

Remembering John Vennari

It was only in late August of 2007 in Brazil that I came more intimately to know John Vennari — and thus to perceive his varied high qualities and warmth of heart — especially because the two of us then had a few concentrated days together there in Brazil immediately after Father Gruner's fine Fatima Conference (20-24 August) — to which I had been unexpectedly invited as a speaker. (Along with Father Gruner, John had invited me to speak selectively on two related, but contrastive, topics: (1) on Catholic Sacramental Literature and the Higher Chivalry a Catholic Centurion Needs Today; and (2) on Perception Management and Strategic Deception in the Growing Forms of Total War We Face.)

In spite of John's warm invitation, I had not at first thought of accepting this special opportunity, for my wife Maike and I had just been married sacramentally on 11 July in Europe, in Alpine Austria, near Switzerland. And we were understandably somewhat fatigued from the travel and also from our recent talks at another Catholic Conference. Nonetheless, my dear wife earnestly encouraged me to accept John's invitation and to go promptly to Brazil! I did and I am manifoldly grateful for it.

John Vennari was then forty-nine years of age and robustly exercising the full range of his own manifold faculties and high spirits (and humor) along lines of excellence: intellectual and moral virtue. John was then soon to turn fifty years of age, on 24 February 2008, the Feast of Saint Matthias, the Apostle chosen to replace Judas Iscariot who had mysteriously committed such intimate perfidy and dark deception.

(After our return to the United States in late August, and with his vivacious and smiling encouragement, I sent John a special gift for his upcoming 50th Birthday. The gift brought out in him some fine sparkles and coruscations, I have heard. For, it was something that a man — a strong and cultured man — could and would receive and drink! And would proceed to do so even promptly!)

Since my wife, Maike, never met John in person — but only had telephone exchanges with him as well as a reciprocity of e-mail messages about their own writings and publications and varied interviews — I shall now first try to convey what John shared with me personally during those days in Brazil.

During our time rooming together in Brazil that late August, John excitedly introduced me to what he called a graduate-level — indeed, a doctoral level — of Political Science education, supplemented by some enriching Strategic Studies. For, John had with him on his accompanying computer a complete set of the 1980s British Situation Comedy and Political Satires known as “Yes, Minister” (1980-1984) and “Yes, Prime Minister”(1986-1987) — especially with “Sir Humphrey Appleby,” the “Permanent Secretary” and Sly Counsellor to “the Minister” and then to “the Prime Minister.” One of John's favorite (and so characteristic) set of words uttered and recommended by Counsellor Sir Humphrey to Minister Jim Hacker himself was: **“Let us not bring the truth in at this stage.”**

John proceeded to show me, over some three days together, five or six half-hour episodes of this brilliant series of comedy and political satire. For example, the episode on how the Prime Minister would have to choose a new Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury, and whether or not the candidate at least had to believe in God! And have certain other qualifications.

When hearing John laugh and deftly comment on these depictions — also in light of the current Catholic Church — I then knew that I was close there to John's genuine heart. Over the years — having first met him in 1997 — I never saw him utter anything sardonic or harshly sarcastic. His humor and irony were always generous and magnanimous. No bitterness, no constrictedness, no sneer — despite the provocations. He might help the situation by giving a vignette from P.G. Wodehouse, whom he cherished, or one from a short story by Evelyn Waugh, such as “Mr. Loveday's Little Outing”!

When John had made up lyrics to his then vividly sung song on advancing in “The Chancery,” he was smiling and radiant with tears of laughter. In the late 1990s when I introduced John to the musical Dr. E. Michael Jones in South Bend, Indiana, and heard them sing together with their fiddles or guitars, it was a rare festive and antic combination. Mike Jones gratefully told me afterwards — and Jones is no effusive praiser of persons — that “John Vennari is a brilliant lyricist.”

In Brazil, John told me much about his life growing up around Philadelphia (E.M. Jones' home town, as well.) For, he knew I grew up nearby in South Jersey, less than 60 miles away, in Margate, on an ocean seacoast island (Absecon Island) which is some 6 miles south from Atlantic City — and John had often visited the coast and beaches there as a boy and as a young man — maybe even with one of his “rock bands.”

Later on he attempted to be a monk (along with the Diamond brothers and their lame, but robust, superior) at The Most Holy Family Monastery, a more traditionalist monastery just outside of Berlin,

New Jersey, a little to the east of Philadelphia. (That former monastery is now *Mater Ecclesiae* diocesan Church which celebrates only the Traditional Liturgy.)

While John and I were discussing his time and difficulties there at the monastery, when he was searching for a confirmation of a true and sound religious vocation, he told me a charming story of how he first met his future wife, Susan.

Susan was at that same time, apparently, a Graduate Assistant to a Professor at the University of Pennsylvania — he was a professor of Arabic and of Middle East Studies, as I recall — and somehow Susan was sent by her professor with a large quantity of papers or texts to be copied on the excellent (and fast) copy machines at the Berlin monastery. While recollecting his time as an Aspiring Novice Monk, John then stopped in his longer narration and charmingly said to me with a smile: “**Robert, When I first saw her [Susan] I knew I had no religious vocation.**”

I am not sure in what year it was that Susan had first visited that Berlin monastery with her learned papers to be copied, but I believe it was after I had first met her in Germany in the early 1990s. It was at Dr. John Haas' Seminar and three-week summer school in lower Bavaria, in Eichstaett, Germany, at which I had also given some invited talks on Catholic Literature. When I later met Susan in the late 1990s at the South Bend Conference (conducted by Mike Chabot) after she and John had married and had at least one child, she was so vividly grateful for her time in Germany and for her dear family, too!

In Brazil, John also told me: “Robert, you are a soldier, and you have probably had a lot of fights growing up, at least at West Point, but likely also so much more later on. **But, do you know that I was never even in a fight growing up?!** Also, in my marriage with Susan, we have never had a fight! We just fit together so well. Even our temperaments.” The way he recounted all these things was so warm and innocent and affectionate. The beautiful picture of John's face — as it was posted on the *Catholic Family News* Website after John's death on 4 April — reminded me of John's face in Brazil as he told me of Susan and such matters. His countenance is (and was) so pure and clear and big-hearted. Just look at his eyes! (We now have a copy of that picture of John in the kitchen of our Old Farmhouse near the hearth and our active fireplace.)

John often shared with me short films of his three children's musical or dramatic performances — to include their rides in home-made wheeled buggies or with sleds in the snow. Often there were the joyful antics of the young children, including young Benedict, his last child and only son.

Over the almost twenty years of our association and friendship (1997-early 2017), we exchanged some deep thoughts and opinions about some challenging subjects: the brilliant and polite **pre-Vatican II learned exchanges** in the *American Ecclesiastical Review* itself between Father John Courtney Murray, S.J. (d. 1967) and Monsignor Joseph Clifford Fenton (d. 1969); the reasons (in addition to weak health) for Msgr. Fenton's own sad departure from the Vatican Council after the First Session; the extent to which John's hero Msgr. Fenton ever met or wrote or spoke to Father Leonard Feeney; and the subtle shift made by some SSPX Traditionalists from “*Extra Ecclesiam Nulla Salus*” to the vaguer and much more ambiguous formulation “*Sine Ecclesia Nulla Salus*”; what Our Lady of Fatima **specifically** meant by “the Errors of Russia”? — Name five!; what did Msgr. Fenton mean by his distinction in his own, often magnificent **pre-Vatican II 1958 book**, *The Catholic Church and Salvation: In the Light of Recent Pronouncements by the Holy See*, namely the distinction *De Ecclesia* about someone's somehow being “**in**” the Church, but “**not a member**” of the Church?; And what are the implications of this claim — without thereby sliding into Karl Rahner's notion of the putatively “anonymous Christian”?

John was always gracious and thoughtful in our discussions, even when he was unable to find and render a satisfactory answer — satisfactory also to him and to his winsome integrity.

It meant very much to me later — when my wife Maike in 2012 was secretly and so strategically forming up a one-day Academic Conference and a subsequent *Festschrift* for my upcoming 70th Birthday on 29 December 2012 — that John Vennari deftly chose to write something for the book which explicitly looked back, once again, to our time together in Brazil five years earlier, and even to one of the talks on literature I had presented there. The memorable title of John Vennari's *Festschrift* contribution was “*These Fragments I Have Shored Against My Ruins*” (65-68). John remembered the proposed motto of a Catholic Centurion and Soldier — “**Blessed is he who has saved a child's heart from despair**” — recalling Georges Bernanos' own haunting words in *The Diary of a Country Priest*.

John Vennari's own “spiritual childhood” always touched me deeply — his docility, humility, and trust. “*Sinite parvulos ad Me venire,*” said Our Lord. May John now rest truly in peace; and may he now or soon know, at least inchoately, the Life More Abundant promised by the Lord to those of Loyal Love *ad Finem. Requiescat in Pace. Abundantius!*

A small — and, I hope, a modest — word of gratitude may be now added by Maike Hickson:

One of the first articles I wrote as a Catholic — on G.K. Chesterton's *What's Wrong With the*

World — was published by John Vennari, in 2009. It was an honor for me, since, still in Germany, his name had resonance among traditional Catholics. I remember having seen reprints of his writing about the *Alta Vendita* document, in German. Down the years, I have gotten to know John for his charity, clarity, and cheerfulness. Our own little children still remember watching, many a time, a little film John once sent to us from a local little pig race which he had attended with his own children. He so clearly was such a loving father and husband.

Unforgettable to me (and my husband) are his and Chris Ferrara's running filmed commentaries from Rome on the Synod of Bishops on the Family. John and Chris together both made such a contribution in resisting the evil flowing out from those heterodox debates in discussing the events of the day, dissecting the lies then being spread, and then themselves returning, again and again, to the clarity of the Catholic Church's traditional teaching. For many of us, these video clips were strengthening and uplifting. Certainly my husband and I cherished them.

I always have a sense that these two Synods on the Family must have damaged John's health. They were life-taking. They were so upsetting and so shaking. We are still shaken to our inner roots. John gave so much in these last years of intensified battle, from articles on the life and work of Cardinal Carlo Martini to the equivocal writings of Cardinal Walter Kasper. John gave his best, and, as it now seems, his last. He exhausted himself, as it seems now, for the greater good of the Church. He gave his all in the defense of the Catholic Faith. I often have compassion for him and his comrades — and I may include my husband in it — because they have had to fight this battle for so long, and often in such a lonely fashion. For us younger Catholic writers, it is only a shorter time that we try to do battle for Jesus Christ. But now, at least the tide is changing a bit, and, though still much disdain we feel, people's hearts are more open to tradition. People like John Vennari, Arnaud de Lassus, Anthony S. Fraser, and also my husband, had to carry the cross for a very long stretch — even since 1962 — without seeing any light. I wish to honor them and to thank them.

John wrote in his contribution to the *Festschrift* in honor of my husband the following piercing words when speaking about those who try to preserve “Catholic fragments”: “Lone individuals who keep alive forgotten truths are a mark of our time. What was considered normal in Christian Civilization are now oddities extolled by the few who recognize the value of these discarded fragments.” This he wrote in 2012. That was before the papacy of Pope Francis. How much further have we come ourselves into becoming these “lone individuals who keep alive forgotten truths”? It is

with a sense of sadness and longing that we will miss John — we miss him as a comrade here on earth, and we long to be with him in Heaven, relieved from this Valley of Tears that seems to become a sadder place by the day. May John Vennari now intercede for us who —to include his dear family — are still Christian soldiers here on earth. May his intercession be now even more powerful than it was while he still walked and wrote among us. May Our Lord have welcomed him with a warm embrace and tears of joy, and with His Mother standing by Him, with a very special smile. You have fought your fight well, John.