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Gregory Baum: Seminal theologian, man of faith and friend

By Father John Walsh Special to The Suburban Oct 25, 2017

Gregory Baum breathed life into the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) and has left the world an inheritance of dialogue. He contributed to the writing of the document *Nostra Aetate* which literally repaired 2000 years of bitter and inimical relations between Catholics and Jews. Today Christian-Jewish dialogue, and more especially Catholic-Jewish dialogue, is palpable in the most recent document *Between Jerusalem and Rome* which representatives from all branches of Judaism presented to Pope Francis on August 31, 2017.

Gregory was one of the leading theologians to propose on-going fraternal dialogues and when he introduced himself to Catholic-Muslim dialogue he supported the Fetullah Gülen movement by writing a defense of his work throughout the world. As a critical theologian he considered every question asked of him or others and reflected upon them to rethink and reinterpret sacred scripture and to draw from Papal and other Church documents to respond to their quandaries. He also wondered why bishops and priests had not read the documents. Gregory proposed a secular-religious dialogue and in reading the works of humanitarians he recognized those values that could be shared. No mountain was too high to climb and no river too deep to cross.

Gregory was a man of deep faith. His faith was centered on Jesus in the Gospels and no one should ever be left behind. His faith led him to be concerned about social justice for all of humanity. He approached his new home in Quebec with the same rigor as Liberation theologians had in South America. He defended the desire of French-speaking Quebecers for self-governance and saw Canada as an asymmetrical Canada. In his reflections on the Holocaust his faith questioned theism and he adopted the paradigm of panentheism: God was active in the world and the world was in God. In a small booklet on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of *Pacem In Terris* he explained the rereading of John XXIII's encyclical by those who were committed and engaged in Quebec as people

of faith. He concluded, in part, that these people of faith say that God gives them the impulse in history to push them to liberate those who have been oppressed and to free them from those structures that have caused their pain and suffering.

His faith was transformed by his study of sociology and was rooted in his post-Holocaust reinterpretation of Providence, prayer, God. He was greatly influenced by Maurice Blondel, of the school of Modernism, whose thoughts were the foundation of the theological underpinnings of Vatican II. He said that an extrinsicist God, a God apart from the world, a God over and against us, doesn't exist. His faith made him a man of prayer. In his wry sense of humor he said: I have never prayed so often for a Pope but that has changed since Pope Francis has been elected. He was happy to see how Pope Francis was renewing the Church. A few months before his death he thought of starting a blog to discuss the theology of Pope Francis. Maybe someone will follow through with his idea.

For almost thirty years we were friends. Our regular meals together were moments to which I believe we both looked forward. His memory was phenomenal and he shared openly about his development as an Augustinian priest, his growth as a human being with a new understanding of psychology, his relationship with Shirley, his homosexuality and his partner Normand, his treasury of long-standing friendships, his theological influences, and in all of these many hours he was peaceful and accepting of what life had offered him. He never complained but rejoiced in the Lord always. He truly believed that his whole life was to seek out the presence of grace, the gifts of God.

The loss of Gregory will be felt by many. Who will speak with a strong voice for the church that is "semper reformanda?" Where are the critical theologians who will accept the views of others with understanding and propose dialogue as the first and last resort? The title of his last book about his life is *The Oil Has Not Run Dry – The Story of My Theological Pathway*. It will not run dry as his writings and his thoughts are visited and revisited in the many years to come. His final words in the book are "While I do not speculate about what happens to me after I die, I cling to the message of Christ's resurrection whenever I think of the men, women and children killed in genocides, armed conflicts, and famines. Rabbi Irving Grenberg proposed that a theological statement is valid only if it can be repeated in the presence of burning children – a horror that was part of the Holocaust. Looking on them I could not say God is all powerful, nor that God is good. The one utterance I could make is *resurrexit*. *Resurrexit*, Christ is risen is a good note on which to close the story of my theological pathways."



It is also the note on which to close a life lived to the fullest ... resuurexit sciut dixit. ... he is risen as he said.

The most powerful inspiration Gregory has left me is that God is to be found in my own personal experience and that God's forgiveness and love go beyond anything we can ever imagine. Life is tru a grace. Gregory's life was a grace for many.

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