

IN MEMORIAM: AVERY CARDINAL DULLES
1918 – 2008

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In Saint Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, the Apostle to the Gentiles must confront the disunity of the Christians in this important Roman provincial city. Having received reports that Christians there had resorted to saying they belong to Paul, others to Apollos, and still others to Cephas, Paul asks rhetorically if Christ is divided. Is Paul the one who had been crucified for them? And are Christians baptized in his name?

While bearing the name Christian, it was clear that the Corinthians had found some kind of favor, some kind of advantage in aligning themselves with distinctive parties, a kind of church within the Church. These parties were obviously not authorized to operate by the men whose names they co-opted. As the party mentality threatened the unity of Christ's Body two millennia ago, Paul's denunciation of it then is a lesson which is timeless.

In our own day, the party mentality in the Church has been especially pronounced and not all escape its clutches—not even theologians. Some in the theological guild have practiced what might be called a partisan theology, casting their lot with a certain camp, perhaps in the expectation of reaping a share in the spoils system of the academy or else being lionized by the media.

Avery Robert Dulles was not this kind of theologian. He didn't practice a theology of partisanship. He never joined a theological rooting section.

When the agnosticism of his youth could no longer compete with the mature equanimity of faith, Dulles found himself asking to be admitted to the fullness of communion with the Catholic Church. Born into a distinguished Protestant family in 1918, Dulles' decision to become a Catholic while an undergraduate at Harvard was followed a few years later by a decision to become a Jesuit. Ordained in 1956 by Cardinal Spellman, Dulles then embarked on a long and illustrious career as an academic, publishing some twenty-three books and hundreds of articles before his death on December 12th of last year.

Among the twenty-three volumes there is *Models of the Church* (1974). When it first appeared, some saw in this work the hand of one who had chosen a side in the theological wars pitting the teaching office of the Church against creative theologians. I for one did not take this to be true. As it was the text for my undergraduate course in ecclesiology, I came in time to view it and *Models of Revelation* (1983) as

characteristic of the Dulles way. The Dulles way, in my estimation, was an evenhandedness in descriptive exercises. This same trait, by the way, is in evidence in the work of Joseph Ratzinger the theologian.

The evenhandedness of Dulles was closely connected to a patience and caution until decisive action on principle was necessary. At just about the same time that *Models of the Church* was published, the Hartford Appeal for Theological Affirmation (1975) was issued. The Hartford Appeal was a stiff rejoinder to the secularization of Harvey Cox's city and the decided preference for religious niceties over Christian dogma which was so ascendant at the time in much theological discourse. Fr. Richard Neuhaus later called Dulles' signature on the Hartford Appeal an example of the latter's determination to think with the Church.

Thinking with the Church is an orientation which emerges out of prayer, study, and pastoral engagement. This last aspect, pastoral engagement, consists—in no small degree—of dialogue with others. In a 1996 lecture, Dulles observed “[w]hen Christians engage in dialogue, they do so with the hope of making [the] one Word better known. In a sense, therefore, Christianity is monologic. Authentic dialogue would be futile unless it helped us to hear the one divine Word.” We must listen to God first so that we can then listen to others. His word is infinitely more important than ours.

I recall being present for another lecture of Dulles, this one coming after he was created a cardinal in 2001. The Cardinal was asked—in a question-and-answer period following his speech—what he had relied upon in his own prayer. He replied briefly that scripture and dogma had sustained him. Dogma is the Church's articulation of God's truth. To think with the Church, we must listen to what she says, believing always that her word is superior to ours.

Cardinal Dulles remained productive to the end. Unable to speak the words of his last public lecture, a Jesuit confrere spoke them for him. He wrote these poignant words:

Suffering and diminishment are not the greatest of evils but are normal ingredients in life, especially in old age. They are to be expected as elements of a full human existence. Well into my 90th year I have been able to work productively. As I become increasingly paralyzed and unable to speak, I can identify with the many paralytics and mute persons in the Gospels, grateful for the loving and skillful care I receive and for the hope of ever-lasting life in Christ. If the Lord now calls me to a period of weakness, I know well that his power can be made perfect in infirmity. Blessed be the name of the Lord!

Suffering and diminishment are not the greatest evils when they occur naturally, but they can be caused by a partisan approach to theology and the Church. Partisanship removes the good faith which should characterize our efforts to know Christ and serve him and replaces it with an ideology. By his lucid thinking, clear writing and thoughtful speech, Avery Dulles sought always to build up Christ's Body, never reducing its magnificence. May he know fully now the glory and splendor of one who has run the good race and kept the faith. (cf. 2 Tim 4:7)

Tu es sacerdos in aeternum. Requiescat in pace.