

A Tribute to Ralph McInerny

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MANY will write of Ralph's impressive scholarship and diverse interests. I will write some about Ralph's accomplishments but I want to write mostly about Ralph as a person, a friend, and mentor. I am, however, one of the few who thinks she knows how Ralph managed to have such prodigious scholarly and popular output. I am convinced his mind was working full steam on several tracks at the same time; it was churning out puns and witticisms constantly; it was working on the latest novel; it was solving complex philosophical problems, processing profound and sometimes poetic thoughts, and it was fully focused on whomever he was talking with—all at the same time. Now how you do that?! I don't know but I think that was what he was capable of doing. To the question, "is the light on when the refrigerator door is closed?" the answer—if Ralph is the refrigerator—is "Yes—and there are several ice makers doing their job at all times as well."

It was not hard to love Ralph. He was simultaneously suave, sophisticated, urbane, relaxed, welcoming, and down-to-earth. He was tremendously and effortlessly charming. Recently I saw just a few minutes of an old Bing Crosby movie and the resemblances seemed to me to be startling. His romantic interest said to the ever debonair Bing, "You are so charming, sincere, and stable." That is a good list to commence complimenting Ralph. Bing was also always ready to burst into some comforting, mellifluous song that seemed to put the world right and so it was with Ralph; he seemed to have the perfect words for all occasions. Bing and Ralph both had a look of benign mischief in their eyes; you knew that at any minute you could be in for some gentle teasing that would serve somehow to build you up, not tear you down.

Bing captures the grounded but light hearted side of Ralph—the side that was expressed by his joyful sauntering through life. For the intense purpose-driven life that Ralph led, Moses comes to mind as the fitting analogue. Both undertook the mission of leading many to the promised land. Ralph was acutely aware, more than anyone I have known, that he was building on the work of his forefathers, for whose work he expressed pious gratitude, and knew he had an obligation to shape those who were to carry on the work in future generations. In a sense, his life was an unrelenting effort to remind us of eternal truths and our obligation to do what we could to preserve them, understand them deeply, build on them, and pass them onto others. For many summers he ran both a summer workshop for accomplished and for up-and-coming Thomists and a workshop on Basic Catholicism for those who couldn't find reliable presentations of fundamental Catholicism anywhere. (Isn't it wonderful that those days are over? In part thanks to Ralph's solace and training of many.) Summer after summer he sat in the front row in rapt attention for talks he had heard countless times or talks he could have given much much better. Always full of compliments to the speakers; always spectacularly accessible to the attendees. And we would find that at the end of the week, he had somehow found time to write another book. That multi-tracked mind!

It would be easy to exhaust one's supply of positive adjectives in describing Ralph. I am confident that all who write tributes to him will mention his kindness since that was perhaps his most salient characteristic—after his manifest intelligence. Much of his kindness was *sub tabula*. I remember watching Ralph ask a poor young scholar at a conference if she would be at the banquet; she made some lame excuse (which I did not recognize as lame) for an inability to attend. Not long after we parted, I saw a conference organizer approach her with an “extra” ticket for the event. I knew Ralph had purchased one for her. For years he attended to the widowed Jean Oesterle like she was his mother; he helped find scholarly projects that kept her going; gave her an office nearby and doted on her with his daily friendship. I am sure these examples could be multiplied exponentially.

Ralph was marvelous to me during my trials at Notre Dame. He befriended me when I was a raw recruit in the fight for the good and true and never acted like he was the “great man” supporting the clueless newbie; he always treated me as an equal although I knew I was privileged to have him as a mentor and friend. His “mentoring” was of the most subtle kind; in fact, I learned most simply by being in his company and observing him deal with people. It was also most edifying to watch

him hatch new improbable schemes and seemingly make them materialize overnight. I remember his wife Connie and I agreeing that very few people wake up each morning with a new grand idea for saving Western Civilization or for putting an end to dissent in the Church and there are fewer who make most of them happen, but Ralph was that kind of guy.

When I was denied tenure at Notre Dame, Ralph was prepared to spearhead an effort to challenge the decision and even went to consult a lawyer with me. I admit I didn't know whether his foremost motive was to support me or to gather material for some impending novel. And he wasn't nice only to those who occupied the same ecclesial camp as himself; he was notorious for championing anyone who he thought got a raw deal, among them a prominent feminist whom he used to debate about the possibility of women becoming priests. When she was denied tenure, he battled for her.

Ralph never backed away from a fight, yet never was pugnacious or belligerent; he was always the gentleman, always fair, always gracious. Indeed, he was undeniably fairer to his opponents than they were to him, both his opponents in the scholarly world and those in the academy. I doubt that anyone could accuse Ralph of underhanded behavior. Still, he didn't hesitate to use his resources to advance the causes and people he believed in but, again, transparently and fairly. When Notre Dame started becoming friendly to the political maneuvering of the gay/lesbian lobby, he arranged for a series of speakers on campus who defended Church teaching. It infuriated many, but Ralph doggedly revered the Church and its authority more than he revered the trendy irreverent climbers at Notre Dame.

I remember a wonderful quodlibetal ("ask whatever you like") session at the University of Dallas where Ralph fielded questions with the finesse of Roger Federer returning brilliant volleys. That's when I realized that those who are in the top 1% of intelligent people can easily make those who are in the top 2% look like fools if they want to. Ralph didn't want to but you knew there was phenomenal power behind that charm. Ralph didn't want to flatten anyone. He just wanted to lay out the truth so carefully and clearly that rejecting it would seem simply foolish. Ralph made the world seem a friendlier and more intelligible place by conveying the attitude that a lot of it does make sense if you just use your mind to think about it—and embrace and trust the Catholic faith! His clarity and certainty about truth did not tend toward dogmatic closure on questions. The truth we know is just a stepping stone to further knowledge, knowledge cloaked in beauty and wonder and those privileged to have minds trained to discover it, were obliged to do so and pass that knowledge on

to others, with an equal combination of humility and determination. Ralph's humility and determination inspired others to imitate his approach to the search for understanding.

Connie, refreshingly candid and delightfully feisty in her own right, was the perfect wife for Ralph. At home, they entertained beautifully together; it was a pleasure to be invited to events on Portage Avenue attended by many of the old guard at Notre Dame; the intimate and warm friendships were a comfort to all; the conversations were erudite, hilarious and captivating.

I hope it is not irreverent, but in fact Ralph reminded me a lot of God (after all, we are supposed to be as perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect). God is harder at work than any of us; involved in projects galore, but always ready to interrupt those projects to help us achieve our ends. And God seems to be equal work and play; he not only instructs and helps us constantly, he continually provides us with things to delight us. So, of course, did Ralph. I never knew who the "real" Ralph was, whether he was a philosopher or a mystery writer at heart. But, like God, he seemed to want to give us some very serious food for the mind and then to give us some enchanting frivolity as a complementary palate cleanser.

I count Ralph among those who stood by me and shaped me. I know there are countless others who have been the beneficiaries of his goodness. I know his children must feel infinitely blessed to have had him and Connie as their parents; his colleagues and friends at Notre Dame must feel infinitely blessed to have had him as colleague and friend. We were all immeasurably blessed to have had Ralph in our lives; we pray now that he is enjoying truly infinite blessings in the arms of the Truth he loved and defended so well. N-V