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The FURROW

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Enda McDonagh

Letter to a Friend
– *Remembering Vincent
MacNamara*

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Dear Vincent,

One of the problems for me as a bereaved friend, and in face of the death of somebody as dear to me as you were, is of course the sadness and pain at the profound loss of a long-standing pillar in one's life. Even if that was not always consciously attended to. In our case, if I may be so possessive for a moment, so much of me seems to have died with you that I am unsure of who I really am now. It occurred to me just today to write to you in your heavenly abode in an attempt to recover how much of your living, loving and healing power had been integrated into me over our seventy years plus of personal closeness. Of course we both had other close friends over the years based on shared interests in theology or for any number of other reasons. Sometimes a friend became for me a beloved poem to which I returned regularly for challenge and enrichment. This seemed to me particularly apt in our friendship given your persona, love of and expertise in music, poetry and drama, and your particular writing style, all less common among theologians of my acquaintance and friendship.

This letter is not intended as simply an extended obituary or memorial although those are not excluded. Primarily it is an exercise in theology, in the love and study of which we both spent our lives and friendship, if often in contrasting styles, yours much more literary and mine more philosophical, perhaps. A distinction that may not be pressed very far. We did over the years learn from each other and from many others, students and teachers, predecessors and contemporaries around the world.

We both concentrated on the personal rather than the legal character of moral relations. These latter were the preoccupation of so many of our predecessors. We undertook a different kind of exploration of human relationships in which trust and love figured prominently. We were returning to Scripture, so often neglected

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by some of our teachers. Love of God and love of neighbour opened us up to love of God in neighbour, even if I in particular did not always live up to it. I was reminded recently of one of your particular gifts when rereading Hilaire Belloc's poem on Courtesy. From many apposite lines I quote, just slightly adjusted, 'Yet in my Walks' to ' Yet in your talks it seems to me/That the Grace of God is in Courtesy'.

As I so often heard from mutual friends and serious readers, your books were so clear and easy to read, without losing anything in depth. In this respect the man was really the style, the courtesy and grace in person, speaking and writing.

While your moral teaching and writing concerned graced and gracious humanity, you took that humanity in itself fully seriously and universally. For you there was no ungraced humanity. Your missionary commitment, which for health reasons you were never able to fulfil in conventional mission territory, made you sensitive to the universality of mission, and your recognition of Ireland and Europe as also 'mission territory'. This was a bonus to Irish theologians, priests and religious, although not always recognised as such.

Sadly in the aftermath of Vatican II and its short-lived excitement, secularisation in an anti-religious sense developed. A more secular ethos could have been a source of religious growth, if tackled positively in its liberating power in face of a rather conservative and closed Church and theology. Vincent you were one of the significant theologians who understood and fostered a new approach to theology, but were ignored with so many others.

Creative theologians are still serving Church and society and an increasing number of these are happily women. You welcomed and encouraged these newcomers, lay and religious. In your work in Trinity College, Kimmage and Maynooth as well as in Kiltegan itself you reached a wide and valuable audience which also introduced your books to many other readers.

For now I just list some of these books as indications of the run and range of your interests. In another time and place I hope to deal with them in their enriching content and detail, on Christian and Human Ethics.

Faith and Ethics (1985); *The Truth in Love* (1988); *New Life for Old* (2004, Reprinted 2009); *The Call to be Human* (2010).

I had the privilege and pleasure of working closely with you in editing and producing the three substantial volumes in our series involving Irish theologians, entitled *An Irish Reader in Moral Theology*. (2009-2013) These covered work over the previous fifty years by Irish theologians.

All your work in writing, lecturing, editing, and retreat- giving

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bore the marks of a dedicated and gifted theologian of remarkable spiritual and human qualities. Two important if frequently ignored human qualities come to mind, plurality and simplicity. The plurality was not only that of learning and of mind-set but also of relationships with religious confreres and academic colleagues, and with a wide range of ordinary lay people, male and female, aged, adult and young. This was supported by a simplicity of manner and life-style which made you so available to so many, as evident at your funeral. Of all this I have been reminded by so many people since.

Go raibh mile maith agat as ucth do chairdeas agus d' abhair. In iolann De go gcasamuid aris.

Moral Growth. For all the rant about moral living, for all the sulphuric sermons of the past, it is remarkable how little thought societies and churches have given to the issue of moral conversion or growth. The energy has all gone into proclaiming and defending orthodoxy. How people might be helped to achieve the organisation of their lives, to deal with their fragility as desiring beings, has received little attention. I can only say that, if it can be done at all, it appears to me to be a much more oblique matter than teaching or preaching or threatening. Straying instinct is not easily quelled. The shimmer of – excitement overcomes reason. It is difficult to be wise.

– VINCENT MACNAMARA, *The Call to be Human* (Dublin: Veritas) p.60.