

COLUMNISTS

Writer's 'crumbs' yield a feast

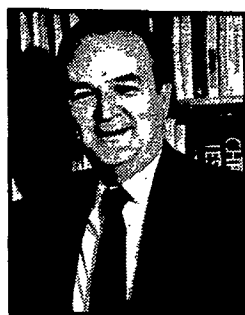
I was asked recently to recommend books for the general reader in various categories of theology, church history and spirituality. I did not have a moment's hesitation in the last category. I recommended Donald Nicholl's *Holiness*.

Although Donald Nicholl spent six years as a professor of history and religious studies at the University of California, Santa Cruz, his name is generally unknown in the United States. That's a pity, because he was one of the Catholic Church's leading spiritual writers. I say "was," because Donald Nicholl died early last month of cancer at his home in northern England. He was 73.

A tribute in the May 10 issue of *The Tablet* (London), for which he wrote more than a hundred articles over the years, described him as "one of the outstanding Catholic laymen of his generation."

I first came to know Donald Nicholl when he visited the University of Notre Dame in 1981 to interview for the position of rector of the Ecumenical Institute for Theological Research at Tantur, in Jerusalem. I was chair of Notre Dame's theology department at the time and also chair of the institute's international advisory council.

In partnership with Dorothy, his devoted wife of 50 years, Donald served as rec-



BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

essays in
theology

tor for four years, until 1985. I recall our long walks together, many through Arab neighborhoods where he was greeted like a beloved uncle, during the days of our annual board meetings at Tantur. I sensed from the outset of our relationship that if there are any mystic-saints in the world, he was surely one of them.

Donald was a holy man in the deepest meaning of the word. I've known few people with as much personal integrity, honesty or spiritual insight.

I was honored when, in 1987, he asked me to write the foreword to a new edition of his classic work, *Holiness*, originally published in the United States by Paulist Press in 1981. I repeat here a few lines from that brief introduction:

"Donald Nicholl's *Holiness*, like its author, is extraordinary for its simplicity, its

ecumenical breadth, and its balance. These are not the sort of words that fairly, or even accurately, describe so many other books on the same subject.

"One is struck by the disarming modesty which runs through the work."

In support of that observation, I quoted from the book itself: "The very act of trying to write about holiness is itself a search for holiness. It is not as though you first achieve holiness and afterwards describe it, but rather that in trying to write about it the very process of writing serves as a kind of (G)eiger counter which discloses holiness to you.

"In other words," Donald Nicholl continued, "this is meant to be a really simple, practical book in the quite straightforward sense that as a result of it, so the author hopes, a number of people will grow in holiness — an area in which practice is everything and theory is nothing."

He was also careful not to take credit for the many and varied insights he had gathered together in his remarkable work. "For many generations," he wrote, "thousands of the most gifted and exemplary human beings have been devoting all their energies of mind and body to becoming holy; on the way they have let fall many crumbs of wisdom; it is a privilege, as well as a joy, to pick up those crumbs of wis-

dom and recycle them."

Because *Holiness* spurns no valid insight into the meaning of human life and its destiny, it is a thoroughly Catholic book. And because it links the quest for sanctity and the joy it yields with self-sacrifice, it is a thoroughly Christian work.

As I acknowledged in my final paragraph, however, my foreword had "not even begun to do justice to the riches of this simple, yet profound, book. One has to taste the crumbs for oneself. They will yield a feast."

Donald Nicholl was once asked in an interview, "What do you most dread?" He answered, "To be without compassion."

About 10 years ago, after a particularly dreadful meeting he had attended, he confided to a friend his irritation that everyone at the meeting had to introduce themselves and that they all identified themselves by their jobs or professions. When it came his turn, he confessed that he really wanted to say, "My name is Donald. I am a unique manifestation of God." Indeed he was.

If you should do nothing else this summer, read Donald Nicholl's *Holiness*. It will truly "yield a feast."

...
Father McBrien is a professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame.

Humor helps us to remain balanced

If the church is to make a successful transition into the third millennium, we're all going to need to cultivate a better sense of humor. There are too many signs that we're uptight, which means we can't operate at our best.

It has been demonstrated many times that in this world, success depends on not losing your humor.

The signs of stress today are seen, for example, in the continuing loss of young priests, many of whom were the promise of the church's future. When asked why they leave, they say that they never envisioned the priesthood as they experienced it. It didn't match their expectations.

They point to long hours, and polarization between parishioners and priests and within the church at large.

They also didn't expect the lifestyle they entered, especially the living situation, which tends to be pandemonium and to lack community spirit. Though they may be surrounded by people, they



BY FATHER EUGENE HEMRICK

the
human
side

complain of loneliness.

A second sign of uptightness is seen among parishioners who are extremely conservative or extremely liberal. And we meet irate women who feel slighted by the church, people from other cultural backgrounds who complain about being left out of the Anglo mainstream, youth who see religion as old-fashioned and aged people whose wishes for the church may differ greatly from the wishes among younger people.

Other signs of tension are found in the

negative suspicions voiced whenever a new bishop is appointed; in theologians fighting with Rome; and in the wave of criticism whenever the pope writes on a topic that touches personal lives. Often these criticisms lead into a prolonged war of words.

With all of this in mind, I feel pretty confident in saying that we'd be making healthier progress if we all had a better sense of humor. Does this sound flippant? It isn't when humor is seen as the virtue it is.

Humor comes from the Latin word "umor," meaning liquid or fluid. In the Middle Ages it referred to an energy related to a bodily fluid and emotional state. This energy was believed to determine one's health and disposition.

Humor helps us to remain well-disposed to life by going with its flow as much as possible, thus it also helps us to practice kindness. Humor nudges those of us who tend to be set in our ways to loosen up when things don't add up. It

reminds us that life is filled with gaps and oddities, and to learn to live with these in order to have a life.

More often than not, something in our lifestyle is not to our liking. People misunderstand each other or slight each other. And this teaching or that teaching isn't found equally agreeable by everyone.

Humor tells us to open our eyes and see that we haven't reached heaven yet where everything will be in harmony and to our liking. Loosen up. Get into a healthier flow of life. Stop letting everything eat at you. Begin anew.

I'm not saying we should condone everything and anything. But we can seek out the lighter side of life's situations, even if we take life seriously. There is something comic about everything human.

Remember, being able to laugh helps us to be kind, and after a good laugh we find it easier to get serious in a good way.

...
Father Hemrick is director of diocesan relations at The Catholic University of America.

Women Needed for Hormone Therapy Research

As they search for the combinations of hormone replacement therapy that are both safe and effective, the Reproductive Endocrinology Unit and Menopause Center at the University of Rochester Medical Center seek women to participate in a study.

Volunteers must be healthy, post-menopausal women between the ages of 40 and 65. After a physical examination, women will be randomized to one of 8 treatment groups and receive various combinations of an FDA-approved estrogen and/or progestin, or placebo.

During this one-year study, volunteers are seen every three months. Benefits to volunteers include free Pap smears and lab tests, free mammogram, and possible relief of menopausal symptoms based on the medication(s) they receive. Compensation of \$450 is available. Women who have had a hysterectomy are not eligible.

Women interested in participating can call Wanda Rivers at 275-7891.

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