

FRANK O'MALLEY

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In those days there was a lounge in the tower of O'Shaughnessy Hall to which the faculty repaired for that wrangling gossip that has always provided the ambience of academe. Coffee and rolls were available in the morning and that is where I would see him. Impeccably dressed, always standing, in one hand were his classnotes, in the other, slightly shaking, his cup of coffee. Frank O'Malley, teacher, already a Notre Dame legend when I joined the faculty. I find it hard to believe that he was, not yet fifty, actually forty-six. He seemed affably aloof, but it was really shyness. I don't think I would have been surprised to be told he was destined to become a symbol transcending the South Bend campus. A symbol of many things.

Of the vitality of the pre-conciliar Church.

Of the primacy of teaching over research.

Of Catholic literature as a unique fusion of the temporal and eternal.

He was born in 1909 and came to Notre Dame in 1928 and that is where he stayed, living on campus until his death in May, 1974, on the eve of retirement. His Master's dissertation was on Archbishop Lamy of Sante

Fe in relation to Willa Cather's novel. He never took a doctorate. He became a teacher and his subject was literature, particularly Catholic literature.

It is, alas, largely forgotten how lively were the 1930s and '40s and '50s in the American Church. There was talk of the Catholic cultural renaissance, already under way in Europe and come to us via Jacques Maritain, Chesterton, Yves Simon and Waldemar Gurian. Gurian, along with O'Malley, founded *The Review of Politics*, and it is in the Review that much of the meager output of O'Malley can be found. His vision of Catholic culture was one in which faith and reason, mind and imagination, thought and life, formed a single whole. Religious knowledge, he insisted, is the highest kind of knowledge. And literature is as much an expression of it as philosophy and theology.

Such knowledge is a corrective of the status quo. O'Malley was the kind of Catholic who did not long for entry into the secular world; he wanted that world transformed. A Catholic education was an opportunity to acquire the culture necessary to redeem the time. He introduced generations of Notre Dame students to Christopher Dawson, Etienne Gilson, Henri de Lubac, Soloviev, Robert Hugh Benson, Peter Wust, Berdyaev, Romano Guardini, Josef Pieper, along with Blake, Milton, T. S. Eliot and, surprisingly, D. H. Lawrence. Catholic novelists like Waugh, Mauriac, Greene, Bloy, Bernanos, Peguy and Sigrid Undset were part of

his repertoire. He loved Gerard Manly Hopkins and his own poetry is imitative, not very successfully, of the Jesuit poet. Newman, Aquinas, Maritain, Claudel -- a whole Catholic world was opened to his students, not as lore, not as something to chatter about, but as addressing the deep and persistent questions to which every life is an answer.

O'Mally was unclubbable, both locally and beyond the campus. One is almost surprised to learn that he attended a meeting of the Renascence Society. Maritain introduced Frank to the University of Chicago, to Hutchins and Adler, and to the Committee on Social Thought. He was a correspondent of Hugh Taylor who nearly convinced O'Malley to come to Princeton and get his doctorate. He stayed where he was.

O'Malley figures in most Notre Dame memoirs, those of Ed Fischer, Tom Stritch, Father Hesburgh, and in 1992 a symposium on him was part of the sesquicentennial celebration of the founding of the university.. But O'Malley had not liked the way Notre Dame was moving in his life time. Not long ago a sign went up at the university entrances. Notre Dame, A National Catholic Research University. O'Malley would have wept. As he would have wept at the voiding of the classrooms of the eager, cultivated and celebratory approach toward Catholicism that characterized his own teaching.

He had a recurrent dream, aided and abetted by former students, of a new institution, Christ College. John Meaney's *O'Malley of Notre Dame*

gives an extended account of it. There was a California possibility, another in Ohio, but it remained only a dream. The thought of Frank O'Malley leaving Notre Dame was more than O'Malley himself could bear. The wider scene provided the contrast for his dream college.

[It would differ] especially from the educational establishments of this day, structures without souls, drained of the vital sap of fundamental intuitions and, in the suppression of all determinate differences of intellectual position or at least of the actual relevance of such differences, rendered purposeless, meaningless, occasions at best of a certain dubious social conditioning.

How ironic that it is such soul-less institutions, grown worse, that Catholic universities now seek to imitate.

Like most great teachers, O'Malley was not an original thinker. He was a retailer of the ideas and images and metaphors of others. His writings echo with Maritain and Dawson and Pieper and all the authors he loved and made his students love. Tom Stritch has pointed out that, while O'Malley loved wit and humor, these were not traits of his.

His teaching was protreptic, aimed not merely at mastery of a subject, but at stirring the soul to a sense of its ultimate vocation. Stritch called him a prophet. He was certainly trying to get young people to see the awesome possibilities in themselves, chiefly the possibility of sanctity.

I would call him a dinosaur, but dinosaurs are popular now.

O'Malley's was a singular voice in his own time. He would seem completely alien now to careerist Catholic academics and administrators willing to deal away almost anything for a little recognition from the human soul's natural enemies. But what he celebrated remains, those poets and philosophers and novelists whose work, like his, was permeated with the faith. They were all in their way pilgrims of the absolute.

Here are a few lines from Ernest Sandeen's valedictory poem to Frank O'Malley.

*You christened writers of indiscreetly
visionary words, the baptized
and unbaptized alike, while awed
multitudes of the young looked on.*

*You gossiped four decades of rich and poor men's
sons showing them where the soul is.
And each day you knotted them thongs to whip
the money-changers from the temple door.*

Frank had his flaws. He drank too much. And he was a Democrat, for all his iconoclasm a partisan who at least during elections seemed to think politics matters.. He lies now in the community cemetery at Notre Dame but on the campus his memory has thinned, as wispy as the smoke from his

interminable cigarette. He lives on in his students, whose tributes to him
bring a catch to the throat. Let Ernie Sandeen speak our farewell.

*But we salute you now as then
with love, across no greater distance
than you always kept, immaculate
and warm, between yourself and us.*