NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Merton scholar Shannon dies at age 94

Zoe Ryan | May. 30, 2012

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Msgr. William Shannon in 2004 (CNS photo/Mike Crupi, Catholic Courier)

His whole life, Msgr. William Shannon fed his thirst for knowledge by teaching and learning.

Shannon, a priest of the diocese of Rochester, N.Y., a religious studies professor and a well-known Thomas Merton scholar, died April 29 at the Sisters of St. Joseph of Rochester motherhouse. He was 94.

"Bill saw his life as a series of conversions," said Christine Bochen, a professor at Nazareth College in Pittsford, N.Y., and a colleague of Shannon's when he taught there. His last book, *How to Become a Christian Even If You Already Are One*, explored those conversions.

Bochen described his "profound gift of presence," which didn't include just his memorable laugh. It was his ability to "truly listen to people, to empathize with where they were, to be interested in their questions and their concerns," she said.

William H. Shannon was born Dec. 6, 1917. He was ordained on June 5, 1943, and was named a monsignor in 1966. He was assistant pastor at Sacred Heart Cathedral from 1943-45. In 1946, he was appointed professor of religion at Nazareth College and was named a full professor in 1958.

He earned a doctorate at the University of Ottawa, Ontario, and did post-doctoral studies at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, to learn about more religions after the theology department at Nazareth changed to a religious studies department.

He was the college's chaplain from 1949 to 1975. He retired from teaching in 1982 and became a professor emeritus.

His zeal for Merton eventually led to the creation of the International Thomas Merton Society. He and about a dozen other Merton scholars in 1987 established the society in order to "promote a greater knowledge of the life and writings of Thomas Merton," according to the society's website. Shannon was the founding president.

The group, which has chapters across the United States, has biennial conferences, support for research, retreats, scholarships and grants. The resource center is based at Bellarmine University in Louisville, Ky.

Shannon wrote, edited and co-edited numerous books on Merton and wrote several other books on topics such as spirituality. He was the general editor of Merton's letters and co-authored *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* with Bochen and Patrick F. O'Connell.

For Shannon, "learning was a lifelong passion," Bochen said, and he communicated that passion to his students.

Shannon's students also influenced him, said St. Joseph Sr. Monica Weis, a student of Shannon's in the 1960s, an English professor at Nazareth and the director of the Master of Arts in Liberal Studies Program. Shannon's interest in Merton did not start until two students suggested he teach a class on the Trappist monk and well-known writer.

The loyalty of Shannon's students did not leave upon graduation. Alumni would visit him at the motherhouse when they were in town; many had him solemnize their marriages and baptize their children, and the ones who were "devotees" were on the mailing list to receive his weekly homilies, said Weis, who had dinner with him Sundays at the motherhouse.

He went the "extra mile" for people, she said. In the 1950s, one of his students called him and said, "My roommate has run off with her boyfriend. Can you do something?" The couple was headed for the turnpike, so Shannon got into his car and arrived at the turnpike before the couple. He talked the tollbooth man into letting him wait for them in the tollbooth. As the couple's car pulled up to pay the fare, up popped Shannon, asking, "Can we talk about this?"

The girl's parents were eternally grateful, Weis said.

In his homily at Shannon's May 4 funeral, Fr. Charles Curran, a longtime friend, said, "No one in this diocese has ever or will ever teach theology to more people than Bill Shannon. He was a well-liked and respected teacher who was never satisfied with just repeating what he had taught before. He incorporated his new understandings and approaches into his teaching."

Curran retold the stories of two of Shannon's former students who, on different occasions, bumped into their professor 30 years or so after graduating. The students told Shannon that they still had all their notes from his class, and Shannon replied, "Tear them up!"

Shannon was also the liturgical consultant for the diocese for the Second Vatican Council documents.

"Bill lamented the trajectory in our church moving away from Vatican II," Curran said. "He was especially upset by the growing centralization in the church that de-emphasized the role of the local church, the failure to recognize the role of the *sensus fidelium*, and the inferior role of women in the church. But as a true pilgrim, he faithfully worked in every way to carry on the work of reform in the church."

He had a "deep love" and "deep hope" for the church and "didn't hesitate to be critical of the church that he loved when he saw that criticism was needed," said Bochen, who co-edited Merton works with Shannon.

Bochen currently holds the William H. Shannon Chair in Catholic Studies at Nazareth College. The chair -- made possible by a gift from the Chester and Dorris Carlson Charitable Trust -- and a lecture series at Nazareth College are named in his honor. Shannon himself gave a gift to the Lorette Wilmot Library at the college for the Merton Room, which houses books on and by Merton as well as archival material.

In his diocesan newspaper, *The Catholic Courier*, Rochester Bishop Matthew Clark called Shannon "a giant in the presbyterate of our diocese."

Shannon was a commentator at Clark's installation as bishop in 1979.

"I first met him when I had a chance that evening to thank him for his willingness to do that work," Clark wrote. "He was gracious to me as always and added that he would always be glad to be of help.

"Experience over the years since proved to me how genuine and sincere were his words to me that evening. He

has been over those years a spiritual guide, theological adviser, encouraging friend. I always appreciate that he understood the office of bishop very well ? its opportunities, its limitations; and how the ministry, while subject to objective analysis, is always embodied and lived out by limited human beings. He understood the humanness, the unfolding, the becoming."

St. Joseph Sr. Barbara Staropoli worked with Shannon in campus ministry at Nazareth College in the early 1970s, and she became friends with the colleague who had a clear mind and "a beautiful, clear writing style."

He lived at the motherhouse for most of the time since 1946. At the motherhouse, he was the chaplain since 1980, but he also became an associate of the sisters and was nicknamed a "Sister of St. Joseph in spirit," "The Mister of St. Joseph," and "our Bill." In his casket, the sisters placed a Sisters of St. Joseph profession cross and the documents from the Second Vatican Council.

He presided at more than 100 funerals of the sisters, and his book *Cloud of Witnesses* was made up of those homilies.

Colleague and friend Paul Pearson, the current director of the Merton center at Bellarmine and treasurer and resident secretary of the society, first met Shannon when Shannon was in England in the mid-1980s giving retreats and talks on Merton. They stayed in touch after that.

"He was a deeply pastoral man, deeply caring," Pearson said. When Pearson's wife gave birth to twins prematurely and they had health problems, Shannon made the twins part of his prayer ministry. The concern and sweetness of Shannon during that time stays with Pearson to this day.

Shannon's biography of Merton, *Silent Lamp: The Thomas Merton Story*, is the Merton biography Pearson recommends to people because Shannon wrote in such an approachable way.

"He understood Merton," Pearson said. "He could draw the reader in."

In Shannon's later years, if he knew you were coming over, he would move from his desk to his easy chair, even though it took 20 to 30 minutes because of his arthritis, so he could sit across from you, Pearson said.

Some months ago, he stopped presiding at liturgy for the sisters because he was getting too weak, Weis said. Not being able to say Mass bothered him, but he would continue to write Sunday homilies, she said.

In his last book, the one on conversions, he wrote, with hints of Merton: "Each of us, right now, at this very moment is as fully in the presence of God as we shall ever be. Even in heaven we shall not be any more fully in the presence of God than we are at this moment. The enormous difference heaven will make is that in heaven we shall be fully and always aware that we are in the presence of God."

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Source URL (retrieved on *06/19/2013 - 07:21*): http://ncronline.org/news/people/merton-scholar-shannon-dies-age-94