

Philosopher adds faith to mysteries

'Dowling' seeks mercy, justice

By Lee Strong
Senior staff writer

If not for a fictional rabbi, mystery fans might not have had Father Dowling to help keep them entertained this summer.

Ralph McInerny, the University of Notre Dame philosophy professor who created the fictional priest detective, was given the idea of writing his first Father Dowling novel by his literary agent who had read some of Harry Kemelman's Rabbi David Small mysteries (*Wednesday The Rabbi Got Wet*, etc.)

McInerny, who had previously written "serious" novels about priests, acted on his agent's suggestion. The result was 1977's *Her Death of Cold*, followed by 16 other Father Dowling mysteries. The 18th installment in the series, titled *Cardinal Offense*, is due out this fall.

Although the show's producers took some liberties with the characters, McInerny's Dowling character also spawned a television program in 1989.

Meanwhile, after another suggestion from his agent, McInerny — writing under the pseudonym "Monica Quill" — produced eight mysteries featuring another religious character — namely Sister Mary Teresa Dempsey.

Under his own name he has also created a lawyer detective, Andrew Broom. The fifth book in that series, *Mom and Dad*, was published earlier this spring. And beyond the mysteries, he has written 13 other novels.

Not bad work for a serious academic who includes in his list of publications such works as *The Logic of Analogy: An Interpretation of St. Thomas; Thomism in an Age of Renewal; Studies in Analogy*; and two volumes of the *History of Western Philosophy* series. In addition to being the Michael P. Grace Professor of Medieval Studies at Notre Dame, he is director of the university's Jacques Maritain Center.

McInerny is also the editor of *The New Scholasticism* and one of the founders

and the publisher of *Crisis: A Journal of Lay Catholic Opinion*.

McInerny, who visited Rochester last weekend to deliver the commencement address at St. John Fisher College on May 21, acknowledged the difficulty in balancing his academic and popular writings.

Early in his career, McInerny seemed intent on solely pursuing the academic path. He studied at Minnesota's St. Paul Seminary, where he discovered his love of philosophy. That passion led to a doctorate from Quebec's Laval University in 1954. A year later, he began teaching at Notre Dame.

He also married Constance Kunert on Jan. 3, 1953. The couple had six children.

McInerny credits his children for returning him to an earlier dream — that of being a writer of fiction.

In the early 1960s, he began writing stories about his family for various women's magazines, using pen names to help shield his prose from his fellow academics. He began a regimen of writing four hours every night after his children went to bed. Although his offspring are now grown and on their own, the writing discipline he developed continues to help him to author about four mysteries a year.

McInerny turned to novels in 1966 after an editor working on one of his academic books commented that he liked McInerny's writing style, and queried whether he had ever tried writing a novel. His first novel, *Jolly Rogerson*, was published in 1967.

It wasn't until the Father Dowling books, however, that he reached a wider audience.

Readers of the Father Dowling stories will discover all the basic ingredients of good detective fiction. But they will also discover a view of the world that is decidedly Catholic. McInerny said he tries



Ralph McInerny (right), who gave the commencement speech at St. John Fisher College in Pittsford, poses with Dr. William L. Pickett, college president, before the May 21 graduation.

S. John Wilkin/Staff photographer

to keep that view from becoming too obtrusive, but his beliefs nonetheless do come through.

"It's fiction," McInerny said. "When you write, you inevitably are going to see things from your point of view."

Even while creating Father Dowling, however, he was careful to avoid creating an overly moralistic character, he noted.

"I was concerned people might think it was a lofty character looking down from on high, so I wanted to give him some flaws," McInerny said. "But I didn't want to make him dissolute."

Consequently, the Father Dowling of the books — unlike the character in the TV show — is a recovering alcoholic who has been assigned to a small-town parish after years of working for the Archdiocesan Marriage Court in Chicago. Dealing with annulment cases had apparently placed an emotional burden on the priest, leading him to drink but at the same time giving him a sense of human weakness.

Thus the priest, while solving crimes, is more concerned with the criminal's "personal relationship with God," and

with balancing "God's mercy and justice," McInerny acknowledged.

"But God's mercy does not necessarily absolve us from the requirements of human justice," he added.

The mystery stories also reveal McInerny's discomfort with some of what has transpired in the Catholic Church since the Second Vatican Council. For example, Sister Dempsey's congregation, the Order of Martha and Mary, has been reduced to three members, in part, as a result of Vatican II changes.

But he is careful not to go too far in expressing his views, McInerny said.

"You can't write fiction and at the same time write propaganda," he said. "Fiction makes very different requirements of the writer. Your task is to entertain the reader, not yourself."

And entertaining people has a value. "Aristotle pointed out that fiction isn't a luxury — it's an absolute necessity for human beings," McInerny said. "There has to be the imaginative, emotive, reflection on what it means to be a human being."



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