



Tribute to a Great Teacher

September 2006

Dear Friends of Clear Creek Monastery,

Many are the spiritual streams and rivers that have joined in a confluence of grace to produce our monastic foundation on the banks of Clear Creek in Oklahoma. I would like to evoke here one of the human instruments, one of the “conduits” of these living waters of wisdom and Divine love, who, perhaps more than any other, prepared the ways of God’s Providence.



Many of you are familiar with the story that began over thirty years ago at the University of Kansas, involving a wave of conversions to the Catholic faith and three professors, who shared a common vision of education, which was both steeped in tradition and overflowing with the youthful optimism of a new beginning. The goal of this “experiment in tradition” as it has been called, was to rescue the hearts and minds of a generation of students who were falling prey to the cynicism and spiritual bankruptcy of the age. What brought the “experiment” to an end was that fact that it succeeded all too well, fomenting jealousy and “death by administration” as was said of its suppression.

John Senior was born in 1923 and grew up in rural Long Island. The sight of social injustice in the 1930s turned him towards Marxism. Later, during his studies at Columbia, he was struck with the vital significance of religion in literature. He did his doctorate on the influence of occult philosophy in modern poetry. This study eventually led him to Eastern philosophy and mysticism.

In the later 1950s, he happened to read St. Thomas Aquinas, where he discovered a realist philosophy of being. This totally transformed the intellectual landscape of his life and helped bring him to Christ. He was received into the Catholic Church along with his family on Holy Thursday, 1960.

At the time of his conversion, Senior was teaching English at Cornell, but the following year he switched to the University of Wyoming, where he hoped to find simpler and healthier minds. He soon experienced the difficulty of teaching anything serious to students cut off from reality by a diffused relativism, by infatuation with modern technology, by rock ‘n roll music, and the rest of what was already a cultural revolution in the making. “I understood,” he wrote, “that the scholastic system of philosophy, as efficient as it is to refute rationalist skepticism, had no hold on students whose minds were disconnected from sensible and emotional realities.” Consequently, he focused his effort on pre-philosophical formation, on the experience of creation and natural things — cultivated through poetry — so as to nourish his students’ conviction that goodness, truth, and beauty really do exist and to get them back in touch with the real world and interested in learning.

John Senior’s teaching met with success in Wyoming: he was named one of the top fifty teachers in the United States by Esquire Magazine in 1966. But in 1967, he transferred to the University of Kansas where he met two like-minded professors, Dennis Quinn and Franklyn Nelick, with whom he launched the Pearson Integrated Humanities Program in 1970. The Program soon proved to have an extraordinary impact on the students who enrolled. The Great Books of Western Civilization came alive in lectures led simultaneously by the three professors. Young men and women discovered to their surprise that these literary works containing “the greatest things ever said and done” in the past, could speak to their own lives in the present.

Foundation for the Annunciation Monastery of Clear Creek

5804 West Monastery Road • Hulbert, OK 74441 • Phone: (918) 772-2454 • Fax: (918) 772-1044 • www.clearcreekmonks.org

Unlike most faculty members of large universities, the professors of the Humanities Program made themselves available for the many questions students had even outside the classroom. It was in this informal context that John Senior, in particular, would share his enthusiasm for the Catholic faith with those who brought up the question. It has been estimated that some 150 students entered the Catholic Church under his guidance, and that of the other professors during the years of the Program.

For students or others who wanted to “do something more” with their faith, Senior encouraged interest in the monastic life. “In the moral and spiritual order,” he explained, “we become what we wear as much as what we wear becomes us — and it is the same with how we eat and what we do. That is the secret of St. Benedict’s Rule, which in the strict sense regulated monasteries and in the wider sense, through the influence and example of monasteries — civilized Europe. The habits of the monks, the bells, the ordered life, the conversation, the music, gardens, prayer, hard work, and walls — all these accidental and incidental forms conformed the moral and spiritual life of Christians to the love of Mary and her Son.”

In 1972, a couple of these student converts to the Catholic Church expressed interest in making a pilgrimage through Europe. Senior encouraged this, knowing the importance for them of witnessing what remained of the great monuments — both alive and not-so-alive — of that Christian culture which Europe once was, and still is to some extent. He had heard of a monastery called “Fontgombault,” which he wanted them to visit. He even dreamed that they might bring back a monk and start a monastery like Fontgombault somewhere in Kansas.

After visiting Rome, the two young men did make their way to Fontgombault and were immediately won over by what they saw. The Superior of the monastery, Abbot Jean Roy, said he could not send a monk back to the United States, but he allowed the two travelers to come back and make a longer stay together with other young Americans. One of the original two eventually entered the monastery. During the next few years many Americans visited Fontgombault, usually staying for several months. Some entered the Novitiate. Of these pioneers, seven persevered in the monastic life and were to be among the thirteen founders of Our Lady of Clear Creek Monastery.



Because of a severe heart condition, John Senior retired from teaching in 1983. He remained active, however, notably in cultivating a friendly contact with many of his former students. On April 8, 1999, he left this world to enter into the great mystery of God that he had so often spoken about. He died with the consolation that the monastery for which he had done so much to prepare would become a reality later that year in September.

Although so much could be said about the great educator and amazing soul that was John Senior, I would like to conclude this modest portrait with a quote from a letter he wrote not long before his death:

“I’ve been resisting those Holy Angels you wrote of whose music is like the “gentle voices” to old Black Joe. For one thing, I still cling to persons beloved and even to poems, like Virgil’s on whose Georgics I’ve been spending several hours per day! . . . For another, like old Simeon, I await at least the reflection of my own salvation when my eyes shall have seen the longed for American foundation! It’s the same with me, in my lesser state, as you said so well of yourself in yours: I’ve spent the last twenty years forgetting and remembering “the same thing.” What thing? You say you don’t know any adequate definition? That is because it is Him. There is no definition of singulars — only the grasp, the clasp: “et ipse accepit eum in ulnas suas et benedixit Deum et dixit: Nunc dimittis servum tuum, Domine.”

Bro. Philip Anderson, Prior

Bro. Philip Anderson, Prior of Our Lady of Clear Creek

P.S. Please review our website for information for our annual banquet on October 21st. You are invited!