

## Well Done, Good and Faithful Servant

Ralph McNerny died on January 29, the day after the feast of St. Thomas Aquinas, to whom he had dedicated his life as a Catholic scholar and educator. Philosopher, teacher, novelist, poet, publisher, man of letters, activist, and father of six wonderful adult children (Ralph and Connie lost their first child, Michael, when he was just three years old), Ralph authored over one hundred books, along with countless scholarly articles and opinion columns. He is perhaps best known to the wider public for the twenty-nine Father Dowling mysteries. But of special interest to lovers of Notre Dame is the series of thirteen (if I haven't lost count!) mystery novels set on the Notre Dame campus and built around, so to speak, a rotund—to the point of being nearly immobile—professor of medieval studies and amateur sleuth named Roger Knight. And infusing all of this amazingly fruitful output was Ralph's deep Catholic faith and piety.

I'm not yet quite ready to write about what Ralph McNerny meant to me personally, and there is no need here to dwell on Ralph's distress over the way things have been going at Our Lady's university. Also best left for another occasion is Ralph's role as the benefactor of scores of graduate students and itinerant scholars, including a young and, at the time, penniless political refugee from a South American dictatorship now lionized by political progressives.

What I would like to focus on instead is Ralph's relationship with undergraduates at the university, especially over the last fifteen years or so. Since I myself served as director of undergraduate studies in philosophy for eight of those years, I can claim some first-hand knowledge whereof to speak.

For many years Ralph taught a 2-level philosophy course, open to majors and non-majors alike, called The Thought of Aquinas. Ralph was convinced, and ending up convincing others of us as well, that St. Thomas's system of wisdom, taken as a whole, is still the best foundation for the articulation of the Catholic claim to wisdom. The core of The Thought of Aquinas is contained in *A First Glance at St. Thomas Aquinas: A Handbook for Peeping Thomists* (1990), the book I usually recommend when undergraduates ask me which of Ralph's books about St. Thomas they should start with. (For more serious students who see themselves as budding Catholic intellectuals, I always recommend *Thomism in an Age of Renewal* (1968), which has nicely withstood the test of time. It's out of print, but you can still find used copies for sale online.)

Over the years Ralph also taught many seminars on St. Thomas for philosophy majors. For instance, his popular course on St. Thomas's moral theory is nicely encapsulated in *Ethica Thomistica* (1997), the best one-stop treatment of its subject matter. And in later years he specialized in dual (dueling?) figure courses with titles such as Dante and Aquinas, Newman and Aquinas, and Newman and Kierkegaard.

More interestingly perhaps, in the late 1990's Ralph's teaching took what might we might call a 'subversive' turn. In the spring of 1998, a group of eight students (and I know your names), looking for intellectual formation faithful to the teachings of the Church and not impressed with the regular course offerings in the philosophy and theology departments, asked Ralph to do a readings course with them on John Paul II's encyclicals *Veritatis Splendor* and *Evangelium Vitae*, along with the parts of St. Thomas relevant to the encyclicals. In subsequent semesters the number of students grew to thirty and the topics included the documents of Vatican II, the philosophical underpinnings of the social encyclicals of the twentieth century, the encyclical *Fides et Ratio*, and so on. They would meet in the Maritain Center under the cover of night—Nicodemus-style, so to speak—and there were always refreshments. This 'shadow curriculum' continued into the new century and, ironically, evoked in some of us oldsters

memories of student discontent with the 'official curriculum' in the 1960's. In any case, a good time was had by all, and those courses helped nurture a number of priestly and religious vocations, along with a lot of solid Catholic marriages.

Now for the dark side. As one might expect, Ralph's unrelenting promotion of authentic Catholic teaching earned him more than a few campus enemies. When in 1982 he and Michael Novak launched the magazine *Catholicism in Crisis* in the wake of what they took to be an imprudent and skewed pastoral letter by the American bishops on nuclear deterrence, Fr. Hesburgh received a hefty stack of protest letters from disgruntled faculty members. In 1997, when Ralph sponsored a series of lectures meant to explain and defend the Church's teaching on homosexuality and the treatment of homosexuals, the head of Campus Ministry took to the pages of *The Observer* to advise undergraduates not to attend. ("He didn't bother to call me," I remember Ralph complaining. "I've never even met the guy.") There was lots of other whining over the years as well. The criticism might have bothered Ralph to some degree, but it never deterred him. Like Peter and John before him, he rejoiced at being "judged worthy of ill-treatment for the sake of the Name" (Acts 5:41). And through it all, he never lost his wit or his wits. Besides, he had his own built-in way of exacting humorous vengeance: in his novels.

Much of the good work that Ralph initiated with undergraduates has been continued and expanded upon by his dear friend David Solomon of the Notre Dame Center for Ethics and Culture. And this continuity was a source of great consolation for Ralph as he retired last year after 53 years of teaching at Notre Dame. Every year the Center for Ethics and Culture sponsors a fall lecture series on important Catholic (and, this past fall, 'almost Catholic') literary figures. My suspicion is that there will sometime soon be a lecture on the literary legacy of Ralph McInerney.

The congregation at Ralph's funeral included many friends and former students who had traveled long distances from all over the country. The aforementioned political refugee, now teaching in Chile, wanted very badly to come, but found that only business class airline tickets were available on such short notice for the flight from Santiago to New York. You just know that if Ralph McInerney had been alive, he would have sent the money for that ticket to his own funeral.

Alfred J. Freddoso  
John and Jean Oesterle Professor of Thomistic Studies  
University of Notre Dame