

Our Man in Heaven: A Tribute to Dick Ryan

Catholicism lost one of its most ardent and devout defenders on May 3rd, the day Dick Ryan went home to God, and no one in Catholic publishing will ever be quite as at home in this world without him in it.

A veteran journalist of fierce heart and ferocious intelligence, his every line crackled on the page. If, in Dick's estimation, someone was messing up God's plan for the kingdom, you could count on the fact that he'd declare open season. No one was off limits and there were no prisoners taken. Thus, writing on the eve of the last Presidential election, Dick filed a column entitled, "The President and Prayer" in which he wrote, "It is unsettling enough that George Bush constantly talks to Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld, but it is far more troubling that he claims to converse regularly with his pal, Jesus." Never one to play favorites, Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia took it on the chin from Ryan too, when he was awarded the City Club's Citadel of Free Speech Award in Cleveland, Ohio. "Before the ceremony," Dick noted, "old Tony did what all free speech crusaders do when he banned all broadcast media from the event and later didn't take any questions from reporters."

And God and the saints help you if you happened to be a member of the Catholic hierarchy and corrupt in any way, because Dick Ryan took on the excesses of the Catholic clergy like a house afire. When Bishop William Murphy of Rockville Center evicted a group of nuns from their home in order to build himself "a palace" complete with crystal chandeliers and a temperature controlled wine cabinet, he earned himself a special place in Dick's sites. When Murphy wrote a column in Long Island Catholic in which he pronounced that, "stewardship invites us to give back to God by taking stock of what he has given us and sharing it with others," Dick shot back, "I guess this means that Long Island's homeless will now be regular guests at his palace....He's probably even going to invite those 500 mentally ill people who have been wandering around ever since Catholic Charities cut off services to them for 'budgetary reasons.'"

Enraged at the growing number of Catholic chanceries hiring high-priced public relations firms to speak for them, Dick wrote, "I understand there's a push on among some bishops who hired high-powered public relations gurus to begin substituting public relations courses in the seminaries for canon law studies. In other words, skip the doctor's degree in Theology and go for the spin doctorate."

It should go without saying that Dick was not one to suffer fools gladly. When Jesuit Cardinal Avery Dulles declared the celibate life superior to marriage and that "salvation cannot be found in any other name than Jesus," in a speech at Georgetown University several years back, Dick was quick to remark, "I think the red cap is a tad tight on his head. Probably slipped his mind that Jesus was a Jew."

Dick's critics complained that he was "bitter," but there wasn't an ounce of bitterness in him. What drove Dick Ryan was righteous anger, and for all of his ascerbic lines, he was one of the staunchest defenders of the faith to ever come down the pike. If he had no patience for clergy who had fallen down the slippery slope of secularism, it was because, as St. John Chrysostom wrote, "whoever is not angry when there is cause for anger, sins." Whatever the excesses, and no matter the degree of corruption, Dick Ryan cut right through it with one purpose only: to take you back to Jesus every time. Bless him.

In his last book, *Holy Human: Stories of Extraordinary Catholics*, Dick finessed the church's current canonization requirements in favor of looking at some modern day saints living among us. In one of his most eloquent columns, "The Next Mother Teresa: American and Married," Dick explained his stance on sainthood:

Throughout history, the saints were invariably ascetic, celibate, penitential, blindly obedient to their bishops and, as they prayerfully insisted, not part of this world. But the saints of the 21st century will be activist, questioning, practical, very much a part of their hurly-burly world and just as prayerful, idealistic and holy as any of those whose statues adorn every Catholic Church....They will come, anonymous and obscure, from groups like Voice of the Faithful who, while fiercely loyal to the Church in a time of turmoil, have abandoned the old image of pray-pay-and-obey Catholics and have also registered, in no uncertain terms, their profound concern about some of the Church's leadership and where it is taking them.

If the scandal of child abuse in the Church was the match that lit the fires of awareness and sudden, passionate involvement by countless Catholics, many of them are also perplexed and angered by other "scandals" that include poor housing, immigration laws, the prison system, war, health care and the global cancer of poverty. And it is some of these issues that are already stirring the juices of all those who have all the impulses of a Mother Teresa, but who will perhaps send them soaring with the kind of down-to-earth determination and directness that might be too crude and American for an Assisi or a Therese of Lisieux.

The next generation of saints will exhilarate their Church with a new and earthier holiness.

Dick Ryan, in all his heartfelt and genuine humility, would be the last to agree that he possessed every quality of sainthood he ever wrote about. But he possessed them in spades. His pen was holy and his cause was just. And he did it all while raising a fine family of six with his wonderful wife Pat, whom he adored. Dick Ryan was a saint indeed while he walked among us, simple as you please, with his "just plain folks", no nonsense approach and his great good heart. Bishop Murphy, and every other member of the hierarchy who thinks they can betray the true message of Jesus had better take note: You only thought you had problems when Dick was still on earth. Now, Dick Ryan is a saint in Heaven. And he's perfect. And, as Dick might have put it himself, "Whaddya want to make a bet that God will give him a few new assignments?"