

In Memoriam

George W. MacRae, S.J.

(27 July 1928 – 6 September 1985)



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IN MEMORIAM GEORGE W. MACRAE*

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George MacRae's life has touched so many of us, and so many of our common concerns as Biblical scholars, that it would be unfair to claim him for just one single institution. But it is my privilege tonight to speak as his colleague from Harvard University where George taught and where this announcement appeared on 10 September 1985:

With great regret I inform you of the death of
GEORGE WINSOR MACRAE, S.J.
Charles Chauncy Stillmann Professor of
Roman Catholic Theological Studies and Acting Dean of
the Faculty of Divinity, which occurred on the
sixth instant, in the fifty-eighth year of his age
Your obedient servant DEREK BOK.

It was at Harvard Divinity School that George participated every term, every week in the New Testament Graduate Seminar. He was often silent for an hour or more; but when he finally made a comment, it was incisive, clear, helpful, and always brought the discussion back to the essential questions of our work: "What text are you talking about?" and "What kind of criteria are you using for its interpretation?"

It was also at Harvard that hundreds of students came to listen to his lectures in exegetical courses, especially to his classes on the Gospel of John and to his lectures on Gnosticism. They were lectures requiring much patient attention to detail from the students; but the listener was rewarded with invaluable insights arising from a text which renewed the

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understanding of ourselves, our world, and salvation through God's word.

It was also at Harvard that George spent hundreds of hours copyediting his colleagues' manuscripts as an editor of this journal, the *Hermeneia* commentary series, and many other scholarly publications. In this capacity George grappled with the stylistic and bibliographical difficulties inherent in academic publishing. He always willingly gave his time and energy to set things right.

At Harvard he also sat through endless faculty and committee meetings, pointing out with increasing impatience in his last years, when his health began to fail, that we had been wasting our time with irrelevant talk—and then offering to do the necessary work in order to solve the problem.

But it was finally at Harvard University that George found the fulfillment of his life's work as friend and advisor of colleagues and students alike—and he enjoyed it tremendously. That serious critical Biblical scholarship could lead to the human growth and spiritual maturing of young women and men, was for George MacRae cause for celebration. That this became a reality was for George proof of the ever-present power of that strange and wonderful Spirit of God that works through the understanding of the "Word." This was the essence of the contagious and assuring joyfulness of his work as a Biblical scholar that has touched all of us so deeply.

If greatness in Biblical scholarship is defined in terms of service to the scholarly community, George MacRae was the greatest in our generation. If leadership is understood as a faithful devotion to the well-being and intellectual and spiritual growth of others, George was truly a leader. If Christian life is defined as giving freely of one's knowledge, wisdom, talents, and critical insights to colleagues and students, friends, and strangers, George was truly a Christian.

I can only express the agonizing paradox of human life, that the perfection of a good life in Christ means so much sadness and grief to those who are left behind. At the departure of George MacRae we want to hold him, not being able to give him leave to go where his Lord has called him. The feeling of having become so much poorer and so much more alone in the burdens and joys of this life is overwhelming. How can we carry these burdens and how can we be joyful without him who gave so freely of himself in sharing both abundantly?

If we had only come to say farewell forever to our dead friend, we should truly be sorrowful. But we would not be true to the life that he has led among us. He should stay here, among us and in our hearts

and minds. If we keep his memory alive, he will remain present in our thoughts, words, and deeds. As time goes on, I am sure that our sorrow will deepen, but our memories will also become richer and more joyful; and these memories should both challenge and encourage our commitment to the vision that guided George MacRae's work among us.

George has been a most significant contributor to change with far-reaching consequences for the place of religion in the University as well as for the scholarly and religious communities in this country and beyond. During the two decades of his career as a scholar and teacher ecumenicity has become a matter of course. George MacRae was a major contributor to an ecumenicity that is based upon the best standards of critical Biblical scholarship and upon open and unbiased inquiry and discourse—not only among Protestants and Catholics, but also with other religions of the world.

George has thus left us the precious yet illusive vision of an unwavering devotion to a life that is lived according to the foundations of a religious tradition, and is fully integrated with an uncompromising commitment to a scholarly and critical assessment of those same foundations. He had the unique gift to see that such critical commitment is actually a source of inspiration for the devotion to one's own tradition and that it can build bridges to others.

Remembering his life and work should transform our grief into courage, joy, and gratefulness for what God has given to us through his faithful servant George MacRae; it can help us to make his vision our own, and we will find that remembering him will become increasingly enriching. It will help us to give thanks for our friend's life, a life that has not ended as we would have liked it, but that has been God's own story with one of his children. Only by following his vision and being enriched by his memory can we make it our own story too.