

Obituary

Life as a Seamless Garment: Richard Schoenherr (1935-1996)

When students are completely engaged in the learning process, they do not bolt from the classroom if the teacher is late to arrive. They wait. They may wait for the ten or fifteen minutes recommended by school policy. In rare instances, they carry on without their teacher present. Richard Schoenherr, professor of sociology at the University of Wisconsin — Madison, died unexpectedly January 9th. Students preparing to take his religion seminar petitioned to prevent the cancellation of his class upon his death. They are conducting the class without their professor, following and adapting his syllabus as their own. They are teaching each other and pursuing their research interests with purpose and passion, with the support and participation of faculty. Seminar participant Robert Mackin remembers that "Richard made it clear that *my* education was '*our* project'." Richard Schoenherr would surely approve of the seminar as a continuation of "our project."

Although most of his public recognition was as a sociologist, in Richard Schoenherr the threads of husband, father, priest, sociologist, teacher, and friend were woven together in a rich tapestry, and he wore his life like a seamless garment. Selena Fox, priestess of a Neo-Pagan group in Madison, characterizes Richard's life work as holistic: "interdisciplinary, interfaith, international, and multi-cultural."

After earning degrees in Philosophy and Theology at Sacred Heart and St. John's seminaries in Michigan, Richard was ordained a Catholic priest in the Detroit Archdiocese in 1964. He then began studying sociology at the University of Chicago, completing his Ph.D. in 1970. That same year, he married Judith Woods, with whom he had three children, Andrew, Joseph, and Maria. In 1971, Richard joined the faculty at the University of Wisconsin where he remained for twenty-five years.

Although he was trained as and always remained an organizational sociologist — his first book was *The structure of organization* (1971, with P. Blau) — his academic career was centered in the sociology of religion and distinguished by a devotion to studying the Church he loved. Most know Richard for his cautious and methodical research on the Catholic priesthood, beginning with *The Catholic priest in the United States* (1972, with A. Greeley). His practice of uncompromisingly rigorous scholarship is evident in his recently published *Full pews and empty altars* (1993, with L. Young), a benchmark analysis of the demographics of the priest shortage in the United States. Unlike many scholarly studies, this research mattered outside the academy. His student Mackin reflects, "He had something to say which was important, but hard for the Church to hear. He saw himself in service to the Church, and was pained when some responded to

that service with scorn." To wit: his research was castigated by a Cardinal of the Church who wrote: "The study presumes that the only factors at work are sociology and statistical research. That is nonsense. . . . Our future is shaped by God's design for his church — not by sociologists."

While *Full pews* solidified his reputation as the "sociologist who studied priests" (NYT, 1-11-96), Richard did not merely count heads. Scores of students in his courses know the broad approach Richard took to the sociology of religion. His presentation was non-reductionist and experience-centered. He taught in an emotionally supportive and academically challenging way that mirrored his own commitments. Through study, discussion, and field trips, he exposed students to beliefs and practices that were beyond his own and usually well beyond theirs. Deeply rooted in the Catholic campus parish and St. Benedict's ecumenical faith community in Madison, Richard encouraged others to search for understanding in religious forms of the East and West, in contemporary and ancient spiritual traditions, in majority and in minority faiths, and especially in the mysticism that transcends specific religious institutions.

Before deciding to enter the graduate program in Madison, a prospective student asked Richard if he thought she could be taken seriously as a social scientist if she acknowledged her spiritual beliefs. Could she study the sociology of religion and not ignore real spirituality and religious experience? She was encouraged by his explanation of his non-reductionistic approach to studying religion, and his conviction that sociology would be a better science if it paid more attention to the spiritual as a real aspect of human experience without marginalizing it or explaining it away. Indeed, Richard was unique among contemporary sociologists in his appreciation of religious experience. While it is increasingly recognized among sociologists that the experiential is an important dimension of religion, Richard had to go outside of the discipline for the intellectual resources necessary to argue that religious experience is the *core* of religion. At the heart of what he taught was a series of readings and lectures on the experiential dimension of religion drawn from the work of theologians (Otto and Buber), historians (Eliade), philosophers (van der Leeuv) and psychologists (Maslow and Wilber).

Colleagues caught a glimpse of Richard's broad theoretical vision in a 1987 article he published in this journal in which he combined organizational theory with a phenomenological approach to religion. The vision has since been fully articulated in a book manuscript Richard completed shortly before his death. *Goodbye Father: Celibacy and patriarchy in the Catholic Church* will stand as the definitive statement of Richard's theoretical, empirical, and personal understanding of religion and the Catholic Church. He saw the Church as a complex organization, similar to others in an organizational society, but also unique because it "deals explicitly with ultimate reality which transcends ordinary space and time" and is "the sacramental means of human fulfillment, a way to unitive consciousness of Absolute Being." In viewing the Church in this way, Richard combined in a truly original way his seminary training in theology, his primary sociological training as an organizational analyst, and his recent explorations into phenomenology of religion and transpersonal psychology.

Goodbye Father emerged from Richard's life, and by his own account is "an expression of who I am and who stands together with me," for he could not sepa-

rate theory from practice. David McKee describes his friendship with Richard as a Eucharistic relationship: "Every table we sat at, and there were many, we were conscious of God's presence, of the Christ in one another. Our time together felt consecrated, and always involved a giving to each other with expressions of the heart." To McKee, "Richard Schoenherr was the gate to the sheepfold, the embodiment of Christ who brought me back to this crazy institution [the Catholic Church]. An encounter with the Holy is such an awesome thing for an individual and a community of people, there is a necessity for protection, for a priest such as Richard Schoenherr who can lead us in, through, and out of the experience. His deep sense of the sacred made entrance, immersion, and exit from the mystery possible for others. He was just a little bigger than we were."

Kate Winters, a Catholic chaplain and close friend, saw Richard accept people as they were, attending to them in an intimate way that made reciprocal — or as Buber would say, *I-Thou* — relationships possible. "His love was both expansive and inclusive, a reflection of his relationship with his wife Judy. He loved and let himself be loved. He was not afraid to feel and to express, to give and to take solace and comfort. The way he taught his friends, his students, and his Church was just part of the expansiveness of his priesthood." Winters realized that "Richard was an expression of the Universal Church. Those who spoke at his funeral included children, gays and lesbians, former priests and those denied the priesthood, and many who worshipped and believed differently than he did. All those rejected by the Church came together in him at the table."

As Richard knew and taught, Ultimate Reality encompasses paradox. Paradox was well integrated in the unity and diversity of vision and pragmatism, gentleness and strength, silence and speech, rationalism and intuition that was celebrated in Richard's life and at his funeral. Though part of his life's work is accessible in print, he left his greatest legacy in the transformed lives of family, friends, students, colleagues, acquaintances, and admirers. As a priest is a mediator between a people and their God, so Richard Schoenherr lived and worked in mediation. As a priest helps open a liminal space between the mundane and the Ultimate Reality, so Richard Schoenherr lived and worked in that space. As a priest is sacrificer, so Richard Schoenherr blessed and broke the bread of his life and poured out a libation of self.

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