

Remembering Avery Dulles

Richard McBrien | Jan. 5, 2009 Essays in Theology

Avery Dulles, distinguished theologian, Jesuit priest, and a member of the College of Cardinals, died just before Christmas at age 90. He had been seriously ill for some time, having lost the ability to speak several months ago.

Essays in Theology by Fr. Richard McBrien

In my review of his last published work, *Church and Society: The Laurence J. McGinley Lectures, 1988-2007*, in *Commonweal* magazine earlier this year, I acknowledged that he was, for almost all of his long academic career, among the most productive and widely respected theologians of our time.

Eight months after Avery Dulles was made a Cardinal in February 2001, he returned to the University of Notre Dame to deliver a lecture and to receive an honorary degree. He had been Visiting John A. O'Brien Professor of Theology at Notre Dame during the fall semester of 1985, teaching my own doctoral seminar in Ecclesiology while I was on sabbatical.

The son of a famous father, John Foster Dulles, secretary of state during the Eisenhower Administration, and the nephew of Allen Dulles, one-time director of the Central Intelligence Agency, Avery himself was a man of simple tastes and life-style.

He had brought to Notre Dame that fall semester some 23 years ago the battered old white Chrysler Newport that he had inherited from his uncle, referring to the car as "Moby Dick."

Some of the obituaries, even in world-class publications, identified him uncritically as a conservative theologian, which he was in the later years of his life, but without acknowledging his earlier, and longer, record as a progressive voice within the Catholic theological community.

In his *Survival of Dogma* (1971), for example, he acknowledged that the increasing skepticism toward the pronouncements of the hierarchy was due in some measure to the fact that the bishops do not rule by "the consent of the governed nor are they commonly noted for outstanding capacity in doctrinal matters" (p. 96).

"The present collapse of confidence in hierarchical teaching," Dulles continued, "would seem to be attributable, in great part, to the growing discrepancy between the current style of operation of the Catholic magisterium and the decision-making processes that have come into general usage in modern secular society" (pp. 111-12).

In his *Models of the Church* (1974) he identified the institutional model (the one that emphasizes the church's hierarchical structure and teaching authority) as the one model of the five (six in a later, expanded edition) that "cannot properly be taken as primary" (p. 198).

He pointed out that some critics, with whom he was clearly sympathetic, noted that among the institutional model's "major liabilities" is that "it binds theology too exclusively to the defense of currently official

positions, and thus diminishes critical and exploratory thinking? (p. 44).

In his *A Church to Believe In* (1982) he retrieved the Thomistic concept of the double magisterium according to which there is a teaching authority exercised from the cathedral chair by the local bishop, and a teaching authority exercised from the professorial chair by theologians and other scholars (chapters 7 and 8). Few concepts proved less popular for many bishops, and the Vatican itself, than this one.

In the period after the Council of Trent (mid-16th century), Dulles insisted, "the many instances of teaching authority recognized in the New Testament and in earlier church history are in effect reduced to one -- the hierarchical, which is itself progressively reduced to the single voice of the papacy?" (p. 113).

These are but a few samples of Cardinal Dulles's earlier writings, all of which justly earned him the reputation -- long before his conservative phase developed toward the end of his scholarly career -- as one of the Catholic church's leading theologians. Many Catholics looked to him in those post-conciliar years as a voice of reason and of hope.

In spite of his shift to the right in the 1990s and during the first decade of the 21st century, Avery Dulles remained for many theologians a beacon of theological light and a sure guide for theological reflection.

I can think of no ecclesiologist, other than the late Dominican Yves Congar, who himself became a cardinal at age 90, who has had greater influence on that

With the death of Avery Dulles last month, the Catholic church lost one of its most prolific and prestigious figures. Although his final book, a collection of his Fordham lectures, does not reflect all of his life's work, it is a fitting reminder that, even in his senior-most years, he continued to think and write clearly and forcefully on behalf of issues that he felt were of central theological and pastoral importance.

We can all be grateful for his extraordinary legacy.

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