OBITUARY

Daniel J. Harrington SJ

When asked once what got him out of bed every morning, Daniel (Dan) Harrington answered: “The Bible!” Through his writing and teaching, Harrington, who died last month, made it his mission to share the fruits of his research. Preaching to 800 mourners at his funeral on 12 February, Thomas Stegman SJ, associate professor of the New Testament at Boston College, Massachusetts, said: “It is no exaggeration to say he knew more about what goes on in New Testament studies than anyone in the world.”

As editor of Boston College’s publication New Testament Abstracts, a post he held from 1972 until three months before his death, Harrington wrote a phenomenal 50,000 summaries of articles related to New Testament studies and another 20,000 book reviews. He was also the general editor of the Sacra Pagina, the first full-scale Catholic biblical commentary in English, comprising 18 volumes.

As chronicler and editor he was also author of more than 60 books and several hundred articles. For 50 years, biblical theologians and their students worldwide would come to know through Harrington’s work who was responding to Dei Verbum’s summons that “access to sacred Scriptures ought to be open wide to the Christian faithful” (22).

More than his writing, Harrington is best remembered for his teaching and preaching. He taught at Weston Jesuit School of Theology in Cambridge, Massachusetts, from 1972-2008 and then at the School of Theology and Ministry at Boston College from 2008 to 2013. His classes were always large and extraordinarily popular: he made the Scriptures and their commentaries accessible. He presided at the Sunday 5 p.m. Mass in his home parish, St Agnes in Arlington, for 43 years and the Sunday noon Mass at St Peter’s in Cambridge for 22 years.

In an interview in 2009, Harrington recalled a childhood memory when a number of family friends were at his home one evening, talking about the Bible, and his mother kindly reminded her guests that as Roman Catholics they did not read it. Nevertheless, Harrington began to read the Bible at an early age.

In a recently published oral history interview, Harrington he tells the story of how he had a stutter as a boy and, because of it, thought that he could never become a priest or a teacher. Then one day he read in the newspaper that Moses had a stutter as well. He found Exodus 4:10 (“I am slow of speech and slow of tongue”) and thought, if God helped Moses, maybe God would help him. Through training Harrington’s speech became more fluid, but whenever he would stutter his thoughts returned immediately to Moses and to that moment when he began to believe through the Scriptures that he could be a priest and a teacher. When he became sick and was less and less able to write, he still taught. Even as he was dying, he Skype’d two final lectures to a class of graduate students transfixed by his dedication and extraordinary talent.

Four basic concerns often accompanied Harrington’s teaching of the Bible. He wanted us to appreciate the Jewish context of the New Testament and to see that Scripture had to be the foundation of all aspects of theology. But he also wanted both his students to witness to the collaborative nature of biblical scholarship and his colleagues to recognize the importance of building bridges between scholarly and more popular interpretations of Scripture.

I was a student at Weston and later returned there to teach. About 15 years ago, Harrington taught a course on New Testament Ethics and midway through the semester, he dropped by my office to hand me his syllabus and asked what article I would add to his reading list. I suggested an article by the social historian Peter Brown, on how early Christians received and lived the Scriptures. Harrington liked the suggestion and invited me to teach with him in the future: he would provide the exegesis and I would speculate about the ethical application to ordinary life.

Over the course of 15 years we first taught the Synoptic Gospels and virtue ethics, then Paul and virtue ethics, and last spring, for the first time, John and virtue ethics. Through the years I worked with a simple, humble, brilliant, dedicated man. Like the many who mourn him, I will miss him dearly.

James Keenan

Letter from W.F. Arbuthnot:
I venture to trespass on your hospitality to air a grievance affecting a large number of Catholics employed in our hotels. These – whether waiters, chambermaids or kitchen hands – are rarely able to hear Mass on Sundays. Managers may be willing that such members of their staffs should attend Mass more regularly: but the chief hindrance, I gather, is that the employees themselves hesitate to ask permission, lest hindrance, I gather, is that the employees themselves hesitate to ask permission, lest

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