

Scholar for the church: Raymond E. Brown, 1928-98

by [Phyllis Tribble](#) in the [October 7, 1998](#) issue

The Death of Raymond E. Brown, S.S., on August 8 in Redwood City, California, came as a thief in the night--unexpected, unwanted and unwelcomed. It robbed him of a life full of writing, research, teaching, travel and play. It robbed the Christian community of a giant and a genius who did justice, loved mercy and walked humbly with his God.

As news of his sudden death spread, two words reverberated in the telling: shock and loss. Nothing had prepared us for this event, even though in hindsight we may think we detect traces of the last enemy creeping toward him. There was the pain in his back that months of physical therapy had not alleviated. And there was the announcement he made only a month before, on a visit to his alma mater, St. Mary's Seminary in Baltimore, of two gifts. One was monetary; the other, the promise that upon his death this Sulpician Seminary, where he had also taught, would receive all his Johannine research materials. Did he know, without knowing, that the number of his days on earth were drawing to a close, that he would be restricted to the biblical three score years and ten (Ps. 90:10)?

To the contrary, he teemed with life. He anticipated all sorts of events: opera under the stars in Santa Fe later in the summer; celebration of a 50th wedding anniversary for a beloved family in California this fall; and a trip to Sicily next spring with friends. Ecclesiastical and scholarly commitments stretched over five years. They included serving on the Pontifical Biblical Commission in Rome, delivering the keynote address at the Religious Education Congress in Los Angeles this coming February, and inaugurating the new divinity school at Wake Forest University next fall. Another research project was under way. Though he and his editor at Doubleday maintained confidence, word now seeps out that he planned to update his monumental commentaries on the Gospel of John. Raymond Brown affirmed life, not death. As the shock of his death lingers, the loss of his life intensifies.

I first met Ray in 1969. Only 41 at the time, he had already published, three years earlier (1966), volume one of his *Anchor Bible Commentary on the Gospel of John*, and he had completed volume two, to be published in 1970. In the context of biblical scholarship, where the writing of a single commentary often culminates the work of a lifetime, one was tempted to think of the 12-year-old Jesus whose teachers were amazed at his understanding and his answers (Luke 2:47). The occasion was the opening of the Ecumenical Institute at Wake Forest University. It fostered dialogue between Roman Catholics and Protestants, particularly Southern Baptists (the classical, not the current, variety). Ray was a principal speaker, an instance of his lifelong commitment to ecumenical relations. During that event word came that The *Jerome Biblical Commentary* (1968), edited by Brown alongside Joseph Fitzmyer, S.J., and Roland Murphy, O. Carm., had received the National Catholic Book Award for 1969. If participants at the conference stood in awe of the young scholar in their midst, he deflected the attention. Raymond Brown did not bear witness to himself.

Our introduction was brief. It occurred during a social hour sponsored by a North Carolina bishop. (Southern Baptists were still uneasy about libations.) Ray and I exchanged words about biblical studies. When a nun in modified habit timidly approached us, he welcomed her and with ease moved the conversation to include her. He asked about her life and teaching in Winston-Salem. Most of the conversation I do not remember, but one comment lodged in my mind. As the sister left us, he gently remarked, "No one has to convince me of the harmful way the church treats women."

Not until a decade later did we meet again. Interviewing for a professorship at Union Theological Seminary, where Ray now taught, I ordered a calves liver at an elegant restaurant on Morningside Heights. Seated next to me, he announced that I had just lost his vote. From boyhood on, he said, he could not tolerate liver. So we became colleagues and soon thereafter friends. (What liver could not do for us, sushi accomplished deliciously.)

In the ensuing years I had ample opportunities to see him respond to the comment he had made in Winston-Salem. Thanks to him, we filled a position in the teaching of Greek with a woman. He delighted when the biblical field became (for a brief, shining moment) the first at the seminary to have a faculty equally paired with women and men. Under his tutelage a large number of women, Roman Catholic, Protestant and Jewish, completed doctorates in New Testament. They now teach in colleges, seminaries and churches throughout the United States and abroad. Ray

continued to support them, writing letters for promotions and tenure and encouraging them to publish. No one had to convince him that the academy and the church needed to open their doors to women and that in the process these institutions would change.

In the weeks since Ray's death much has been made of the fact that he always lectured in a clerical collar, thereby witnessing to teaching as a priestly activity. Loyal to both scholarship and faith, he demonstrated even in his attire that neither one need undercut the other. Though these comments are true, sartorial realism and humor temper the piety. Ray often wore his clerical collar on top of a plaid flannel shirt. A staff member at Union remembers adjusting the collar once because the shirt was sticking out. A former student at the seminary remembers an exchange on the subject. She attended class at another institution where an eminent scholar, himself a Roman Catholic priest, appeared in mismatched clothing offensive to the eye and distracting to the mind. When the student reported the incident to Ray, he laughed and replied, "So now you know why I wear a uniform." Ray did not vaunt priesthood. He was a priest because God called him. Humility was the requirement and humor did not hurt.

Much has also been made of Ray's work habits. They excluded breaks for lunch, extended around the clock, and so accounted for those ubiquitous catnaps that could rattle his company. When teased about nodding off, he would smile and resume the conversation as though sleep had not intervened. It may be accurate to say that he knew he was brilliant, but it would be inaccurate to say that he claimed the brilliance. He understood that it came from neither his genes nor his own relentless pursuits, not even when, as a young seminarian in Rome, he would sit in a tub of cold water to stay awake for study. No, he knew that brilliance came from God. His responsibility was to nurture and use it in discipleship. For that reason he worked diligently.

Tributes to Ray understandably report on his astounding literary productivity. In the number and the substance of his publications he had no peer. Five major books, some of them two volumes each, attest the uniqueness: exhaustive commentaries on the Gospel of John, on the Epistles of John, on the infancy narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, on the passion narratives in all four Gospels, and, just last year, a full-length introduction to the New Testament. In addition, he wrote hundreds of smaller books and articles in which he distilled for a wide audience the fruits of his research. On August 10, two days after his death, colleagues and friends

received through the mail another of these small writings. It is a beautiful and witty book, *A Retreat with John the Evangelist* (St. Anthony Messenger Press). In it the evangelist speaks in the first person, with Raymond as his translator. The repartee between these two voices is as enjoyable as it is illuminating.

Receiving and reading this little book in the context of Ray's death evokes uncanny connections. As I retrieved it from the package, my eyes lit upon the subtitle, *That You May Have Life*, and then upon the name "Raymond E. Brown." This dear colleague and friend was sending me a message beyond the grave.

In the short bibliography at the end comes another disclosure. Ray notes that he considers his study *The Churches the Apostles Left Behind* "the most interesting book I ever wrote." It explores the diversity in seven churches after the deaths of the apostles. Those familiar with it will recall the dedication to a diverse group of "Protestant scholar friends to whom I am indebted in many ways." To learn of Ray's assessment of this book, 14 years after its appearance, is to perceive that even in death his ecumenical spirit reaches out.

Yet another section of the book resonates movingly with the advent of his death. When John the Evangelist explains what he means by the Paraclete whom Jesus will send, he compares the Paraclete to the Vindicator in the Book of Job. Surely not by chance this famous Joban passage (Job 19:23-27) was read at both funeral liturgies, the one in California and the one in Maryland. Job begins by wishing that his "words were written down, that they were inscribed in a record." The gentle irony of that wish as appropriated for Ray lightened the sad occasion of his death even as the deep poignancy of Job's closing words voiced Ray's abiding faith: "I know that my Vindicator lives . . . from my flesh I shall see God; my innermost being is consumed with longing."

Although cardinals, archbishops, bishops and countless priests attended the funeral services, neither their presence nor their words dwarf the outpouring of love for Raymond Brown that comes from all sorts and conditions of people throughout the world: the former students in Japan who became his translator; the nuns from Mexico for whom he said mass and who prepared the spicy food he enjoyed; the cloistered Carmelite sisters in East Anglia, England, who received his lectures with gratitude; the parishioners at Corpus Christi Church in New York City whom he served for many years; and, just recently, certain teen-agers in southern California who turned the tables by teaching him how to prepare for college these days. (Pack

clothes, not books.) These and countless more people bring to his death stories of his ministry to them. As the telling of stories continues in public and private, they give comfort in the midst of sorrow. They testify to this gracious and generous man whose happy demeanor and lambent humor were themselves a blessing. Through Ray the stories also witness to the One who came that we may have life.

After the funeral at Our Lady of the Angels Chapel in Catonsville, Maryland, and the burial there in the Sulpician Cemetery on August 17, the community of mourners scattered. The farewells had been said, though in faith and hope of the resurrection. Later that day, four women returned alone to the grave, each immersed in her own thoughts and yet joined with one another in love for Ray. They wept. In time they left in silence for the long drive home on Interstate 95. Suddenly a torrential rain descended. For close to an hour it pounded, relentlessly and fiercely. If death had crept through the windows of Ray's earthly abode to cut down his life (Jer. 9:21), the windows of heaven now opened to weep profusely at his demise.

When the lamentation ceased, the women did not see a new heaven and a new earth where death and sorrow are no more. Nonetheless, they knew that those are blessed who have not seen and yet have believed (John 20:29). So we are emboldened to join Raymond Brown in his closing prayer for the retreat with John the Evangelist: "May the Spirit of Truth guide us to the many mansions in your heavenly home that your Son has prepared for us, there to share your love and life."