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Remembering Joe

Michael Sean Winters | May. 27, 2011 Distinctly Catholic

Perhaps it is because I am an eternal optimist. Perhaps it is because I understand science and medicine very little. Perhaps it is because for twenty years I smoked like a chimney. Nonetheless, yesterday morning, when the news arrived that Joe Feuerhard had died, it took me by surprise. Perhaps I am confusing a sense of surprise with a sense of uncommon pain. The news came like a physical blow, as if I had been punched in the gut. For the next several hours, as the news spread and people called, no conversation failed to include tears. How could they not? For the real reasons I felt a sense of surprise, despite the fact that we all knew this moment was coming, and soon coming towards the end, was that life without Joe Feuerhard is, at the moment, an exceedingly painful proposition, and it is painful to exactly the degree that life was so much better with him.

Other writers and editors here at NCR worked with Joe longer than I did. They have more stories to tell, more memories to share. Joe brought me into the NCR family when he recognized the need for NCR to expand its web presence. The NCR website has become a lot like Joe: Smart, incisive, funny, small ?c? catholic in the range of interests and ideas it explores and big ?C? Catholic in its devotion to the Catholic Church. Joe found the Church endlessly fascinating, as well as often infuriating, but part of that fascination came from affection.

Joe was a liberal Catholic in the best sense of the word. He believed that the institutions that constitute modern, liberal democracies could and should be integrated into the life of the Church. He not only wanted, he helped create, a free press. He believed more democratic procedures would be a leaven in, or at least a counter-weight against, a clerical culture that is sometimes horrifyingly dysfunctional. Joe sought greater openness and transparency in the Church?s operations. He was supremely tolerant. Joe would walk further down the liberal road than I would, to be sure. I saw difficulties on that road that he thought were not rooted in fact but in fear. This, in one way or another, was at the heart of most of the conversations we had about the Church.

I saw Joe a few days before he died. We talked shop. He inquired about the articles I was working on, suggested a source for one of the stories, told me to avoid a certain angle on another story, and asked why he had not seen a first draft of a third. He was lively, although in the course of our visit, I could see that conversation was enervating for him. That however much he seemed to perk up and engage, the effort needed to speak was struggling with the energy needed to breathe.

Yesterday, Joe?s beloved wife, Becky, sent me the draft of an email he had started and was working on shortly before he lapsed into a non-responsive state. For someone struggling with the final stages of a long illness, and subjected to merciful but very disorienting pain killers, it was remarkably lucid. After explaining that he understood his final journey would be a matter of days not weeks, he asked me to help his family arrange the funeral and began to describe his faith journey. There was nothing purple about his prose; Joe wrote like a newspaper man to the end. And, the email ended in mid-paragraph.

It was said of soldiers killed in combat in earlier times that they died ?in harness.? Based on that final, unfinished email, we can say that Joe died, not on the field of battle, but on the field of journalism, his laptop. He, too, died in harness.

I realize that I am crying again. I realize that my tears are not merely those of sadness. I am still angry about this. Joe was too good and too young to be taken from us so soon. I want to confess that I think this is unjust. In short, I want Joe back. That can?t happen, I understand. But, I understand also, that in my desire to have Joe back, I recognize the first twitch of faith. The desire to live forever with those we love is not, as some psychologists suggest, an infantile projection of childish desires. It is a true, heartfelt desire. And, like every other desire, from hunger and thirst to the need of companionship, I believe there is some way for this desire to be fulfilled. ?Our yearnings anticipate landfall,? wrote Augustine. Joe hit landfall yesterday. For the rest of us, we must still rely on faith to see that death is not a wall but a door. Joe helped strengthen my faith in many ways, and I shall always be grateful to him for that, as well as for his many kindnesses.

Eternal rest grant unto him, O Lord. And may perpetual light shine upon.

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