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American Morals and the Future, The Thoughts of Monsignor John Tracy Ellis

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“If we abandon the moral sense that is taught in the Catholic schools, we might as well close (them).”

Monsignor John Tracy Ellis, author, professor and Church historian made the comment during an interview here. The former Catholic University professor touched on a variety of topics, saying he is optimistic about the future of Catholic schools but worried about Catholics’ acceptance of the moral standards of the nation as a whole.

Some of his other observations were: “Americans in general are woefully anti-intellectual. It’s notoriously true in Catholic ranks.” Catholics have paid a “very costly price” to be accepted in American society. “I wonder if the people’s reaching out to Jimmy Carter isn’t some sign of their reaching out for someone with a moral sense?”

Monsignor John Tracy Ellis

Non-Catholic schools, Monsignor Ellis said, “Probably have much more educational material, laboratories, and maybe some trained personnel, but the moral sense is all-important.” “In some instances, that element has faded out, and I think there was a great confusion for many. I think the confusion is lifting. I think there is a return to sanity.”

There has been “dawning consciousness of the folly that had gone on in many elementary schools,” Monsignor Ellis asserted. As a result he feels parochial schools are better off than they were eight or ten years ago.

The “folly,” the noted historian said was “an excessive eagerness for innovation.” Change is a law of life, he added, but “a fair number of people in our schools had gotten into a sort of frenzy of change – anything that came along so long as it was new.”

Monsignor Ellis said he once found a guideline for a parochial school that stated: “We protect the right of the child not to learn.” “Nonsense,” the priest exclaimed, saying such an attitude is

the culmination of “19th century individualism” which said, “I will do what I please, no matter who says anything to the contrary.”

Monsignor Ellis said he is very encouraged by the National Opinion Research Center survey that showed a large majority of Catholic parents favor Catholic schools and are willing to sacrifice to keep them open. “I doubt that they would say that ‘we think the training of the mind is better in the Catholic schools.’ The main element is the thought of getting some kind of moral training to protect them against the almost ferocious society that has descended on the United States.”

Turning to the political forum, Monsignor Ellis said: “Every effort should be made by every group in the republic to arouse a moral sense of the American people.” That is the only way the nation can survive, he added.

“It sounds discouraging. I wish I could sound otherwise, but all I can speak is what I now to be true.”

Anti-intellectualism – “the attitude of the mind of so many that learning is a process to be followed by the rather eccentric, freakish people” – is “all too real” among American Catholics, Monsignor Ellis noted.

“The intense practicality” of Americans leads to their anti-intellectualism,” Monsignor Ellis claimed.” “The great goal of American life is to make money. Everything else is subordinated to that.”

Biographical Note

Born 30 July 1905 in Seneca, Illinois to Elmer Ellis and Ida Murphy Ellis, Monsignor Ellis received his A.B. from St. Viator College, Bourbonnais, Illinois in 1927 and his A.M. and Ph.D. from the Catholic University of America (CUA) in 1928 and 1930 respectively, with a dissertation in Medieval church history. While studying history at CUA, he was a student of Peter Guilday. He taught at St. Viator, 1930-1932, and the College of St. Teresa, Winona, Minnesota, 1932-1934, before returning to CUA to join the Sulpician Seminary (now the Theological College).

Soon afterwards, he began teaching in the history department part time in addition to his theological studies. He was ordained a priest June 5, 1938 in the Church of Saint Mary of the Angels at the College of St. Teresa, Winona, by Francis M. Kelly, bishop of Winona. When asked in 1941 to begin teaching American Church history, he first took a year's leave of absence to prepare for his new subject matter, studying at Harvard and other institutions. This became a turning point in his career and settled him firmly within the field of American Church history.

In 1947 he became ordinary professor of church history at CUA. In addition to teaching, in 1941 he became managing editor of the Catholic Historical Review as well as secretary (later president) of the American Catholic Historical Association. He was also president of the American Society of Church History.

Beginning in 1963, he taught at the University of San Francisco for twelve years. He was also a visiting professor at Brown, Notre Dame and Mount Saint Mary's universities; the Graduate Theological Union at Berkeley; and the Gregorian and Angelicum universities and the North American College in Rome. Returning to CUA in 1976 as Professorial Lecturer in Church History, he

taught in both the theology and church history departments until suffering a stroke in 1989. He died October 16, 1992.

Ellis's lectureship at the North American College in Rome coincided with the fourth session of the Second Vatican Council, and he was able to attend the council in the mornings and lecture in the evenings. A highlight for Ellis was September 21, 1965, when the Declaration on Religious Freedom, later promulgated as *Dignitatis Humanae*, was approved. In later years, Ellis wrote that this was a rare opportunity to see history being made.

He was called the dean of American Catholic church historians, and it is difficult to underestimate his impact as a teacher to a generation of Catholic historians. He published twenty books, which include the Life of James Cardinal Gibbons, American Catholicism, Catholics in Colonial America, and The Formative Years of the Catholic University of America. In 1955, in a seminal speech and essay entitled "American Catholics and the Intellectual Life," he attacked the academic quality of Catholic seminaries, colleges, and universities whose shortcomings resulted from a "self-imposed ghetto mentality." Some officials and educators were greatly offended but Ellis was later credited for the resulting renewal of Catholic scholarship. He also advocated more active roles for parishioners in church affairs and he called for greater acknowledgment of church transgressions such as the Inquisition.

In high demand as a lecturer and orator, Ellis received numerous honorary degrees and awards throughout his long career, including the John Gilmary Shea Prize and the *Laetare Medal*. In 1985, Ellis was presented with the festschrift *Studies in Catholic History: in Honor of John Tracy Ellis*, on the occasion of his eightieth birthday, July 30. Pope Pius XII named him a domestic prelate (monsignor) in 1955, and in 1989 Pope John Paul II made him a protonotary apostolic, the highest honor for a priest short of becoming a bishop.



Photo from University Archives, Catholic University of America

Monsignor John Tracy Ellis with Archbishop Patrick O'Donnell, June 1961