

Late Catholic historian helped inspire academic standards

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country, indeed, even among many U.S. Christian historians.

Monsignor Ellis was renowned not only in academic circles, but also held in esteem among the church's hierarchy, including the late Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen, bishop of Rochester from 1966-69. Monsignor Ellis served as the famed communicator's secretary during the 1920s when Sheen was a professor at Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C. The two clerics later lived together in the capital from 1939-41.

By the time of his death, the 87-year-old historian had published more than 400 works, ranging from books and essays to articles and tapes. In addition, he had received numerous honorary degrees and awards citing his unique contributions to Catholic historical scholarship in the United States.

Two works in particular marked Monsignor Ellis as a force in the church's academic circles — his biography of James Cardinal Gibbons, and his 1956 essay, "American Catholics and the Intellectual Life."

Published in 1952, the two-volume biography chronicled the life of Cardinal Gibbons — the most influential Catholic leader of his time — and his leadership of the Baltimore archdiocese from 1877 to 1921.

Prior to Monsignor Ellis' biography of the cardinal, few historians had attempted to tackle U.S. church history in such a meticulous manner.

Father Robert F. McNamara, archivist for the Rochester diocese, noted that although Monsignor Ellis was not writing a compendium of U.S. church history, he nonetheless cleared the way for future overviews by concentrating on such a major figure as Cardinal Gibbons.

"Nobody could really write a history of the total church until these main biographies were available,"



Father McNamara commented.

Those sentiments were echoed by Father Mark A. Miller, associate pastor of Church of the Good Shepherd, Henrietta, and a former graduate student of Monsignor Ellis at Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C. Father Miller compiled a bibliography of the monsignor's work for the 1985 book *Studies in Catholic History*, co-written by several historians, including Father McNamara, to honor Monsignor Ellis for his 80th birthday.

"When he was cardinal archbishop of Baltimore, Gibbons was at the center of American Catholic life," Father Miller said. "In doing the biography, Ellis also discusses many of the historical events of that period."

Indeed, his work could also be seen as valuable to any U.S. historian — Catholic and non-Catholic — since it broadly examines such diverse phenomena in U.S. church history as the impact of Irish immigration, the Civil War, labor unrest in the late 1800s, and the ebb and flow of anti-Catholic bigotry among the U.S. populace.

Rochester's own Bishop Bernard J. McQuaid surfaces on several pages of the work. Shepherd of the Rochester diocese from 1868-1909, McQuaid sometimes butted heads with the good cardinal. One incident, in particular, drew the ire of Rochester's first bishop.

During a tour of the midwestern states, a Baltimore newspaper editor praised Cardinal Gibbons to the skies in an article on his journey, according to Monsignor Ellis.

"Reports from en route indicated that the beloved head of the Church in America has been everywhere received with the strongest tokens of affectionate respect and esteem by all classes of citizens without regard to creed."

Bishop McQuaid did not take kindly to the editor's effusive opinions, Monsignor Ellis recorded.

"Bishop McQuaid had apparently seen the editorial and he told his friend, Archbishop Corrigan, 'This everlasting

talk about head of the American church annoys me. The good little man can't see that he is making himself ridiculous. He will go so far that somebody will have to call him to order.'"

This passage points to Monsignor Ellis' lack of hesitation about bringing disagreement — even rivalry among bishops — to light. Although it might seem obvious that any historian should be unafraid of the truth, Monsignor Ellis set a new standard among Catholic historians, observers said. Prior to the publication of his work, many biographies of U.S. bishops were characterized as insipid, pious remembrances that did little justice to the men who led an often turbulent immigrant church.

Monsignor Ellis further revealed his unflinching commitment to truth in his essay on "American Catholics and the Intellectual Life," a work that received a decidedly mixed review.

The essay acknowledged that the U.S. church had to grapple with such practical problems as bigotry and poverty in its early days — factors that constricted its commitment to intellectual endeavor.

Nonetheless, by the 1950s, a church growing in affluence and power seemed to have produced little intellectual achievement or leadership worthy of the church's scholarly history in Europe, Monsignor Ellis maintained.

The essay noted that a lack of scholarship and intellectual rigor seemed to characterize many of the church's members, and even its colleges and universities.

"An additional point which should find place in an investigation of this kind is the absence of a love of scholarship for its own sake among American Catholics, and that even among too large a number of Catholics who are engaged in higher education," Monsignor Ellis asserted. "It might be described as the absence of a sense of dedication to an intellectual apostolate."

Father Thomas J. Shelley, a church historian and professor at St. Joseph's Seminary in Yonkers, reflected on the nationwide stir created when those

words appeared — and reappeared — in academic journals.

"A lot of Catholic scholars didn't like it because they accused him of washing dirty linen in public," Father Shelley told the *Catholic Courier* in a telephone interview.

Father McNamara recalled that the essay "struck me as a very honest statement, and one which I felt could be verified."

The diocesan archivist remembered Monsignor Ellis' criticism of the proliferation across the country of small Catholic undergraduate and graduate colleges founded by religious orders. Instead of dispersing its intellectual and monetary sources everywhere, the church should have concentrated on developing fewer universities and colleges to produce a superior intellectual product, Monsignor Ellis asserted.

"There are those who don't like to see Catholics criticize the church," Father McNamara said. "But I think that those who were really acquainted with Catholic academe could see how valid his criticisms were."

Monsignor Ellis' essay did stir Catholic universities and colleges to make many improvements and raise their standards, observers agreed. However, given his stringent standards — one commentator thought him "a little too idealistic" — it is doubtful anything but the consistent presence of Catholic institutions among the top universities and colleges of the nation would have satisfied the diligent historian.

Whatever Monsignor Ellis' effect on Catholic academia, Father McNamara — who hosted Monsignor Ellis many years ago on a visit to St. Bernard's Seminary in Rochester — noted that the historian did much to inspire his own efforts, including his 1968 history of the Rochester diocese.

"I think that I should say that whatever I have accomplished as a writer, however minor in importance, I must attribute in all gratitude to Theodore Maynard, my teacher at Georgetown, and John Ellis," Father McNamara said.

@bituaries

Sister Joseph of the Infant Jesus, OCD, at 86

PITTSFORD — Mass of Christian Burial was celebrated for Sister Joseph of the Infant Jesus, OCD, on Nov. 19, 1992, at the Carmelite Monastery, 1931 W. Jefferson Road.

Sister Joseph died on Tuesday, Nov. 17. She was 86.

Born June 8, 1906, in Lawrence, Mass., the former Veronica Collins attended Catholic schools in that city. She earned her nursing degree from St. Elizabeth Hospital in Boston.

While working as a nurse, she became attracted to a vocation as a Carmelite sister and contacted the Carmelite monastery in Roxbury, Mass. In 1931, she was sent to the Rochester

monastery, which had been established in 1930, and was accepted as the community's first novice. She made her final profession on June 23, 1933.

In addition to other ministries, Sister Joseph ran the print shop for many years. She produced prayer cards to help raise money for the monastery until ill health forced her to stop.

Sister Joseph was predeceased by her parents, Dennis and Ellen Collins, and by seven brothers and sisters. She is survived by a number of nieces, nephews and cousins, including Monsignor J. Bernard Caverly of St. Petersburg, Fla., who celebrated the Mass of Christian Burial.

Sister Lawrence Schrank, SSJ, office worker

PITTSFORD — Sister Lawrence Schrank, SSJ, died Tuesday, Oct. 27, 1992, at the St. Joseph Convent Infirmary 4095 East Ave. She was 85.

A native Rochesterian, Sister Lawrence entered the Sisters of St. Joseph in 1938 from St. Joseph's Parish.

She served as a supervisor at St. Mary's Boys' Home and then as switchboard operator at St. Joseph's Villa and St. Ann's Home. She also directed the altar-bread department at the SSJ motherhouse for 12 years.

In 1965, Sister Lawrence became an office assistant at St. Joseph's Hospital in Elmira. She retired in 1986 and remained in Elmira until declining health forced her to move to the congregation's infirmary in Rochester.

Sister Lawrence is survived by a cousin, Mary O'Brien of Rochester.

Her funeral Mass was celebrated on Oct. 30, 1992, in the motherhouse's Chapel of the Sisters.

Burial was at Holy Sepulchre Cemetery.

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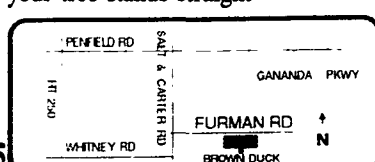
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