

Ralph McInerny and the tragedy of Notre Dame

In late February, Professor Marjorie Garber of Harvard came to the University of Notre Dame as the Provost's Distinguished Lecturer for 2009-2010. She spoke to a class on "Breaking the Code: Transvestism and Gay Identity," the subject of chapter six of her book, "Vested Interests: Transvestism and Cultural Anxiety."

Ralph McInerny, an Olympic-class punster who taught at Notre Dame for 54 years before his death Jan. 29, might have appreciated the sly title of Professor Garber's book; he almost certainly would have regarded her topic as an example of everything that had gone wrong at the university to which he had dedicated his professional life.

McInerny was arguably the most distinguished scholar ever to work at Notre Dame. His scholarly publications outstrip those of other Notre Dame philosophers by orders of magnitude - and that's before we get to his popular fiction, his magazine work and his encouraging of generations of younger Catholic academics.

Yet a university that does not hesitate to boast of its accomplishments as measured by the U.S. News and World Report ratings seemed curiously reticent about celebrating his life and accomplishments.

One cannot help suspect that this has something to do with the fact that Ralph thought Notre Dame had gone off the rails in its dogged and relentlessly self-promoting attempts to measure itself against what it likes to term "peer schools," such as Dartmouth and Yale. What Ralph understood, and what the man who brought him to Notre Dame, the legendary Father Theodore Hesburgh, has never seemed to understand, is that that's the wrong plumb-line by which to measure a Catholic university's accomplishment. Or indeed any university's accomplishment, given the intellectual chaos, political correctness, decadence and madcap trendiness that has afflicted those "peer schools" since the late Sixties.

McInerny knew, and could demonstrate with acute philosophical rigor, that there

are truths built into the world and into us: truths we can know by exercising the arts of reason; truths that, known, lay certain moral obligations on us, personally and in our civic lives. With the rarest of exceptions, they don't know that, and in fact they deny that, at the "peer schools" to which Notre Dame compares itself. And therein lay the tragedy of Notre Dame and Catholic institutions of higher education of a similar cast of mind, as Ralph saw it: they had sold their intellectual and moral birthright – the true excellence that comes from an immersion in the Great Tradition of western higher learning – for a mess of pottage.

I've long thought that all of this had something to do with the misreading of a 1955 essay by Father John Tracy Ellis, "American Catholics and the Intellectual Life," which justifiably criticized the shabby condition of too much of Catholic higher education in the United States in those days. Father Hesburgh and others influenced by one reading of Ellis's critique decided that the thing to do was for Notre Dame to become Harvard, so to speak. McInerny thought that this didn't make much sense at a time when those "peer schools" were awash in pragmatism and utilitarianism. Rather, he believed (and I think this was the more accurate reading of Ellis) that Notre Dame and other premier Catholic universities should play to strength, emphasizing a demanding liberal arts education while bringing the best of the mid-20th century Catholic philosophical, theological and literary renaissance to bear in the U.S. Doing that, Catholic universities would model a form of higher learning that was truth-centered, character-building, and life-inspiring.

There is indeed some of that going on at Our Lady's University today, thanks to students, younger faculty and some reform-minded members of the Congregation of the Holy Cross. Those true reformers lost a happy warrior for their noble cause with the death of Ralph McInerny. Perhaps someday the university's board and administration will understand that.

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