

FREDERICK J. CROSSON

In Memoriam – 1926–2009

Frederick Crosson, editor of this journal from 1976 to 1982, died on December 9, 2009. Nearly two years earlier he had suffered a brain-damaging fall that left him confined and weakened in ways that painfully removed him from normal communication with family and friends. In full health, he had been not only a remarkably warm and gregarious person marked by a probing and ranging intellect and a rich spirituality, but also one who especially delighted in the significant exchanges and the specific public trust of academic life. He was among a handful of the intellectual and moral leaders on the faculty of the University of Notre Dame in the second half of the twentieth century.

Fred taught at Notre Dame from 1953 until 2007 and held endowed chairs first in the Department of Philosophy and later in the Program of Liberal Studies, the University's Great Books Program. He published more than forty-five scholarly articles, edited five books and reviewed countless others, the latter especially in his capacity over many years as Philosophy and Religion reporter for national Phi Beta Kappa's *The Key Reporter*. He was the first Catholic to become President of PBK (1997-2000).

Fred was also the first layman to serve as Dean of Notre Dame's College of Arts and Letters. He was on leave, regaining his scholarly momentum after seven years as dean, when he was asked to become editor of *The Review*. Fred's tenure as editor was the shortest among those five editors who have led *The Review*, because a serious decline in the health of his wife precipitated his reassessment of what he could handle well. As he left the Deanship in 1975 he had been called upon not only to lead *The Review* but also to become first director of the Center for the Philosophy of Religion, which he had worked to found.

Only once during his editorship did Fred make any kind of editorial statement. The occasion was the fortieth anniversary issue of *The Review* in 1978. Fred's introduction was just over a page long; in it he noted "the close relationship which has existed between *The Review* and its patron University" and concluded with an indication of how he had appropriated the tradition of the journal. He wrote of "the past and present dedication of this journal to addressing the problems of political life in its concrete forms and its cultural contexts, under historical, philosophical and theological perspectives. Those perspectives require the objectivity of scholarship, but we have never understood objectivity to entail indifference or scholarship to demand neutrality. We continue to work in the traditions of political democracy and of Catholic Christianity."

Fred himself did not publish in *The Review* save for a handful of book reviews over the years. In 1990, however, he did write a brief introduction to *The Review's* publication, under the title "Law and Liberty," of a translated chapter of Yves R. Simon's *Traité du libre arbitre*. Since we are all inclined to imitate what we truly admire, it is not surprising that what Fred wrote of Simon, his colleague on the faculty for a decade, represented his own emphasis and orientation as a teacher of political philosophy. He wrote of Simon's "genius at bringing into view the critical theoretical questions which lay behind the controversies of our public life." He noted that Simon showed Catholics "that liberal democracy and its emphasis on freedom was in no way opposed to the Catholic tradition," and he showed liberals "not only that that tradition could provide a foundation for democracy" but also that it "provided a sounder foundation than did the possessive individualism of some of the classical theories of liberal democracy."

Fred knew Eric Voegelin as well as Yves Simon and Jacques Maritain and was the first I know, at least the first outside some circles of the University of Chicago, to appreciate the significance of the work of the authors who had appeared in the Walgreen Lecture Series at Chicago as remarkable contributions to understanding the widely perceived mid-century crisis of liberal democracy. Fred's interest in Leo Strauss and the work of his students is reflected in the list of authors who appeared in the pages of *The Review* during his tenure as editor. That interest in Strauss was nourished by his long-standing friendship with the late Father Ernest Fortin, a bond also fostered by their mutual scholarly interest in St. Augustine. Fred's engagement with Strauss, like that of any sensible person, did not represent wholesale agreement with Strauss in his every interpretive move. In the five to six years before his death, Fred was especially interested in clarifying Strauss's teaching on esoteric writing and asking whether and how the esoteric dimension appeared in Christian classical writers like Augustine and Aquinas. This inquiry brought him to distinguish a Christian notion of "latent" meaning over against the esoteric that he saw Strauss opening in our understanding of the great tradition of political philosophy. The work of Fred's final years is reflected and emphasized in a collection of his essays that he began to prepare for publication in the months before his fall. Colleagues of his have carried the work forward, and specific word on the publication of *Ten Philosophical Essays in the Christian Tradition* is expected soon.

This portrayal of Fred as editor of *The Review of Politics* and as a student and teacher of political philosophy would distort the configuration of his professional life if it did not emphasize his love of teaching and commitment to excellence in it. His first love as a teacher, or better, as a facilitator of liberal education, was for the role of being leading questioner in a Great Books seminar. For him the key to deft guidance of discussion was greater and greater understanding of the text. He emphasized the simple human good and happiness that came from greater understanding of who we are and where we are in time and in the universe. I found especially meaningful

an observation in his address upon winning the Sheedy Teaching Award for the College. Fred said, "To be better informed, but also to reflect on and to understand that information, is to expand not only our memory banks, but the scope, the articulation, of the everyday world we live in, to enrich the meaningfulness of our daily experience. Learning can help us to see more, to see otherwise, to discern what we never noticed. *The more you know, the more you can actually see and hear and feel.*" The good of such education was personal, yet in speaking on behalf of liberal education in various national and campus contexts, he was ever attentive to the bearing on good citizenship in all our communities of such expanded and truly understanding minds. Fred welcomed the outstanding student, but he never understood his teaching vocation to be centered on further propagating the professorial ranks or professional philosophy. For years now, his students of earlier years have especially looked forward to his appearance as seminar leader on a reunion weekend or in a summer "Return to the Classics" program. One of his students from his early years of teaching has specifically remarked on his reaching out to struggling students and his being at that time nearly alone among the faculty to socialize with students. Other undergraduate students who became successful professors in political theory and philosophy noted that Fred taught one "how to teach political philosophy" and that "his combination of personal integrity, intellectual depth, and spiritual acuteness was unique." They said that Fred had inspired them to become teachers and to hold themselves as well as their students to the highest standards of excellence. Katherine Kersten, among the very first women to take a Notre Dame bachelor's degree, herself a mother of four, businesswoman, lawyer, educator, and noted columnist, showed in her comments upon Fred's death that his students could perceive the full significance of the gift of this man. She observed that "there are few minds like his in the university world today—few with such a broad grasp of the Western tradition and the best that has been thought and said. There are certainly few who can lead students with such love and skill to ponder the good, the true and the beautiful."

—Walter Nicgorski