

In Memory of Jaroslav Pelikan  
A Homily Delivered at His Funeral Vigil Service  
May 16, 2006

Dear Sylvia, dear Martin, Michael and Miriam, dear Pastor Pelikan, your long vigil is over. During these last weeks we here at the seminary have been singing the hymns of Pascha, hymns proclaiming the resurrection: "From death to life, from earth to heaven has Christ our God led us." And during these weeks you have been keeping vigil around Jary. Now Christ has led *him* from death to life, from earth to heaven. As persons of faith, we rejoice. We know that Christ is risen. We know that He has destroyed the power of death. We know that on the last day God will raise up those who sleep in Him (cf I Thess 4). But what a sense of loss we also feel!

On the first paschal morning Mary Magdalene felt a similar rush of conflicting emotions. As we read in John 20, she came to the tomb of Jesus to find His body gone. She turned and saw Jesus standing there, but she didn't recognize Him and supposed He was the gardener. She asks, "Sir, if you have carried Him away, tell me where you have laid Him, and I will take Him away." Jesus addresses her by name: "Mary." She recognizes His beloved voice, and she reaches out to touch Him. But He says, "Do not touch me" – "Do not cling to me." Don't try to hold on to me.

Mary couldn't hold onto Jesus as she had known him. All the more, we can't hold onto those who now lie asleep in Him. We can't hold onto Jary. We can't know him now in the ways that we knew him in the past – as a devoted husband, a loving father, a proud grandfather, a dear brother, a teacher and mentor, a sage advisor, a witty conversationalist. A few weeks ago Michael summed up the situation that so many of us are in now. He said, "All my life, if I needed to know something, I could just ask my father, and he would know the answer. But I'm not going to be able to do that any more." Like Michael, we can't know Jary in the ways we once did. But we can recognize him and know him in new ways - ways no less real, and certainly more profound.

We are invited to see and know Jary not as he was, but as he is; not just as we remember him, not just he as he lives in our own feeble memories, but as he truly lives in God's eternal memory. It's right for us to reflect on what Jary has meant in our own lives. Let's remember these things with joy. But at the same time we are challenged to see his life in a new perspective – to look for what God has accomplished through him, for what God is still accomplishing through him - and through all those who truly love Him.

A story is not exhausted in the telling. A word once spoken continues to echo. A bell once struck continues to reverberate. So too, what we do and say in this life has a lasting impact. This is true for all of us, but certainly this is true in Jary's case. What a lot he accomplished in the course of his life! What a lot he said! And what a lot he wrote! Nearly forty books and innumerable articles, touching on practically everything - from philosophy, literature, political science, legal theory, the visual arts and music, to education, the natural sciences and even sailing.

Jary traced many of his academic and religious interests to his Slavic background. His grandfather was born in Slovakia, a wonderful meeting-place of cultures and religious traditions, and after coming to the United States he became one of the founding fathers of the Slovak Synod of Lutherans. Jary's father, also a Slovak Lutheran pastor, once told him that "he combined German Lutheran scholarship and Slavic Orthodox piety – and fortunately not the vice-versa." One result of this happy coincidence of qualities was Jary's remarkable academic career. It's not necessary to review his scholarly accomplishments here. The list of his publications, academic appointments, honorary degrees, prizes, medals and citations only confirms what we already know: He was brilliant. But interwoven with his scholarship, and virtually inseparable from it, was a Christian faith as simple, as endearingly child-like, as it was profound. This is what Jary had to say in a brief autobiographical essay written just a few years before his death: "I was quite out of step with many in my generation, especially among theological scholars at universities, in never having had fundamental doubts about the essential rightness of the Christian faith, but having retained a continuing, if often quite unsophisticated, Slavic piety."

Jary showed his appropriation of the basic tenets of the Christian faith in whatever he did or said or wrote. Consider the Christian doctrine of creation. In Genesis we read: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.... And God saw everything that He had made, and behold it was very good." Jary loved the beauty of God's creation, and he also loved the fruits of human creativity. Great works of literature, for example. (Goethe was his favorite poet, I believe, though he also could recite reams of Schiller by heart.). Or music. His book *Bach Among the Theologians* is a classic. He loved the out-of-doors – hiking in Sleeping Giant State Park near his home in Connecticut, where he could tell you everything you ever needed to know about its flora and fauna – and then some! Or, back at the house, he enjoyed checking up on how the koi were doing in their fishpond. Jary could write hefty tomes on the creed, on the Christian doctrine of creation, on "one God the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth..." But he also confessed this creed in his daily life, through his child-like wonder, through his joy in living things both great and small.

Besides being a person of deep faith, Jary was extraordinarily gifted. He – and those around him – recognized this early in his life. All of us know how people – even the most gifted – sometimes end up wasting their talents, accomplishing little or nothing in life. This was not to be the case with Jary. As a sincere Christian, he – and those around him – were determined that his many gifts be put to proper use: "To the glory of God, and in service to my neighbor" might have been his motto, just as it was Bach's. In the autobiographical essay that I mentioned a few moments ago, Jary remarks on the influence that his mother had on the formation of his character. She had an "iron sense of duty" and a "loving determination" that her son not "get by on brains and glibness" – as she put it. Jary had brains and glibness. But he also had remarkable self-discipline and a strong sense of responsibility. This took many forms. For example, I understand that he would get up to listen to the short-wave radio at odd hours in order to keep up his skills in various exotic foreign languages. Through his joy in creation, Jary expressed his faith in

one God, the creator of all. So also, through his faithful stewardship of the talents given to him, he showed his awareness that one day he would stand before that same God to account for his talents.

By his own admission, Jary was, first of all, a historian. In one of his typically pungent one-liners, he put it this way: "Everybody else is an expert on the present. I wish to file a minority report on behalf of the past." But for him the study of the past was not just an academic exercise. He believed that there was a shape to history, and a vital center - Jesus Christ - that gave it meaning. He also believed that great figures from the past - church fathers like St. Athanasius, Basil the Great and St. John Chrysostom - had something to say to us today. Jary was a scholar, but - professedly, self-consciously, and sincerely - he was a Christian scholar. If you entered his study, he almost inevitably would point out two portraits, one of Adolf von Harnack, the great liberal Protestant historian of dogma, the other of Fr. Georges Florovsky, whom he described as "the last of my mentors and the one to whom I owe the most." And Jary would offer this observation: "Harnack showed me what it was to be a scholar. Florovsky showed me what it was to be a scholar and a Christian at the same time."

What Florovsky showed Jary, Jary showed us, through his books and through his life. He showed us that it's possible to be a Christian and a scholar at the same time; that it's possible to be Christian - indeed an Orthodox Christian - and a modern human being; that it's possible to be engaged with the world, to address its most pressing questions, to be in dialogue with others, without lapsing into religious indifference or cynicism. Jary's life as Christian scholar inspired those of us who were privileged to be his students, and it continues to inspire young scholars who are struggling to maintain their Christian identity in the midst of an increasingly hostile world. This past Sunday I phoned Leon Lysaght, like Jary a member of the seminary's Board of Trustees, to tell him about Jary's passing. Leon recounted to me an encounter he recently had with a graduate student who was studying in the field of late antiquity. The student confided that he had been making a journey to the Orthodox faith and expected to be chrismated within the next few weeks. Leon asked him how his spiritual journey might be related to his course of study. During his response the student used the expression "vortex of darkness" to describe the environment in his department. When asked to explain what he meant, the student gave as an example a comment made by one of the professors in the department. According to the student, the professor stated that the writings of John Chrysostom were very valuable "once you wade through all that Christian junk." The student then went on to say that he and his small group of fellow Christians were sustained above all by the books of Jaroslav Pelikan: "He has been a beacon of light in the darkness," the student said.

A beacon of light! That is what Jary was during his life with us. That is what he is now, as he stands before the throne of God: He gives inspiration to students who want to be not just scholars, but Christian scholars. He offers an example of faithful stewardship. He shows how love for the Creator is inseparable from delight in His creation. For all this we give thanks to God. Certainly right now we feel a sense of loss. We miss Jary! We want to hold on to him. But what God accomplished through Jary, He continues to

accomplish in those who love Him and have faith in Him. May God grant us to be part of that blessed company!

- Fr. John H. Erickson, Dean  
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