

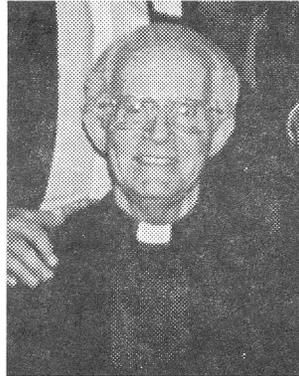
ST. JOSEPH'S - ST. PATRICK'S COLLEGE ALUMNI ASSOCIATION

Winter 1999 Newsletter

IN MEMORIAM

FRANK B. NORRIS, S.S., R' 44
1925-2000

On January 11, 2000, Frank B. Norris's body was laid to rest. I regret that I was not there in Menlo to help to celebrate his life, but I am grateful for this opportunity to share a few memories of this splendid human being. Like Chaucer's parson, Frank was "rich of holy thought and work, a learned man, a clerk. Christ's gospel truly would he preach, his parishioners devoutly would he teach. Benign he was, and wondrously diligent, and in adversity full patient."



The last time I saw Frank was on Thanksgiving Day. Tom Sheehan and my wife, Aine, and I dropped by that morning to visit. I told him how thankful I was that our paths had crossed, and how deeply he had influenced my life. I recalled how he forged for us the connection between grace (charis) and gratitude (eucharistia). As a student, I loved his crystal clarity, his razor-sharp intellect, his deep wisdom, and his marvelous sense of humor. I admired him greatly for enabling us to turn up our baloney detectors. His heart was as good as gold, full of charity, even for people he knew were insensitive clods.

I told Frank that my finest experience as an educator was team-teaching a course with him on Historical Theology. The students were marvelous (folks like Jim Murphy, Larry Purcell, John Riley and Gene Quinones). I remembered his courage and honesty in acknowledging the human condition in all efforts to reflect about life theologically. To my amazement, he recalled that class as one his finest experiences as well.

As the four of us prayed the Our Father that morning in the chapel, I had the intuition that it would be the last time I would see him in the flesh. It was. I spoke to him a few times on the phone after I heard about the heart attack, but my leave-taking was on the day we set aside for the whole nation to be eucharistic. I am still filled with gratitude for his marvelous gifts to us.

The idea of seeing his body for the last time on Thanksgiving Day stirred a recognition of the ambiguity of the term "body". Frank had a great esteem for the well-being of persons and never bought into a phony Cartesian dualism that divides body and soul. Without becoming a health nut, he understood the integral unity of body-mind-spirit long before California faddists or new agers began to cop on.

He also spoke often of the body of Christ, which for him was not a metaphor. If a Christian is buried into the death of Christ in Baptism, then that is who we become in a pro-

found sense. His baptismal faith made him yearn for the deepest possible communion with all of the baptized. He welcomed the body-mind-spirit of others who disagreed with him on this or that point of theology. Frank was the first in the south bay to befriend Robert McAfee Brown when he left Union Theological Seminary in New York to come to Stanford. One of the high points of his career was being invited to serve as a translator for the Protestant observers at the Second Vatican Council. He gave the Vatican's guests much more than accurate,

skillful translations of the comments on the documents under review. He gave them a generous sense of how connected we all are and should become.

"Building up the body of Christ" meant for Frank not exercises at a gym, but countless acts of charity and hospitality that let people know how important, how valuable they are.

The other sense in which he would refer often to the body of Christ was, of course, the Eucharist. No one influenced my faith on this reality more significantly than Frank. He was immersed in the biblical and patristic literature and unfolded it with such clarity. At a moment in the history of our very funny church (Frank above all had a sense of humor about the Church) when it was controversial, Frank stressed that the Mass is a sacred meal, or when he was feeling especially elegant, a banquet.

He presided at our sacramental meals with grace and hospitality, and he unfolded the texts of the readings in his homily with great care and crisp articulation because that too was a way of providing nourishment for our needy bodies. At the Mass, he used to say, we become what we eat, the body of Christ, so we ought to treat one another with respect.

More than anyone else I met, Frank helped me grasp the evil of the Christian teaching of contempt for Jews. "The world's oldest hatred", he called it. He helped me understand how at the most profound level of commonality of faith in God, Christians must be Jews. And in his funny way, he helped us recall that the big Christians in the first century (Peter, Paul & Mary) were all Jews.

I miss this warm, dear friend dearly, but I recall fondly the unique ways in which he became our brother, now endlessly so as the atoms of his body-mind-spirit commingle with those of the universe.

*by Edward McGlynn Gaffney, R'61
Professor of Law at Valparaiso Law School, Indiana*

Further Reflections:

The Association received quite a few emails with respect to Frank's death, and I reprint two of them.

Friends,

I can't fully capture my own thoughts and feelings about yesterdays gathering honoring Frank's life and passage, but I thought it was wonderful and have the urge to put a few lines down.

Archbishop Levada presided with six other bishops present. Over 100 robed clergy were present, and the rest of the chapel was filled with the likes of us and friends Frank had shared with over the years. Frank would have gotten a kick out of it. Just looking around reminded me how fortunate we were to be part of that era and community of men.

Jack Olivier was there looking good; Bob Giguere, a bit frail but sharp. All three of them—meaning Frank too—were wrestling with their own struggles back in the mid-60's while at the same time giving so much to us all. There were a thousand flashbacks looking around the chapel. Larry Purcell and Murph smiling at all of us, Brian Cahill standing across the chapel with his arms folded, shoulders slightly hunched like he was coaching third base, Bob Murnane still at a higher elevation, PI, Tom Sheehan, Bill Kennedy, Pat Browne, Denis Ducey, and a number of guys younger and older. I recalled all the hours sitting in this same chapel in reflection during our stay there.

A little thing I noticed. Don Osuna was the last of the robed priests to walk in, and there was no chair for him. One of the seminarians retrieved a chair. As he set it down, I could remember Frank doing the very same positioning of a chair for someone either in a small chapel Mass or talk or something, but I remembered his gesture and act to make sure each one of us had a place to sit and be part of the event. I think he did this on many levels. There was a seat for everyone yesterday, and the place was full. I guess a fancy way of saying it is that his theology/ spirituality had legs, was incarnate.

I remember Frank telling us shortly after his book was published that his mother told him to remember that he may not be that big a frog because he lived in a rather small pond. Maybe. I'm glad that I was in the pond too, despite all the craziness. I know that we were blessed. I look forward to ongoing contact.

Bob Nixon, R' 62

I think of that wonderful idiosyncratic gesture of the fist to the jaw, in a certain way, as he was just about to make an important point. He stayed human through all the dehumanization, suffered surely for it but rose through it. How interesting that at the depth of his pain he was one of the brightest lights in the faculty firmament, laboring on, even in deepest darkness, teaching though his dry mouth would hardly let him speak, and always, always maintaining his dignity and integrity. He loved the warmth of human encounter, though he was shy and not used to it, and he was charmingly surprised at the friendship and warmth that he was able to generate.

John D. Riley, R'64

In closing our Memoriam for Frank B. Norris, S.S., I think it is fitting that we look to Frank's own words. Frank wrote the Commentary to Vatican Two's Decree on Priestly Training found in the Paulist Press Edition (1966) of Vatican Two Documents. I quote briefly from the Introduction and Conclusion of the Commentary:

"Now the moment has arrived for a searching examination. Vatican Council II must create a new kind of seminary in line with the needs of today. If there is one place where Pope John's aggiornamento is needed, it is here". So spoke Cardinal Leon Suenens of Malines-Brussels at a Rome press conference in October, 1964, during the third session of the Council. These words expressed his personal concern of many years' standing, as well as that of large numbers of his fellow bishops. It was their deep conviction that the updating of seminaries is not just another desired result of Vatican Council II. In considerable measure the ultimate success or failure of the Council will depend upon the sort of priests that seminaries will prepare for ordination during the next two or three generations. The Latin adage states:

"Talix grex qualis rex"—as the leader, so the flock. If the priestly ministers of the Christian community are equal to the challenge of the Council, the likelihood of an effective renewal of the Church at the grass-roots level is strong. Otherwise, it is slight indeed.

During the four sessions of the Council of aggiornamento virtually every aspect of the Church's life and of its relations with others was subject to long and hard scrutiny. As a result we now possess a corpus of conciliar teaching which is a clear and unambiguous summons to renewal and reform. Among the documents of the Council some stand out as veritable giants, strong in vision and mighty in their power to bring to realization the hopes of the saintly old man who first dreamed the dream of a new Pentecost in our day. But the greatest of conciliar declarations is utterly powerless unless priests in the years to come understand the message of Vatican II and are willing to spend themselves unsparingly in its implementation. That is why so much depends upon the enlightened interpretation and fulfillment of this brief Decree. Intelligence, patience, humility, faith- and good humor-must all be marshaled in the momentous and exciting cause of the renewal of priestly training. May the Lord have compassion upon the vessels of clay at his disposal and use them to his honor and glory."

Thank you so much, Frank, for teaching, directing and leading us through turbulent times. We are honored to have known you, and we love you!