, Eve Marie Saint, Rod Steiger and Lee J. Cobb, in addition to Malden.

He found that the priest, known as "Pete" since his seminary days, had not only immersed himself in waterfront issues, but had become a leader of union dissidents.

"I can't take credit for some of the best lines in the move," said the 93-year-old Schulberg last week. "They were written for me.

"Fr. Pete single-handedly turned the union into a powerful force for good," he told the crowd gathered in the cold sunshine at Pier 40.

Corridan was born in 1911 on 107th Street at Amsterdam Avenue, the first of five sons to Jack and Hannah (nee Shanahan) Corridan, both natives of Castleisland, Co. Kerry. When he was 9, his father, an officer with the NYPD, died.

Hannah Corridan herself had been one of 11 children. Of those, five sisters and a brother made the emigrant's journey to New York. The latter, Paddy Shanahan, a grocer, became the family patriarch and a surrogate father to his sister's children.

He had three of his own and they grew up with the young Corridan boys. One of the Shanahans, the future Patricia Garry, has fond memories going to prom dances and movies

with her cousin before he joined the priesthood.

"We always got along," she recalled. "We had wonderful times together."

When she got married 65 years ago, however, the young Jesuit couldn't get permission to attend the wedding. But the newly married couple went to his seminary in Maryland and brought him out for a sandwich.

Corridan, who was a scholarship student at Regis High School on the Upper East Side, was relatively late becoming a priest.

"My grandfather made him stay home for a while to help support the family," said the Rev. Peter Garry, a priest in Newport, L.I., and a third-generation Shanahan. Then the Jesuit recruit had 13 years of studies before ordination.

Fr. O'Brien, who was son of another Shanahan sister, Lizzie, was ordained not long after his cousin, though he was a decade younger.

"I was born in the same apartment," said O'Brien, who moved with his parents, at age 2, to Newark, N.J.

"I was shipped out to the Rockaways every summer," he remembered. There he fell under the spell of his older cousin, the impressive swimmer.

"He was for real -- both in what he was doing and what he was," O'Brien added.

"He was fearless," added Fr. Garry. "He was a prophet."

"He was a very courageous priest," J. Kevin McGowan, assistant chief of police of the Waterfront Commission, told the Echo.

Asked by a member of the press corps at last week's event if there were priests of his caliber still, Garry said: "There are one or two prophets left," he said, priests who have the courage to face pain.

John M. Corridan's first assignment as a newly ordained priest in 1945 was as associate director of the Xavier Institute of Labor Relations on West 16th Street. He quickly became aware of the endemic crime and corruption at the piers on Manhattan's West side and how it impoverished the longshoremen who depended on jobs there for their livelihood.

"You had to give kickbacks to those thugs," McGowan said of the Irish-American gangsters who controlled New York harbor. "The workers took loans from loan sharks because it guaranteed them a job."

Schulberg has said in a previous speech about Corridan: "He was serving as the true union leader that [the longshoremen] didn't have, teaching them what their rights were, how they could stay together and attract more members. He was building a rebel movement."

Corridan talked boxing and drank with the longshoremen, said Schulberg, to win their confidence. When they met him, the screenwriter's moviemaking colleagues wondered aloud if he really was a priest.

But he made a lifelong impact on the Jewish screenwriter: "Fr. Corridan's words cut a way for me through the curtain of religious prejudice into the world of Catholic humanism -- of Christian social ethics. There I began to sense what a powerful force for social betterment this religious tradition can be."

Schulberg and director Elia Kazan's movie, which also garnered Oscars for stars Brando and Saint, is universally acknowledged as a classic, though it wasn't without controversy. Both Schulberg and Kazan were friendly witnesses when called before the House Un-American Activities Committee during the Hollywood Red Scare and the film, in which Brando character Terry Malloy identifies a mobster leader to a government commission, was seen as an

attempt to justify their actions.

The year before the film's release President Eisenhower had established the New York-New Jersey Waterfront Commission to combat crime on the docks. Corridan's work was seen as instrumental in the creation of that body.

Pressure, though, from the conservative Cardinal Joseph Spellman led to the end of his waterfront career in 1957. He then became a college teacher, first in economics and later in theology. In 1967, he was appointed chaplain at a Brooklyn hospital, where he remained until his retirement in 1981.

Fr. Corridan died of a heart attack on July 1, 1984. He was 73.

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