



William H. Shannon

A Tribute to William A. Shannon by Dr. Marion Hoctor, SSJ:

“MONSIGNOR WILLIAM H. SHANNON, FORMER PROFESSOR OF THEOLOGY/RELIGIOUS STUDIES AND CATHOLIC CHAPLAIN AT NAZARETH COLLEGE:1948-1982;CHAPLAIN AT THE SISTERS OF SAINT JOSEPH MOTHERHOUSE :1982-2012

Right Reverend Monsignor William H. Shannon, Reverend William H. Shannon, Father William Shannon, Father Shannon, Father Bill—or “just plain Bill;” these are names by which we knew our beloved Chaplain over the years at Nazareth College [1948-1982/Associate Chaplain 1975-1982] and later at the Sisters of St. Joseph Motherhouse [1982-2012]. Long time Nazareth College faculty member --as well as long-time faculty colleague and friend, Bill was a very remarkable person. I still remember with gratitude both Bill’s wisdom and his sensitivity during the years when we served together on the Faculty Committee on Rank and Tenure, a committee which both he and I had had the dubious honor of chairing in the 1970’s and 1980’s.

From the very beginning, Theology was one of the “core requirements” in the Nazareth College curriculum. In his first decade at Nazareth College [1948 to 1958],_Bill was the College Theology Department. At the high point, Bill had close to 100 students in a single class, so that it became necessary either to pitch a tent outside Smyth Hall for his classes, or –more realistically--to appoint additional faculty members to the College’s Theology Department. To address this situation, Sister Mary Lourdes McCarthy was appointed to the Theology Department in the fall of 1958, upon completing her doctorate at St. Mary’s College of Notre Dame University. Sister Joan Margaret Kunz and Dr. Christine Bochen followed, at which point the Theology Department, later the Department of Religious Studies, took its rightful place as “first among equals”!!

In addition to his excellent course preparations and classroom presentations, Father Bill also served on various faculty standing committees. I particularly remember both his professionalism and his sensitivity during the years when he and I served together on the faculty Committee on Rank and Tenure—no easy task then or since! We spent many long hours at our work —late afternoons, evenings, and even Saturday mornings when things got desperate

enough!— and it was very frequently Bill’s wisdom that saw us through to a final decision!!

Bill’s generosity both to Nazareth College and to the College’s founding Congregation --the Sisters of St. Joseph of Rochester NY-- has likewise been remarkable over the years. Most notably the substantial Merton Rooms and Merton book collections in the Lorette Wilmot Library, the William H. Shannon scholarships, and of course the Shannon Lecture Series, which each year brings four eminent scholars to the Nazareth campus for the College community and for the larger area community as well. From its outset, Dr. Christine Bochen, Professor of Religious Studies, has organized this annual scholarly program. In addition to the annual Shannon Lecture series, Bill Shannon will continue to be remembered at Nazareth College through the Endowed Chair, currently held by Dr. Bochen, which bears his name:

“Through a generous gift from the Chester and Dorris Carlson Charitable Trust, the *William H. Shannon Endowed Chair in Catholic Studies* was established at Nazareth College to assist in keeping alive and visible the Catholic intellectual tradition belonging to the Roman Catholic heritage upon which the College was founded. . . . The Chair in Catholic Studies honors William H. Shannon, currently Professor Emeritus of Religious Studies at Nazareth College. As beloved teacher, distinguished colleague, renowned scholar, prolific author, and respected religious leader, Father Shannon has advanced the educational mission of Nazareth College and contributed significantly to Catholic intellectual life, both nationally and internationally.” [See Nazareth College website: <http://www.naz.edu/shannon-lecture/shannon-chair>]

Nazareth College student appreciation of Monsignor Bill Shannon was lively from the day of his arrival as Theology Department faculty member and Catholic chaplain at Nazareth College in 1948. Bill’s availability to students in his Smyth Hall office “living room” seemed limitless. Whether these gatherings were academic, social, or problem-solving situations, the students were greatly appreciative of his wisdom, his concern, and of course his generous presence whenever needed. One situation in particular seems to demonstrate his gift of “presence”: One late afternoon a distraught resident student contacted Bill to tell him that one of her dormitory friends had just departed with her boyfriend to make arrangements to get married. She had no clue where they were going, except that they were headed for the nearby Victor entrance to the New York State Thruway.

After getting a bit more information, Bill leapt into his car and took off for this location. The Thruway agents on duty, who had not yet seen any evidence of an apparent elopement, invited Bill into one of their booths to help with surveillance. He spotted the car, signaled the agents, and walked over to the stopped car to say: “Could we talk about this—somewhere else?” The young woman returned with Bill to the College, to discuss the episode with him and to call her parents, who were enormously grateful to Bill for his tactful but effective intervention.

Christmas party soirees became a regular feature in mid-December; his office was always super-crowded for those. I recall also his inviting students and faculty to watch some of the John F. Kennedy election and Inauguration coverage in 1960-61 [50 years ago now!]. That election season was really the first to capture the interest and enthusiasm of this age group --as well as a plausible explanation for their unfinished class assignments!

Numerous humorous exchanges between us still stand out in my mind. For example, early in my teaching career at Nazareth College, I had been determined to drum some “originality” into my freshman English students as they prepared their various essay assignments. One Sunday morning as I sat in the back of the former Motherhouse [now Golisano Center] chapel, listening to Bill’s homily, suddenly several rows of students turned around and focused their gaze on me. Why? Because Bill had just introduced an idea with the comment “Webster defines [whatever] as . . .” a phrase which my freshman English students were not allowed to use without penalty. “A crutch” I had warned them, but now they were not so sure! We had to negotiate that one from then on!

On another occasion, while I was one of the co-chairs of the College’s Lecture Committee, I had stopped into the front hall parlor in Smyth Hall, where lecturers often took “time outs” between their scheduled presentations. Stanley Edgar Hyman, prominent literary critic and Syracuse University professor, was to deliver a lecture that evening. His wife, an accomplished short story writer, accompanied him out of general interest. In response to my polite question, “would you like a cup or coffee or something?” they replied: “What did you mean by ‘or something’?” I knew what they had in mind, and knew that the nearest—in fact the only —source of that kind of

supply would be in Father Shannon's office down the hall. Bill, of course, generously rescued me from my predicament! And no one the wiser!

Countless tributes have been paid to Bill Shannon by classes, alumnae/i, and individual students from his Nazareth College years [1948-1982] One of my favorite senior classes in those earlier years, the class of 1966, dedicated their senior yearbook [*Sigillum*] to Monsignor William H. Shannon "in recognition of his length of service as Nazareth College chaplain." Forty years later, members of the class of 1966 met with Father Shannon on Alumnae Weekend [Saturday 9/23/06], an hour before the 4:00 PM Memorial Mass, to honor him again. Their 1966 yearbook dedication on behalf of the class, written by Karen Moore Larimer on behalf of the class reads:

"To Monsignor William Shannon in his twentieth year as chaplain. Because he has chosen to become a priest there are miracles among us and between us and there is no one of us who can't find Love. Children and many children will know their Heavenly Father because he has chosen to teach women." This heartfelt statement from the Class of 1966, is not only eloquent but also prophetic! A well-deserved tribute to their beloved teacher and scholar.

Monsignor Shannon's most recent book, entitled How To Become a Christian Even If You Already Are One, published earlier this year [2012], brings to 16 the number of books Bill produced over the past 3 decades [1981- 2012]—in addition to dozens of articles published in numerous scholarly journals over these same years. In his "spare time" he also prepared and delivered a wide range of scholarly lectures all over the country and abroad, a major professional activity honored by the establishment of the Shannon lecture series at Nazareth College. That Bill himself was an eloquent speaker goes without saying! His many years of lecturing around the country—and abroad—testify to that reality.

By way of conclusion, I would like to include some statements made by Richard Matzek, College Librarian Dr. Christine Bochen, Professor of Religious Studies, when the College Library's new Merton Room opened in October 1996:

"The original Thomas Merton Room and the new room have been made available to this learning community through the sustained generosity of Monsignor William H. Shannon, Professor Emeritus of Nazareth College of Rochester and pre-eminent Merton scholar. Monsignor Shannon has provided the funding for the two rooms, has donated dozens of Merton books

and other materials, has deposited the archival materials located in the room, and is himself the author of fourteen of the titles contained in the Thomas Merton Room.

“Professor Shannon served as general editor of the Merton letters, editing two of the volumes himself, and he recently edited a collection of Merton's essays. Still it seems important to note that *Professor Shannon has not simply written about Merton.*

“His writing reflects the way in which he has been deeply touched and personally challenged by Merton's vision of prayer and justice. Because of this, Professor

Shannon writes and lectures in a way that entices students and readers to discover for themselves what Merton has to say. It is our hope that those who use this room and the materials it houses might discover in Thomas Merton a voice that speaks to them.”

Bill Shannon's impact on Nazareth College over the past six decades has been a magnificent one. It lives on in the College, and in each one of us, in wonderful ways. Let us take to heart a particularly valuable admonition which Bill Shannon offered two decades ago, based on his own lived experience:

“Spirituality is not a compartment of our lives—something we do at certain times. It is simply our lives lived in awareness of God. One of the fundamental notions of Merton is that you must never compartmentalize your life. Get rid of the compartments and live a whole life.”

Thank you, Bill, for modeling all of that and more. It is your great legacy to each one of us!