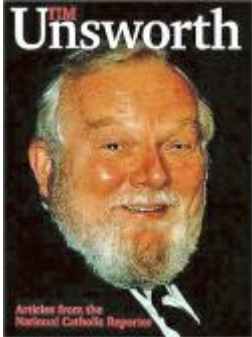


Remembering Unsworth

Thomas C. Fox | May. 22, 2009



Death spawns warm memories. So I sit before my computer today in a happy-sad place. It was one year ago, April 30, 2008, that *NCR* columnist Tim Unsworth met up with St. Peter at the Pearly Gates. I imagine the impish Unsworth soon had the old saint in stitches with his Catholic yarns. He'd be talking about old Chicago parishes: churches filled with widows, antsy children, cranky pastors and those authoritative ushers. No doubt he eventually had Peter doubled over in laughter, and when the saint was appropriately distracted, our beloved Unsworth would have made his move and darted forward. But even as he zipped through the gates I can imagine Unsworth wondering if he'd made the right choice, concerned that some friends had gone the other way. No matter, he would quickly build bonds and argue their causes from up in heaven.

There's sadness in realizing the master storyteller is no longer adding to our Catholic imaginations. He enriched them so. His was a generous spirit, always finding the good buried beneath the foibles in those he wrote about. He was rarely judgmental, never condemning. Rather, he'd poke at each of us, coaxing us to enlarge our own circles. Unsworth's faith was energized by a primordial sense of redemption -- and, along with his well-noted wit, his faith showed in his writings. His Catholicism was as it should be, founded in community, in a notion that each of us was part of something larger and all of us depended on each other. The subjects of his musings were often vulnerable and hurting people, not the kind prone to throw stones. And there was always comfort to be found in his portraits and insights, as if he was reminding us that few of us ever do get it right -- but that the best among us keep trying.

I can imagine that some relatively new *NCR* readers never had a chance to enjoy his prose. To give you a bit of his flavor and to rekindle memories in *NCR* veterans, let me share with you a few of the headlines that topped some of his *NCR* columns: "In praise of ushers out on the steps," "Indulgences out of the attic for the new millennium," "Archbishop's portable throne heavier than sin," "Dorothy's friends have their Day," "Stuck in rectory with a curmudgeon and a bishop's ghost," "Wiggle room, common sense will save church from *Ex Corde*," "No escape from news of sex scandal, even on a cruise ship."

These were all quintessential Unsworth. To mark this memorial day, here are some more Unsworth nuggets:

- "About 50 pounds ago, in 1949 ..."
- "Catholic writers are like vintage grapes. They come in bunches."

- A few weeks ago, before my recent time in the hospital, Jean and I went to Florida for a mini-vacation. We rented an economy car that looked like a venial sin compared with the yacht-sized cars favored by those little old men with peaked caps who cruise by at a steady 25 mph. The cars are polished like a pro basketball player's head with, believe it or not, cherry-scented wax.
- Only a handful of older people remain morbidly obsessed with the past. The rest have learned to distinguish between divine law and church law.
- According to a recent article in *The New York Times*, the religious right is backing out of politics largely because they cannot find a candidate who meets their litmus test. It's equally likely that even the gentle souls at Franciscan Village would not pass a bar-coding process administered by an increasingly restrictive church they love so much. But they remain placidly optimistic that the God they love even more has not left every decision in the Vatican's hands.
- Over dinner a few years ago, two wonderfully warm bishops listed the requirements for a nod from the Holy Spirit. You have to go to bishops' installations and funerals, they said. You have to write about birth control and abortion, married priests and female priests. Of course, there remains the threat of homosexuals. And don't forget about vocations and the Blessed Mother.
- I have always had a bit of trouble with that once a priest, always a priest cant. At first, it was simply that I could not spell Melchizedek, which was written under the soupy drawing of a skinny, hopped-up looking priest in the old Baltimore Catechism. He was kneeling before the cone-headed bishop who was intoning: You are a priest forever of the order of Melchizedek (Psalm 110:4 and Hebrews 5:6). The sisters who taught me didn't talk much about Melchizedek. They were into Fighting Father Duffy, who said a million aspirations a day and never got canonized because aspirations aren't really in anymore and a million is considered excessive.

Unsworth's was a large-tent Catholicism full of human weakness and no small measure of reckless joy. His ramblings painted the portrait of an attractive church, one you felt proud to be part of. His was an image of church that seems, at times, perilously absent in these divisive days of thunderous judgment.

Sante Timothy, ora pro nobis.

Tom Fox is NCR editor. He can be reached at tfox@ncronline.org.

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