

Drinan, Catholic priest and member of Congress, dies: First Catholic voting member of Congress

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Robert F. Drinan, the first Catholic priest elected as a voting member of Congress after his opposition to the Vietnam War drew him into politics, was remembered fondly in death by fellow Jesuit educators and human rights advocates.

Representing Massachusetts as a Democrat for a decade starting in 1971, Drinan stepped down only after a blanket directive issued by Pope John Paul II prohibited priests from holding political office.

Drinan, who was 86, died January 28 in a Washington hospital. He suffered congestive heart failure and pneumonia in the 10 days before his death, said John Langan, rector of the Georgetown University Jesuit Community.

“He was a much cherished member of our community, admired for his simplicity of life and his dedication to the cause of justice and enjoyed for his energy and his gift of friendship,” Langan said.

Thomas Reese, former editor of *America* magazine and a senior fellow at Georgetown’s Woodstock Theological Center, said Drinan was a good friend whose “distinguished life” included speaking up for human and civil rights. “He wasn’t in Congress representing the Catholic Church” but rather his district and “the good of the country as he saw it.”

Drinan held moderate views on abortion and school prayer, countering attempts to overturn Supreme Court decisions of the 1960s that outlawed organized prayer in public schools. “What’s fascinating about him was his strong opposition to the school prayer amendments that came up in the House in 1971,” said Albert Menendez, a researcher whose organization tracks the religious affiliation of members of Congress.

Drinan was one of three Catholic priests to serve in Congress. Robert J. Cornell represented northeast Wisconsin for two terms in the 1970s, and Gabriel Richard represented Michigan as a nonvoting delegate in the 1820s before Michigan became a state.

Drinan urged the Catholic Church to pronounce the Vietnam War “morally objectionable” and called for President Nixon’s impeachment—not for the Watergate cover-up but for the U.S. bombing of Cambodia. He quit Congress in 1980 after the pope ordered priests worldwide not to run for political office.

The Vatican had more than the U.S. in mind; it was concerned as well about priests serving in the Nicaraguan government. “The Vatican was telling them to get out of government and not be involved in a political party,” Reese said. Drinan was succeeded by Barney Frank, a Democrat who continues to hold that seat.

One Democratic colleague of Drinan’s in the House in the late 1970s was Methodist minister Bob Edgar. He said last month that the priest’s commitment to peace and the poor never diminished in later years. “He was one of the few people I knew of whom it could be said—without exaggeration—that he was a prophet among us,” Edgar said.

Drinan received his law degree at Georgetown University in 1949 and served as dean of Boston College Law School before his congressional years. Afterward he was a law professor at Georgetown.

He authored a dozen books and wrote numerous magazine and newspaper articles. Between 1976 and 2000 he wrote 11 pieces for the *Century*, predominantly about human rights issues.

While he was in Congress, Drinan continued to wear his clerical collar—telling inquirers upon starting his first term, “They’re the only clothes I have.” -*Religion News Service*