

Ryle Memorial

By Claudia I. Provencio, The Catholic Sun

Hundreds of people from all walks of life paid tribute to Msgr. Edward Ryle during a memorial Mass for the late priest who was widely known in legislative circles for his lobbying efforts on behalf of the poor. He was 75.

Politicians, diocesan employees and ecumenical leaders were among those who celebrated the life of the late monsignor Jan. 6 at St. Mary's Basilica with their tears and their laughter at the words of Lutheran Bishop Michael Neils, president of the Arizona Ecumenical Council.

"I just can't imagine Ed Ryle at rest. He's got to be up to something," the Lutheran bishop said of the monsignor, also a staunch supporter of the ecumenical community. "First of all, I believe that in heaven he is engaged in spirited political debate and those who did not see that the full truth of Catholic social teaching is the truth... are now seeing the grinning monsignor saying 'I told you so.'"

"And though the very notion of heaven precludes any sense of injustice, should even a hint of it show up, Ed will identify it, name it and organize to overcome it," he added.

His ability to organize helped the monsignor successfully push to abolish the death penalty in Arizona for people with mental retardation in 2001.

During his 19-year tenure as executive director of the Arizona Catholic Conference, the office that monitors public policy for the bishops of Arizona and Gallup, N.M., the monsignor formed many ecumenical coalitions to address key issues of social justice, such as the death penalty, fair wages and the reform of immigration laws.

Bishop Thomas J. Olmsted said "perhaps no one in Arizona was better known for his commitment to this ecumenical task than Msgr. Ryle."

While the monsignor — dubbed "God's lobbyist" — was known for his ability to socialize with anyone, Bishop Olmsted said his heart for the poor was always at the forefront.

"While monsignor felt at home in the corridors of the state Capitol, he felt even more at home at the agencies of Catholic Charities or St. Vincent de Paul, for these are places where the poor are recognized with as much distinction as the rich and the famous, as the movers and the shakers of society," the bishop said during his homily.

Msgr. Ryle, a priest for 49 years, died Dec. 28 at St. Joseph Hospital's Barrow Neurological Institute surrounded by family and loved ones, including longtime friend, Arizona Governor Janet Napolitano. He was found unconscious in his home Dec. 3 and never regained consciousness.

Prior to his term with the Arizona Catholic Conference, the monsignor taught at the National Catholic School of Social Service at The Catholic University of America in Washington and as dean of the Graduate School of Social Work at Marywood University in Scranton, Pa., from 1977 to 1984.

"Msgr. Ryle selflessly devoted his life to ministering to the less fortunate and advocating for them at the Capitol," the governor said. "I will miss him dearly."

A friend for 28 years, Paul Martodam, CEO of Catholic Charities Community Services — a post Msgr. Ryle held in the 1960s for the Diocese of Tucson — said the articulate monsignor could gently persuade colleagues to change their stance on issues affecting social policy.

But Martodam said the monsignor could also become animated when legislative actions threatened financial resources for Arizona's poor.

"His legacy will be as a voice for justice for the poorest and most vulnerable of society," he added. In 2005, Catholic Charities honored Msgr. Ryle with its Vision Award, for his tireless lobbying efforts to help underprivileged Arizonans.

"I always thought of monsignor as a prophet," Martodam said, fighting back tears. "At times he was gentle and persuasive, always intelligent and fully informed. And at times he was like John the Baptist — he would be the voice crying in the wilderness to make straight the way of the Lord."

Programs Msgr. Ryle was most passionate about included many under the auspices of the Arizona Department of Economic Security, which provides support to people in greatest need of assistance.

"Probably one of the biggest fights he helped lead was to protect and maintain (welfare)," said DES director David Berns. "He was also a staunch advocate for protective services in making sure we had resources to support families and to keep kids safe."

Herschella Horton, chief of legislative services for DES, said Msgr. Ryle was a man "respected on both sides of the aisle" at the state Legislature.

"He was always, always a strong advocate for the poor," said Horton, who frequently interacted with the monsignor during her 10-year tenure in the Arizona House of Representatives.

"He didn't ever seem to give up," she said. "He always was there, testifying before committees, stopping people, talking to them, getting people to understand the need. That this just wasn't throwing money at a problem — people needed real help to be able to get on their feet."

In addition to his penchant for serving the disenfranchised, the late monsignor served on numerous community boards and was known for his fundraising style.

"I will always picture him as the guy who came by to see if we had any money lying around," said John Scola, president of the Catholic Community Foundation.

"As part of his work in ministry he was always looking for the opportunity to help the poor and sometimes that meant just coming around to the office to see if we had any loose funds that he could use."

To ensure that his causes could be helped by the foundation, the monsignor established the Monsignor Edward Ryle Field of Interest Fund to support projects that address social justice issues in Arizona.

"What I really liked was you would think on the surface that there is something egotistical, if you will, about establishing a fund that bears your name," Scola said. "But you never got that feeling from Msgr. Ryle when he was working to build this up because it was always about the work that he was going to accomplish with it."

Longtime friend Msgr. Richard O'Keeffe, pastor of Immaculate Conception Parish in Yuma and Episcopal Vicar for Yuma and La Paz counties, said he hopes historians will one day more aptly describe Msgr. Ryle's numerous contributions to "the Church, the people and the state."

"He treated everybody with dignity and respect," Msgr. O'Keeffe said of Msgr. Ryle, who he befriended early in his priesthood. "It didn't matter what (religious) belief the person was because of the way he treated them. I think that was one of the reasons why he was so successful."

One time I was looking for him and it might have been when we were back in the old building. It was important that I find him for some reason. I went by his office several times during the course of an afternoon only to find out he had been in there the whole time but you couldn't see him past the stack of papers. He had the most disorganized pile of papers anyone had ever seen. I think he had anything that was ever sent to him piled up in there. He knew where everything was but if you went in there to try to find something it would be impossible. — John Scola

"I remember one day we were sitting in his office talking about a piece of legislation and it had to do with benefits for poor people. He looked at me and said 'I know I am not going to win this one but I have to go down there and fight the battle.' He sometimes referred to himself as the champion of lost causes. That's what I call the plight of many prophets. Heard my many, heeded by very few. Monsignor very often felt that pain." — Paul Martodam

"You know I think because of him there are more of us (championing for the poor). He has taken those seeds and cultivated them right within me and others so that we will stand there ready to try to carry out his good work." — David Berns

"What comes to my mind is that verse in Corinthians 'Love is patient, love is kind,' that's what he embodied." —Herschella Horton