

Preface

Don Briel and the Catholic Studies Project

AS 2017 MARKED the twentieth anniversary of *Logos*, 2018 marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of Catholic Studies at St. Thomas. We look forward to the fall celebration, a gala on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception with keynote speaker Bishop Robert Barron; we also look back to the recent death of Don Briel, the truly beloved founder and architect of this program, on February 15 of this year, from two forms of acute leukemia that were only diagnosed in mid-January.

Two lines come to mind when thinking about Briel's death. "Precious in the sight of the Lord," we read in Psalm 116:15, "is the death of his saints." Don's son Matthew, a theologian at Assumption College, wrote to me after his father's death that though it was a difficult time, it was nevertheless a profoundly grace-filled time. As is sometimes the case with brilliant minds, Don had a complex and sometimes difficult persona. If Don is not a canonized saint, he is certainly, as other translations put it, one of the "faithful ones." The second is the claim of the early North African Christian writer Tertullian, that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church. Again, though not a martyr in the more technical sense of one who

suffers violent death on account of his faith, Don was, in the more basic sense of the original Greek term, a most powerful “witness” to the power of Christ even as he was leaving this world in what many considered a tragic fashion. In an interview several weeks before his death, Don revealed that both a hospital nurse and a physician were somewhat surprised by how he handled his diagnosis and utterly bleak prognosis—one month to live. What they had seen in his response was what is true “for any Christian, of course,” that “our confidence is not in this world but the world into which we are invited in Christ, and the great hope that gives us in the face of the prospect of death.”¹

This conclusion to his life was perfectly in line with the rest of it. Don was born on January 28, 1947, in Ventura, California. His father, a manager for Sears Roebuck, and his mother, an executive secretary, moved around the West Coast, settling in Reno, Nevada, where he graduated in 1961 from St. Thomas Aquinas Elementary, an auspicious confirmatory sign for this child born on the Angelic Doctor’s feast day. Upon graduation from Reno’s Bishop Manoque High School in 1965, he entered the University of Notre Dame as the Second Vatican Council was coming to a close. In a 2014 address, given at the University of Mary for a conference celebrating the twentieth anniversary of Catholic Studies (2013) and collected together with a number of other addresses in a volume titled *Renewal of Catholic Higher Education: Essays on Catholic Studies in Honor of Don Briel*, Don reflected somewhat wistfully on both the dynamism of that time and the signs of danger ahead. Notre Dame in the late 1960s possessed “a rich remnant of Catholic culture”:

Priests and brothers of the Congregation of the Holy Cross in habit present throughout the university, not merely as faculty and administrators but also as rectors in residence halls; daily Mass not only in Sacred Heart Church but also in each hall chapel; the symbols of faith everywhere, the grotto, the statue of Edward the Confessor outside my bedroom win-

dow, the log chapel, statues of the Sacred Heart and [Notre Dame's founder] Edward Sorin, shrines, the mosaic of Christ on the face of the new library; eight required courses in both theology and philosophy including courses in Scripture, morality, metaphysics, logic, and ethics; Moreau Seminary; and an attentiveness to issues of Catholic thought and culture which pervaded nearly every course, including those taught by non-Catholic faculty. This was true in courses in literature, in which I first encountered serious figures such as John Donne, Paul Claudel, Georges Bernanos, Richard Crashaw, Evelyn Waugh, Francois Mauriac, and Romano Guardini; in history, in which I first grasped the importance of the Catholic foundations of Western culture; and even in a course on Jewish thought taught by a local Reform rabbi.²

During these arcadian years studying with luminaries such as Frank O'Malley (literature), Joseph Evans (philosophy), and James T. Burtchaell (theology), Briel nevertheless sensed that the cultural and intellectual confidence of Catholic culture was quickly dissipating and a greater confidence in political and social activism was taking root. It wasn't that Don was himself averse to political activism, having traveled in Nebraska and Indiana with Bobby Kennedy's presidential campaign in 1968. But in Daniel Patrick Moynihan's commencement speech at his own graduation, Don heard what seemed to him to be a primary diagnosis not only of the modern academy, but of the Church and the world: that liberal societies often substituted political and social process for the substance of tradition, authority, virtue, and even the divine. Moynihan claimed what was happening was "a religious crisis of a large number of intensely moral, even Godly people who no longer hope for God."³ Briel connected this message to the changes that were taking place at Notre Dame, where Notre Dame had replaced religion courses with offerings "in the emerging field of academic theology," by which "it implicitly distanced itself from the task of the moral and religious formation of its students."⁴ Catholic theology, once considered an ecclesial vocation, was

now more often considered an academic discipline that needed to prove its worth among other disciplines in the modern university. Ironically, Catholic universities, having declared, as historian Philip Gleason put it, independence from the hierarchy in the 1967 Land O' Lakes statement, were putting a great deal of weight on theology departments to maintain their own catholicity.

Perhaps spoiling for a fight, Don did eventually enter into academic theology, earning a licentiate and then a doctorate in Catholic theology at the University of Strasbourg in France. But first he did graduate work in nineteenth- and twentieth-century history at Notre Dame and literature at Dublin's Trinity University. Having been captivated by the presence of story and verse as an undergraduate, he never really left it behind. In "A Reflection on Catholic Studies," he observed that "perhaps particularly in our own time we need the insights of poets, and not only the great Catholic poets of the past—Prudentius, Dante, Hopkins, Rimbaud, Eliot, and Stevens—but also contemporary poets."⁵ As his good friend George Weigel recalled, one forty-minute conversation shortly after his dim prognosis revolved around which single-malt scotch to try before crossing the Jordan (he settled on Lagavulin) and what novel he should reread (Weigel suggested Waugh's *Helena*).⁶ It is no surprise, then, that the boy born under the liturgical sign of Aquinas, would pursue for his doctoral thesis a dissertation on John Henry Newman and fellow Oxford Movement member Isaac Williams. In Newman, one of the greatest stylists in English (Don loved to cite T. S. Eliot's claim that Lancelot Andrewes and Newman were the greatest preachers the English language had known), Briel saw a prophet who understood what ailed the modern university and world—the fragmentation of knowledge and society that happened when men forgot God, left behind wisdom, and tried to replace them with specialization and technique.

After short teaching stints at the University of San Francisco and St. Mary of the Plains in Kansas, Briel began teaching at the then College of St. Thomas in 1981. In 1990 he was appointed the first lay chair of the theology department, a position he filled until 1999.

During his time in the theology department Don saw the need for bringing to university life the kind of integrated educational experience that was now rarely found in universities, Catholic or not. After experimenting with some programs such as “Perspectives,” which paired up readings in philosophy, literature, and theology, Briel and other colleagues discerned the need for something different that would allow a new kind of interdisciplinary study, which would respond to the highly specialized modern university. Inspired by John Henry Newman’s *Idea of a University*, Christopher Dawson’s educational focus on two millennia of Catholic culture, and Frank O’Malley’s own humanistic teaching, he proposed a program that would allow both faculty and students to set up the conditions for an integrated Catholic approach to education. That program, begun along with professors from theology, philosophy, and English, and initiated in the 1993–94 academic year, was Catholic Studies.

Don’s gift for vision was always accompanied by an unusual strength in administration. By beginning an interdisciplinary program, he was able to begin without funding since the professors were drawn from already existing departments. The courses laid out then, still offered today, were broad-based looks at and through the Catholic intellectual tradition: Catholic Vision, the Catholic Literary Tradition, and Faith and Doubt. And while there were general goals for all the courses offered, Don was not an obsessive about the minutiae of faculty identity or curriculum. His own view, often stated, was that if one puts together a faculty possessing a concern for the integration of faith and reason, a belief in the unity of knowledge, and a conviction of the importance of the Church’s teaching and the riches of her cultural heritage, it doesn’t really matter what disciplines or specializations the professors come from or whether they teach from the exact same texts. The goal was to “embody that incarnational principle not primarily in the comprehensive claims of a curriculum but rather in a communion of persons disclosed in the program’s faculty, in their mutual relations and disputations, in their friendship.”⁷

Don understood that this goal of an intellectual and spiritual communion of persons would need a more solid institutional structure to secure the development of the university and college principles, integral and complementary aspects of a true university education developed by Newman in his *Idea of a University*. The university principle, found particularly in the lecture hall, promotes the unity of knowledge and the relationship between faith and reason, while the college principle involves both personal formation and an attention to study. Both principles require the presence of the Church to thrive.

On the side of the university principle, Don worked tirelessly to create a department of Catholic Studies that would be able to hire its own professors dedicated to its mission. That goal was secured in 2001, and shortly thereafter the Catholic Studies master's program began. Don had been working on other aspects of this university principle as well. He had seen possibilities for joint cooperation with Opus College of Business professor Robert Kennedy and theology professor Michael Naughton, who had founded the Center for Christian Social Thought in 1992. When the Center for Catholic Studies was formally established in 1996, thanks to a large gift from David and Barbara Koch, it incorporated Kennedy and Naughton's project as the John A. Ryan Institute for Catholic Social Thought. In 1997, at the suggestion of philosopher Tom Sullivan, *Logos* was launched. In 2003, Don convinced the trustees of the estate of the late president and then chancellor of St. Thomas, Msgr. Terrence Murphy, to fund the Murphy Institute for Law, Ethics, and Public Policy, an institute aimed at both the university and the public square, in conjunction with the newly restarted St. Thomas Law School.

On the side of the college principle, in 1998 Don had secured a home near the university to serve as the center's headquarters and provide an actual physical place for students and faculty to connect and congregate. And, perhaps most important, in 1998 the Rome program, with an affiliation with the Angelicum (the pontifical Dominican university), began. "It was important to us,"

Don observed, “that we create not merely another American study-abroad program in Rome but that we instead create a truly Catholic community of conviction.”⁸ That program, in which students get a true sense of the catholicity of the Church, has almost always been cited as the most powerful part of students’ experience in Catholic Studies. Don didn’t merely want that community to be relegated to a principle of “when in Rome,” however, and residential men’s and women’s floors at St. Thomas were created in 2004 and 2005, and houses were purchased for Catholic Studies men and women to live in intentional communities of prayer, study, and fellowship.

There are many more aspects to the project that is Catholic Studies, and in all of them Don was involved either by direction, administration, inspiration, fund-raising, support, or all of the above. By the time he retired in 2014 and took up a new position as the Blessed John Henry Newman Chair in Liberal Arts at the University of Mary in North Dakota, the Catholic Studies project had not only flowered at St. Thomas, but had inspired similar projects all over the country—including at the University of Mary, which not only started its own Catholic Studies program but also a satellite program in conjunction with Arizona State University. Indeed, it was Don’s conviction that in many ways the integrative project of Catholic Studies had an even brighter future on the large public university campuses where the vast majority of American Catholic undergrads were attending school. Don was instrumental in advising faculty not only at Catholic institutions such as Seton Hall and John Carroll University but also the very successful Newman Institute for Catholic Thought and Culture at the University of Nebraska. Don’s vision of Catholic Studies was that it could serve as a “creative minority . . . an intentional community of students and faculty seeking to realize an organic intellectual, and human formation within the broader work of the university that focuses on the abstract and theoretical claims of the various disciplines.”⁹

Weigel’s claim that Don’s founding of the Catholic Studies program was—along with John Tracy Ellis’s 1955 article, “American

Catholics and the Intellectual Life,” and the 1967 Land O’ Lakes statement, “The Idea of a Catholic University”—one of three “seminal moments” in the history of Catholic higher education after World War II is probably not hyperbole.¹⁰ David Delio, S. E. Canizaro Professor of Theology at Holy Cross University in New Orleans, who worked with Briel on several initiatives in the last year of his life, told me, “There are few Catholic initiatives of any interest in this country that don’t have Don’s fingerprints on them.”

It is perhaps because of Don’s generosity with others and his attention to building networks of scholars, donors, and students that his own academic career was not marked by the kind of long publishing record that the contemporary university rewards. In a different spin on the university-college distinction outlined by Newman, the poet John Ciardi once said that a university “is what a college becomes when the faculty loses interest in students.” Don did write some very important articles, mostly dealing with the needs of Catholic higher education and how they could be met, and, importantly, he edited the Catholic University of America Press collected works of Christopher Dawson, but his real interest was not in these accomplishments but in his students. Personally, I often marveled at how many times I walked by his office and saw students sitting with him and talking. Don not only continued to teach regular classes but also took on independent study courses with students, and was frequently requested as a reader for many master’s essays, dissertations, and the like. Regular faculty members know both how much time these courses require and how little financial remuneration they yield. Yet Don was happy to do them and was loved for them.

I was never a student of Don’s, so I do not know what he was like in the classroom. Like those of my late teacher Cardinal Avery Dulles, Don’s public lectures struck me as intellectually brilliant but a little dull to hear. It was love of the man and the knowledge that he was saying important things that kept you in your seat. But I have met countless former students who have told me how he changed their lives simply by reading important passages of Dawson

or Newman and then commenting on them in a way that opened up the drama of salvation history or the development of doctrine. I doubt that the effects claimed were caused by some drastically different persona in the classroom. Instead, I suspect that the miraculous quality of his teaching was more a function of the fact that students who listened knew he was delivering the goods—and he showed that he meant it by welcoming them into his office to talk out their problems, intellectual, spiritual, or vocational.

What students saw in Don was a wise father. Briel was not sentimental, nor did he have any populist edge, though pictures of him with his children indicate that as a young father he was not averse to putting on a snowsuit and sledding. And he admitted to a few that one of his first real jobs was waiting tables in lederhosen at a German restaurant. At his wake, his good friend Fr. Wilson Miscamble, CSC, told me that while at a conference Don once gazed at him in horror when he described a particular blue collar steakhouse he said he had visited in St. Paul. Don was single-malt scotch, champagne, and high art. Students at St. Thomas in the late 2000s often referred to him as “James Bond,” by which they certainly did not mean the rather cartoonish Roger Moore version. He thought it gauche to keep pictures of himself in his own house; how he must have suffered internally years ago when St. Thomas used his picture to advertise on buses.

Nor did his brows remain merely high, but had quite a bit of arch in their routine. His suffering of fools was no glad act and he was famous for what many called his “tersely worded emails.” He battled faculty members and administrators with courage and relentlessness, often doing what is so difficult for parents and managers alike to do: say no—and keep saying no. Msgr. James Shea spoke at his funeral Mass about Don’s use of the word “mediocre” and how it designated “‘small-mindedness,’ a willingness to be occupied with unworthy pursuits that did not speak of the high destiny of humans.”¹¹ But Don could also use the word to mean bad work, too, a failure to really do the job. When I heard him say, “That’s essentially correct,” I knew that the details had been botched in some way.

Tough. Relentlessly demanding. Cultured. But also human. Don's lectures might have been dryly delivered, but he could be wickedly funny, especially when he enjoyed a good gossip about Church and university. But though he was aware of the failings and generally skeptical of many actors in both, he never let realism turn to cynicism. What he had communicated to students and colleagues alike was that dismay at the human side of the Church did not mean a loss of love for the Church as she stands. He instilled hope because he had a faith in Christ that conquered the often depressing sights that are presented to us in the Church and world by giving a vision of a true Catholic education and the Providence that guides it. Many former students wrote to me in his final weeks asking if they could come and visit him, wanting to thank him for what they had done for him. Many did, some coming from different states and even different countries. Dianne Johnson, a nurse and alumna of the Catholic Studies master's program who has been very active in Curatio, an organization designed to spiritually and intellectually support Catholic health-care professionals, wrote to me to let her know if he rallied so she could visit and thank him in person. "Perhaps that is selfish on my behalf but seriously he has had a huge impact on my thinking and gave me the courage to keep going with Curatio. What a gift he has given us! I don't think folks understand how incredible one feels knowing and connecting the truth everywhere one looks. Catholic Studies does that." This feeling she describes is exactly what Don thought Catholic Studies should produce: what Augustine called *gaudium in veritate*, or "joy in the truth."

Don may have been born under the sign of Thomas Aquinas, but in God's providence he died under the sign of his personal patron. Surrounded by his children and some close friends, Briel died on the Thursday after Ash Wednesday, the day on which Roman pilgrims celebrated the station Church of San Giorgio in Velabro, the titular church of Briel's beloved Cardinal Newman. Like Newman, who said that divine Providence was the "one momentous doctrine entering into my reasoning" that explained it all, Don always

attributed the success of Catholic Studies to God, whose project it really was. We who remain do so as well, thanking Providence for Don's work and asking for prayers to continue it with his prayers as well as his inspiration. *Requiescat in pace.*

Our first article in this issue is the last public lecture by **Don J. Briel**, given at Catholic University of America in November 2017 and titled "**Looking Back at Newman.**" In the fiftieth anniversary year of the Land O' Lakes statement, Briel looks back at a precursor to it, a 1962 *Commonweal* essay in which Fr. Theodore Hesburgh, one of Land O' Lakes's architects, had himself looked back at Newman's *Idea of a University* and found it wanting. Briel sees the good in the essay but also punctures some of the naïveté that permeated Hesburgh's take. He then reflects on Newman's thought himself and identifies areas where the contemporary Catholic university needs to rethink its vision, most particularly in recovering those concepts of the university and collegiate principles.

I suggest that the only way in which we might hope to renew the Catholic university, to make Catholicism "perceptibly present and effectively operative" within it, would be to recover both the work of the College and its complex relation to the Church. For the College to realize this task of formation within a more diverse modern University its students and faculty would need voluntarily to subscribe to the deepest ecclesial and spiritual commitments that alone would make possible the integrative work of lay theology in forming the habit of mind on which Newman insisted.

Jason Morgan's "Catholic Critiques of Statism in Interwar Japan: Minoda Muneki, Suehiro Izutarō, and Tanaka Kōtarō" takes us back to arguments that took place in pre-World War II Japan about the nature of law and the state. With some generous extracts of the arguments, Morgan shows how both traditional Japanese concepts of the *kokutai* or "national essence," as argued by

Minoda, and more Western-influenced notions of the state, advanced by Suehiro, a Tokyo law professor borrowing from American pragmatism and the theories of Austrian thinker Eugen Ehrlich, ended up similarly giving all authority to the state. In their midst was the Catholic political philosopher Tanaka, who argued on the basis of a view of the world in which Caesars, Roman or Japanese, are not above the natural law or God. “For Minoda, the state was the ontological ground of being and the epistemological filter of experience. Suehiro, likewise, although not an overt proponent of the *kokutai*, nevertheless backed into statism as a way to overcome the social chaos engendered by Ehrlichian social pluralism in a time of global crisis. Against both, Tanaka argued in opposition to the primacy of the state and in favor of the natural law.” Tanaka lost the debate in the 1930s, but the account of his arguments with traditional and contemporary state-worship will be important until the last trumpet is sounded.

D. Marcel deCoste’s “Contested Confessions: The Sins of the Press and Evelyn Waugh’s False Penance in *The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold*” reads Waugh’s classic novelistic account of his episode of drug-induced insanity in a way that shows that #fakenews has been, like the poor, always with us. DeCoste’s argument, supported by a rigorous examination of both the text and Waugh’s own biography, is that Waugh was not, as many supposed him to be, revealing himself for the fool that the press had depicted him. Instead, he was engaging in a sort of literary judo by which he would show how easily they were able to dupe themselves and others about Waugh, and especially his Catholic faith, on the flimsiest of evidence: “What the book exposes, then, is not the penitent-author’s grievous faults, but an author’s contest with his critics, and what it seeks, by its victory, to establish, is the falseness of those critics’ stock formulation and reprobation of Waugh’s sins.” If the book is “confessional,” DeCoste concludes, it confesses not to Waugh’s purported sins and follies, but “proffers a confession of Waugh’s own Catholic faith to stand as a final rebuttal to all such accusations.”

Philip Irving Mitchell's "Civilizational Sickness and the Suspended Middle: R. G. Collingwood, Christopher Dawson, and Historical Judgment" examines the two famous Christian philosophers of history in light of the German Jesuit Erich Przywara's notion of a "'suspended middle,' a measurement of existence both in and beyond history, that is, one that gives space mutually to universal truths and to historical particulars" and that helped shape their moral judgments as well. Their views were very close but they remained uneasy, given Dawson's leaning toward "general judgments" and Collingwood's toward "historical givenness." Yet together they give a good description of what is needed for a truly incarnational view of history.

For Collingwood, the Christian faith was and is at the core of a set of centuries-old historically developed commitments, and these could not easily be jettisoned without also losing the will and imagination that uphold the body politic. Unless others were trained to take these up, they could be lost and leave an imaginative and social vacuum in their wake. For Dawson, however, unless these commitments were based in suprahistorical reality, the long-term decline of a desacralized civilization would be tragic but not the end of the story. Christianity was embodied in culture, but it also was above culture, and its divine work would go forward regardless.

Mary Frances McKenna's "The Promise of Enlightenment and the Incalculability of Freedom: A Consideration of Horkheimer and Adorno's Critique of Enlightenment in Relation to Ratzinger's Notion of Freedom" shows how secular thinkers can see the weakness in modern views of human nature, but they cannot easily provide a satisfying account of it. While Horkheimer and Adorno rightly assess many Enlightenment views of freedom and solidarity as tending to reduce the world around us to simply another object to use—and thus simply a tool in the hands of powers-that-be or wish-to-be to squash others' freedom and eliminate solidarity—

McKenna argues that they could not see their way out of the impasse. She proposes Joseph Ratzinger's theologically inspired thought as a corrective and a way to salvage what was right in the Enlightenment project. Ratzinger's emphasis on the necessary connection between freedom and truth is the first step: "Love is the additional ingredient that transforms being-thought into a vibrant, creative space of freedom that is being for, from, and with—in the freedom of love. Freedom is not ultimately power. Freedom in love is a freedom of relatedness where the individual of community can be transformed into the person of communion."

David Paul Deavel

Editor

Notes

1. Interview with Maria Wiering, "Told He Has Not Long to Live, Catholic Studies Founder Don Briel Reflects on Dying Well," *Catholic Spirit*, February 13, 2018, <http://thecatholicspirit.com/uncategorized/told-not-long-live-catholic-studies-founder-don-briel-reflects-dying-well/>.
2. Don J. Briel, "A Reflection on Catholic Studies," in *Renewal of Catholic Higher Education: Essays in Honor of Don Briel*, ed. Matthew Gerlach (Bismarck, ND: University of Mary, 2017), 21–39, at 22.
3. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, "Politics as the Art of the Impossible," in *Go Forth and Do Good: Memorable Notre Dame Commencement Addresses*, ed. Wilson D. Miscamble, CSC (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003), 187. Cited in Briel, "A Reflection on Catholic Studies," 23.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*, 31.
6. George Weigel, "Death With Real Dignity" *National Review Online*, February 16, 2018, http://www.nationalreview.com/article/456496/don-briel-death-remarkable-last-days_.
7. Briel, "A Reflection on Catholic Studies," 32.
8. *Ibid.*, 33.
9. *Ibid.*, 34.
10. George Weigel, "Homage to Don Briel," *First Things Web Exclusives*, January 24, 2018, <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2018/01/homage-to-don-briel>.
11. Msgr. James Shea, "Homily for the Funeral Mass of Dr. Don J. Briel," available at https://www.umary.edu/_resources/pdfs/Funeral-Homily-Don-Briel.pdf.