

# CATHOLIC COURIER

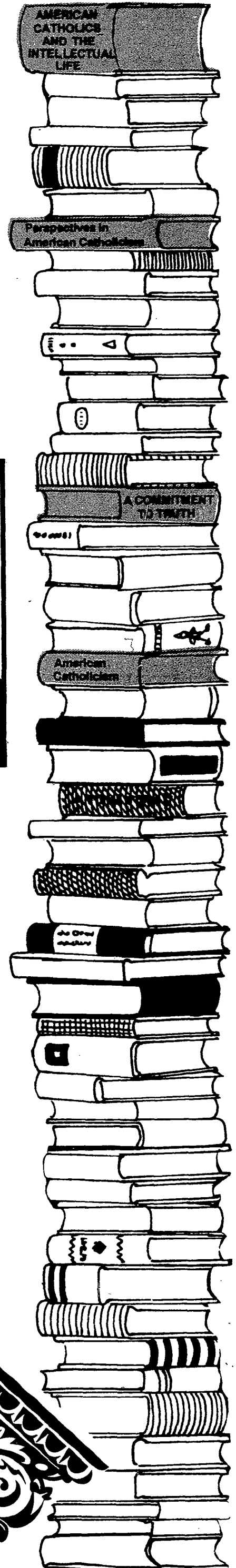
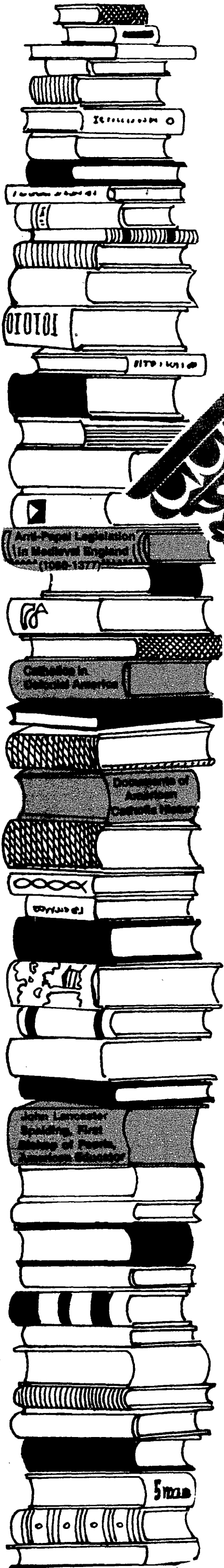
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Monsignor John Tracy Ellis

## An Historian Remembered

### Scholar stimulated intellectual debate

Monsignor John Tracy Ellis, 87, the dean of American church historians, died in Washington D.C., on Oct. 16, 1992, leaving a legacy of exhaustive scholarship to Catholics in this country.

During that same month, Pope John Paul II addressed the Pontifical Academy of Sciences on the Galileo case. In retrospect, the pope's speech confirmed many of Monsignor Ellis' beliefs.

The church condemned Galileo in his day for holding that the Earth revolved around the sun. But only in 1984 did the church officially admit that it had erred in condemning Galileo.

The "sad misunderstanding" that there is a "fundamental opposition between science and faith" no longer exists, the pontiff told the academy last month.

The pope's gesture indirectly paid tribute to the whole of Monsignor Ellis' life. The priest would have been heartened by the pope's acknowledgment of the primacy of truth — even if that means the church must sometimes admit it has erred.

Galileo's condemnation concerned Monsignor Ellis deeply, as evidenced by his statements in "A Commitment to Truth," a 1965 address the historian gave at St. Vincent College in Pennsylvania.

"The incalculable injury done to the reputation of the Catholic Church in learned circles by the Galileo case requires no em-

phasis," the priest said, noting that anti-Catholics often used the church's stance against Galileo to emphasize the pitfalls of its authority.

Continuing on the topic, he added: "(W)hen it is a question of truth to which men have a right — to say nothing of one which they will inevitably become aware — attempts to hide it can only end in failure, and in that failure the Catholic name can only emerge tarnished and dishonored."

Associating the church's name with unvarnished truth was the primary objective of Monsignor Ellis' life. Although few lay Catholics may recognize his name, the priest's reputation is almost without parallel among Catholic historians in this

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