

**IN MEMORIAM: FRANCIS CANAVAN, S.J.
1917-2009**

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February 26, 2009 marked the passing of Father Francis Canavan, S.J., one of the giants of contemporary Catholic political and social thought. From his landmark studies of the political thought of Edmund Burke, to his critique of the liberal individualist model of man and society, to his stalwart defense of an unabashedly Catholic view of constitutional democracy, Canavan's intellectual lifework and personal example influenced several generations of colleagues, students, and admirers.

Born in 1917, Father Canavan received his primary and secondary education in the public schools of New York City and Long Island. (As luck would have it, he attended the same elementary school to which John Courtney Murray, another future Jesuit, had gone some fifteen years earlier; and he attended high school with Harry Jaffa and Joseph Cropsey, who also went on to become prominent political theorists). He received his B.S. and M.A. degrees from Fordham University in, respectively, 1939 and 1947, his Ph.L. from St. Louis University in 1944 (where he immersed himself in the study of Thomistic philosophy); his S.T.L. from Woodstock College in 1951, and his Ph.D. from Duke University in 1957. He entered the Society of Jesus the same year he received his B.A. and was ordained in 1950. In the course of his long career Fr. Canavan taught at Regius High School (1944-1945), Canisius College (1945-1946), St. Peter's College (1950-1956) and Fordham University (1966-1988). From 1960 and 1966, he served as associate editor of *America*. From 1988 until his death, he had served as professor emeritus of political science at Fordham.

While at Fordham, Woodstock, and Duke, respectively, Canavan met and studied with three men who would have a great impact on his academic interests and intellectual development as a political theorist: Moorhouse I.X. Millar, S.J., John Courtney Murray, S.J., and John H. Hallowell. All three were deeply interested in Christian political thought, and each sought to articulate a theory of democratic government rooted in the Christian understanding of the human person. Millar was the first to encourage Canavan to read Edmund Burke, and this interest was further encouraged by Hallowell under whom Canavan wrote his doctoral dissertation on Burke's conception of political reason.

Published in 1960 by Duke University Press, *The Political Reason of Edmund Burke*, was followed by two subsequent volumes on

Burke's thought, *Edmund Burke: Prescription and Providence* (1987, Carolina Academic Press) and *The Political Economy of Edmund Burke* (1995, Fordham University Press). In the face of interpretations which contended that Burke lacked a coherent political theory or which saw him as a historicist, cultural relativist, atheist, or proto-Humean, Canavan sought to restore Burke to his rightful place as a Christian political thinker. Burke, he insisted, "did his political thinking within the framework of a 'realistic' metaphysics derived from the biblical and Christian doctrine of creation." Burke "believed in a common human nature created by God as the supreme norm of politics," but also recognized "that human nature realizes itself in history through conventional forms customs and traditions, which constitute the second nature of a particular people. . . . The statesman must therefore frame his policy with a practical wisdom that understands his people, their history, their traditions, their inherited rights and liberties, and their present circumstances." Canavan concluded that Burke offers us "a way of thinking about politics and its problems which makes it possible to approach them rationally, while avoiding both unprincipled expediency and doctrinaire idealism."

While Burke's work was Canavan's primary interest, it was hardly his only one. In *Freedom of Expression: Purpose as Limit* [1994, Carolina Academic Press], an acclaimed study of the political theory of the freedom of speech (which was named to *Choice's* "Outstanding Academic Book List" for 1985), Canavan criticized the approach to freedom of speech championed by contemporary civil libertarians in the light of "the major writers who argued the case for freedom of speech and press . . . that has prevailed in the English-speaking world." He also wrote scores of essays (some of which have been collected in *The Pluralist Game: Pluralism, Liberalism, and the Moral Conscience* [1995, Rowman & Littlefield] and *Pins in the Liberal Balloon* [1990, National Committee of Catholic Laymen]) exploring the problem of law and public morality in a pluralistic society; the inadequacies of the liberal-individualist model of man and society; the Catholic tradition in social thought and its relevance to contemporary America; and the American Catholic scene and the interaction between Catholicism and American culture.

One of the unifying threads that connects much of Canavan's work was his uncompromising rejection of a public philosophy of liberal individualism, to which he attributed many of the difficulties that beset contemporary American public life. He engaged in an effort to outline a public philosophy for contemporary America rooted in a richer and sounder model of man and society than that which informs the liberal

tradition. Indeed, his writings provide nothing less than a devastating critique of the liberal assumptions that dominate our public life today, including a powerful critique of liberalism's pretensions of neutrality on the question of the good life, pointing out its essentially sectarian character—a critique that predated the work of Michael Sandel and Alasdair MacIntyre. One of the most striking aspects of his work on liberalism and contemporary America's quest for a public philosophy was, as Robert P. George has noted, its "sheer prescience." More than four decades ago, he was predicting the moral freefall—the collapse of traditional values and convictions, and the institutions that embody and transmit them—that has become perhaps the defining feature of contemporary American public life; and he warned of the decay of liberalism into "mere permissiveness."

Not surprisingly, given the influence exerted on his thought by John Courtney Murray, Canavan's work reflects a subtle indebtedness to the Catholic tradition in social thought, its teaching on the whole subject of limited, constitutional government, and its relevance to the contemporary American public argument. In contrast to those who believed some type of rapprochement between Catholicism and the liberal-individualist intellectual tradition is possible, he stressed the gulf that separates the Catholic and liberal understandings of man and society. In sharp contrast to liberalism, for example, from the Catholic perspective, man is not "a sovereign will free to make of itself and the world what it pleases" and social relations are not something "artificial, external, and contractual." Rather, man is a person, a being who possesses intelligence and free will, and who "is obliged to frame his life through free choices in accordance with a law built into our common human nature by the Creator, who is the first truth and supreme good, and by Christ's call to a higher, supernatural life." He is an intrinsically social being who "realizes and develops himself through communion with other persons" in a wide array of social groups and institutions.

At the same time, he affirmed the legitimacy of what George Weigel has dubbed "the Catholic human rights revolution"—contemporary Church teaching's principled embrace of constitutional democracy as the political system that most comports with the Catholic conception of human dignity. Far from representing a break with the Catholic tradition, Canavan argued that this revolution was driven by a new and deeper appreciation of the implications of principles constitutive of Catholic social thought as a distinctive intellectual tradition. Finally, he insisted that the Catholic understanding of man and society can help supply American democracy with the better theoretical foundation, the new public philosophy, it so badly needs. It can do so

because it combines an affirmation of the dignity of the individual human person with a recognition of a “a universal human nature, whose natural tendencies and needs are knowable to the human mind” and the fact that the human person is a “social being from whose nature flow relations to his family, neighbors, fellow workers, the community and the political order.” These needs and social relations, in turn, “are the foundations of both rights and obligations that are prior to and independent of consent.” What results is an understanding of rights and democratic government that differs fundamentally from that which informs contemporary liberalism.

However much Father Canavan may have sung outside the chorus of 20th-century American political science (to use a phrase he once employed in reference to his own mentor, John Hallowell), his intellectual contribution to his discipline was recognized and honored. No less an authority on Burke than Peter J. Stanlis has affirmed that Canavan’s work earned him “a very high permanent place of honor among Burke scholars, living or dead.” Likewise, Robert P. George has described him as the “most incisive and trenchant critic” of “the *sectarian* moral agenda of liberal secularism” and the “activist judges” who have imposed that agenda on the American body politic.

Gerard V. Bradley is hardly alone in viewing Canavan as “one of the greatest political theorists” of recent decades. At its 1996 Meeting at Franciscan University, the Society of Catholic Social Scientists presented him its annual “Pius XI Award for Contributions Toward the Building Up of a True Catholic Social Science.” Several years earlier, the Fellowship of Catholic Scholars had presented him with its Cardinal Wright Award in recognition of his many years of long and selfless service to the Church. His work was the topic of panel discussions at the 1998 Meeting of the American Political Science Association and the 1996 and 2007 Meetings of the Society of Catholic Social Scientists, as well as of a symposium at Christendom College in 2000 at which he was honored for his contributions to American Catholic intellectual life.

A Jesuit for 70 years, he embodied everything that the Society of Jesus has historically represented: intense intellectuality combined with an unwavering devotion to Christ and His Church. Indeed, his work offers us a model of how a Catholic thinker ought to engage his discipline and, more broadly, his culture. It does so by combining a thorough command of contemporary scholarship in his chosen discipline with a deep knowledge of, and fidelity to, the Catholic intellectual tradition. Precisely for this reason, his work engaged the best scholarship in contemporary political theory without becoming

captive to the intellectual categories he encountered there. Assimilating what it judged to be the valid insights that have emerged in contemporary political theory, it retained the critical distance needed to evaluate that theory in the light of the Catholic faith and the intellectual tradition that has developed under that faith's aegis. "The Catholic mind," Canavan once remarked, "is by nature a synthesizing mind" which seeks to harmonize "the teachings of the faith" with "the findings of human reason" at any given moment of history. His work illustrates just how such a mind operates.

The example he offered us, however, was not limited to the way he approached his discipline, and, more broadly, his culture. In the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council, when so many Catholics—including so many members of the clergy—confused engaging the culture with capitulating to the intellectual fads of the day, and when such capitulation was the path to fame, popularity, and influence, he remained faithful to God and His Church—even at the possible cost of marginalization.

This fidelity, furthermore, was combined with a profound sense of personal humility. As Dawn Eden noted (in her tribute to him on her blog *The Dawn Patrol*), Father Canavan "was the humblest man one could ever hope to meet." While immensely learned, he seemed simply immune to the occupational vice of academics: intellectual arrogance. He did not assume he knew everything or seek to monopolize conversations with long soliloquies designed to show off his superior knowledge and learning. Like his mentor John Hallowell, he didn't seek to turn his students into his disciples or to form a school of thought. Indeed, he steadfastly refused to follow the example of academics who saw their task as producing a cadre of followers to carry their messages to the world. He wore his learning lightly.

One is also reminded at this sad moment of his exceptional charity. He might attack flawed ideas or mistaken policies, but he never spoke ill of individuals. Deeply frustrated by developments in the American Church over the past half-century, Fr. Canavan tirelessly warned against the temptation to bitterness, and when confronted with criticisms of the American episcopate or individual bishops, he would typically respond by calling attention to the unprecedented character of the challenges confronting the hierarchy today. "There was," as the author of a tribute in *Catholic Eye* noted, "no malice in him." This charity also found expression in his unfailing concern for, and generosity toward, his students.

Like Pope John Paul II (whom he deeply admired), Father Canavan displayed the loving characteristics of Christian fatherhood and

concern for family in a world so desperately in need in of it. He loved to reminisce about his parents and siblings and to visit with his extended family. Enjoying the excitement and bustle of family life, he delighted in the everyday adventures of children (and providing occasional sage advice to parents dealing with the vagaries of childhood and adolescent behavior).

Finally, Father Canavan radiated hope. Dawn Eden has noted that, in the last few years of his life, he told and retold a story with “slight additions and emendations” whose punch line had become his credo. The story concerned a Jesuit friend who had been told by a prominent Harvard professor with whom he had studied not to worry so much: “What are you worried about, Father?” the professor had told Canavan’s Jesuit friend. “In the long run, you guys can’t lose.”

Father Canavan believed with every fiber of his being that the Harvard professor was right. He constantly counseled others not to despair in the face of contemporary cultural disintegration, insisting with ever increasing frequency as the years went by that the easygoing nihilism that dominated contemporary culture could not endure. It could neither satisfy the deepest spiritual needs of the human person nor provide the basis upon which a functioning society could be constructed.

While he will be missed by countless friends, students, and admirers, comfort can be taken in the body of work, and, even more importantly, the example he left behind—and in the fact that we have gained a new intercessor in heaven. With Father Canavan pleading our case, we can’t lose.