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Cunneen, CrossCurrents shaped US Catholicism for 50 years

Jerry Filteau | Aug. 10, 2012

Sally and Joseph Cunneen in 1992 (CNS/University of Dayton)

Appreciation

With the death July 29 of Joseph E. Cunneen, the church lost a major figure in the development of U.S. Catholic intellectual life over the second half of the 20th century.

In 1950, shortly after their marriage in 1949, Joe and Sally Cunneen founded *CrossCurrents*, a quarterly Catholic journal on religion, thought and culture.

The journal, which they jointly published out of their home for the next 48 years, exposed American Catholics to some of the best and most creative thought by contemporary religious and cultural thinkers in Europe and around the world -- philosophers, theologians, scientists, historians and others, Catholic and non-Catholic.

Well before the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) made ecumenical and interreligious relations an integral part of Catholic thought and culture, *CrossCurrents* was publishing -- without any of the elaborate explanations or justifications then common in other Catholic publications -- articles by prominent Anglican, Protestant, Jewish and other thinkers on current religious and cultural questions.

?The journal and the networks it spawned played a major role in shaping American Catholic intellectual life for over half a century,? prominent Catholic historian David O?Brien wrote in an email to *NCR*.

O?Brien, now-retired professor of American Catholic studies at Holy Cross College in Worcester, Mass., and long one of the nation?s leading Catholic historians, recalled that his first published article as a graduate student in history, reflecting on the idea of a Catholic diaspora put forward by the noted German theologian Jesuit Fr. Karl Rahner, appeared in *CrossCurrents* in 1964.

He said the article subsequently led to lifelong friendships with the Cunneens and others, including the country?s leading church historian of the 20th century, Msgr. John Tracy Ellis.

It may be impossible to gauge the total impact on U.S. Catholicism of the international networking of Catholic intellectuals that the Cunneens promoted through *CrossCurrents* and their personal contacts, but it almost certainly constituted a major influence on the intellectual life of the U.S. Catholic church over the second half of the 20th century.

European thinkers they brought to American Catholic attention included such figures as:

- Austrian-born Jewish existentialist philosopher Martin Buber, whose classic works *I and Thou* and *Between Man and Man* explored dialogue and human relationships in new ways;
- Fr. Henri-Marie de Lubac, a French Jesuit priest basically silenced by the Vatican in the 1950s for his advocacy of what was then called the French school of *Nouvelle Théologie* (?new theology?) -- but years later one of the few theologians named a cardinal to honor his contributions to church thinking;
- Jesuit Fr. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, a French paleontologist whose writings on creation and evolution evoked Vatican warnings and censorship in the early 1950s, but whose thoughts are considered today to have made significant contributions to Vatican II.

The list of early prominent *CrossCurrents* contributors could go on almost without end -- Fr. Hans Küng, a leading theologian at Vatican II and later declared ineligible to teach as a Catholic theologian; Dutch Dominican Fr. Edward Schillebeeckx, who also faced later Vatican reprisals for his thought; Spanish-born Fr. Raimundo Panikkar, whose favorable writings on Eastern religions contributed to his expulsion from Opus Dei; and many others who pushed the edges of Catholic thought in creative ways.

William Birmingham -- who joined *CrossCurrents* in the early 1950s and was a co-editor with Joseph Cunneen until the journal?s transfer to the New York-based Association for Religion and Intellectual Life following the Cunneens? retirement -- told *NCR* that he thought the quarterly?s contribution to Catholicism over the years was its focus on ?relatively new questions or on old questions being asked once again? and trying to provide ?modern answers? that did not necessarily coincide with official church teaching.

It?s ?now normal for the life of the church? to consider the theological input of non-Catholic thinkers, Birmingham said, but when *CrossCurrents* made its debut in 1950, its unapologetic introduction of non-Catholic thinkers like Buber and various British Anglican theologians among its writers was without precedent in the Catholic publishing world.

Much like *NCR* when it was formed about 14 years later, *CrossCurrents* claimed a Catholic identity but did not rely on any official church certification.

Cunneen, whose wide interests included not only church history, theology and culture, was also a literary critic and translator of several books from French and other languages. He was also *NCR*?s film critic for 20 years, 1988-2008.

Cunneen?s wife of 60 years, Sally, died of cancer in 2009. Joseph Cunneen?s own health deteriorated after that and he died July 29 after extended illness.

He is survived by three sons: Michael, of Vancouver, Wash.; Peter, of Geneva, Switzerland; Paul, of Rutherford, N.J.; and one grandson, Sean, of Rutherford.

?Joe embodied all that we mean in our church when we speak of faith and reason, and faith and imagination, about Catholic intellectual life and shared responsibility,? O?Brien said.

He added that the Cunneens ?knew there were a lot of smart Catholics out there, some in, but most outside of, Catholic academic institutions, and they wanted to invite them into the worldwide flowering of Catholicism, first in the reflective assessment after World War II, then during the exciting explosions of Vatican II, then amid the awakening of fresh ideas and practices across the postconciliar and postcolonial global church.?

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