In Memoriam

Nicholas Tonti-Filippini*

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When I first met Nick, I was a young Dominican student, and he was a strange new phenomenon in Australia: an institutional bioethicist. His St. Vincent's Bioethics Centre was becoming famous around the world as well as in Australia, and Nick became a household name as a series of bioethical waves hit our shores and the media turned, more often than not, to Nick for comment. I remember well attending and learning so much at his St. Vincent's bioethics conferences—by being a water-boy, microphone porter, and general dog's-body, I was able to attend for free. Later, the annual National Colloquium for Catholic Bioethicists continued this tradition of Melbourne bioethics conferences established by Nick—though I no longer have to attend as water-boy.

Nick was, for decades, a leading light among Australian Catholic bioethicists and the best known Catholic voice in this area in Australia. He contributed to public debate, conferences, and publications, and gave wise counsel to church leaders and laity, Catholic or not. For many years his contribution as a public bioethicist was recognized not just by the Church but by

civil society. He advised on legislation and regulation, served on various National Health and Medical Research Council and other government working parties in Australia and overseas, and counseled political leaders.

Among his many expert involvements, he chaired the Research Committee for Matercare International and was a founding member of the board of directors for Matercare Australia. He was a founding member of both the International and the Australian Associations of Catholic Bioethicists. He also made a long contribution to marriage education, sexuality education, and natural family planning in Australia.

In all this he seemed indomitable, despite his illness and despite the advances of the culture of death, which in his home state has even managed to legislate against the exercise of medical conscience.

Nick worked for the Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference, and, despite being up so close to us bishops, he did not lose his faith! Perhaps this reflects how deeply ingrained it was in his Italian genes, though I know he would have resisted any attempt at genetically engineering piety. There is a perennial temptation for Christians to write off the surrounding culture as corrupt and

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irredeemable and to retreat into enclaves of the like-minded, speaking a language only we understand. Nick always resisted this temptation, taking the wisdom of Jesus Christ and his Church out into the public realm, confident that in every human heart there is a hunger for such wisdom. His stood out through his own magnificent efforts to unite faith and reason in pursuit of truth, to share his grasp of the truth with others, and to live it himself, not least through his own suffering.

As someone involved in founding the John Paul II Institute for Marriage and the Family, I am deeply grateful for the tireless work Nick did as a professor and associate dean at the institute. He was genuinely loved and revered by the institute's staff and students. They appreciated Nick's sharp intellect and extraordinary capacity for hard work, his courtesy, and availability. His generosity was all the more astonishing given chronic pain and a condition which required regular hospitalization, surgery, and dialysis. Remarkably, even when exhausted by all that and in the midst of controversy, even vilification, sometimes by people who should be his friends, he remained courteous, humorous, and focused on the ball rather than the player, on building the civilization of life and love. His ability to maintain good humor and respect in the midst of such challenges always inspired me.

Nick was supported in his conference work in recent years by the Order of Malta, of which he was a leading member. He lived up to his commitments in the Order in an exemplary way. He truly strove for spiritual perfection, forgetful of himself, in service of *tuitio fidei et obsequium pauperum*. Nick himself knew what it meant to be sick, and, as an academic and Church employee with multiple children, he knew about poverty too. He knew how to serve, and this was truly

demonstrated in his service of the Catholic faith and of the sick poor.

The institute in which Nick taught is, of course, one consecrated by Pope John Paul "the Great" to the study and pastoral care of marriage and the family. That brings to mind the enormous contribution that Dr. Mary Walsh, his dear wife, and his children, Claire, Lucianne, Justin, and John, made to his life and he to theirs. They shared with him his ups and downs, and many of the "downs" could not have been easy. The affection of his family and their pride in each other makes them a real example of what Pope John Paul II had in mind when he asked the John Paul Institute to cultivate family life as a school of a deeper humanity and a domestic church.

I knew Nick for nearly half my life, and when I reflect upon those years, I am deeply grateful for his and Mary's friendship and support for my vocation as a Christian, religious, priest, bishop, and ethicist. Such friendships can be our most tangible experience of divine grace; they sustain and enlarge us; they are, in a sense, sacramental. I am also enormously grateful for all Nick taught me, through his writings and our many conversations, but perhaps above all by the courageous witness of his life.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Most Rev. Anthony Fisher, O.P., is the archbishop of Sydney, Professor of Moral Theology and Bioethics at the John Paul II Institute for Marriage and Family, Melbourne, and Adjunct Professor of Moral Theology and Bioethics in the School of Philosophy and Theology and the Centre for Faith, Ethics and Society at the University of Notre Dame, Sydney.