

Benedict M. Ashley, O.P.
(May 3, 1915–February 23, 2013): R.I.P.

MARK S. LATKOVIC
Sacred Heart Major Seminary
Detroit, MI

A VERY long life—such as the remarkable one that Benedict Ashley lived—does not guarantee that the individual has used those many years well. Fr. Ashley used his many years on this earth—almost a century—to advance the Kingdom of God as a priest philosopher-theologian. But before turning his life to Jesus Christ (he was baptized in 1938) and entering the Dominican Order in the 1940s (he was ordained in 1948), Ashley was a follower of Marx, not the Master. His autobiography, *Barefoot Journeying* (New Priory Press, 2013), could very well be titled *From Socialism to the Savior*. In the pages of that large book you will find Fr. Ashley’s “conversion story” told in both prose and poetry. The many poetic writings of his that are included give us great insight into the mind and heart of a man who, at the University of Chicago in the early 1930s, had the hope of becoming a novelist and poet.

I first met Fr. Ashley in August of 1988, when I was assigned to be his graduate research assistant after beginning studies for an STL degree at the just-founded Pontifical John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family in Washington, DC. As the cliché goes, “It seems just like yesterday,” and not twenty-five years ago. I was privileged to take six courses with Fr. Ashley and, as a Father Michael J. McGivney Fellow, to work with him on various writing projects for two academic years. What impressed me most about him was his humility, despite the incredible breadth and depth of his learning. We students would often lament that when our Fr. “Benny” passed away, a great deal of knowledge and wisdom would pass with him. Thankfully, our esteemed teacher lived two plus decades more after those early days of the “JPII Institute”—the unassuming Fr. Ashley

was the original “pillar” on which it stood—and his nearly two dozen books and hundreds of articles will live on even longer. (Many more were in the works or awaiting publication when he died.)

When one looks back at Fr. Ashley’s incredibly full life, as he himself does in his autobiography, one thereby immerses oneself in a virtual “Who’s Who” of twentieth- and early twenty-first-century Catholicism. From his birth in May 1915, during the First World War, to the second decade of the Third Millennium, we encounter the figures of his esteemed teachers Mortimer J. Adler (himself a convert to Catholicism in his mid-90s; he died at age 98) and Robert Maynard Hutchins in the “Great Books” program at the University of Chicago. We meet other revered teachers such as Waldemar Gurian and Yves Simon at the University of Notre Dame (where Ashley received a doctorate in political philosophy in 1941). We come in contact with his Dominican confreres William H. Kane, William A. Wallace, and James A. Weisheipl in the 1950s. (Ashley studied for a doctorate in philosophy at the Aquinas Institute in River Forest, Illinois, earning it in 1951.) From there, we move to the 1960s and the Second Vatican Council (1962–65), the events and debates surrounding it, and the controversy over the encyclical of Pope Paul VI on birth control, *Humanae vitae* (1968). *Barefoot Journeying* takes us all the way up to our present day, with its own debates, especially over the foundations of morality, biotechnology, secularism, and more.

What may impress one most about Ashley’s thought is the deep familiarity with and respect for modern science that is on display in many of his best-known writings. Already, in the early 1950s, Ashley was collaborating with his fellow Dominicans in founding the Albertus Magnus Lyceum (1951–69)—a think tank of sorts to bring modern science and theology into dialogue with each other. For these “River Forest School” Thomists, modern science is largely continuous with Aristotelian natural philosophy/natural science. Further, they have argued, St. Thomas’s metaphysics must be grounded in a sound philosophy of nature lest it lack a solid foundation. Ashley was still thinking about these questions up to the end of his life, evidenced by some of his most recent books, the magisterial *The Way toward Wisdom* (2006) and *How Science Enriches Theology* (co-authored with John Deely, 2012).

But Ashley has also taken the thought of St. Thomas and applied it fruitfully in the areas of the body-person, moral theology, bioethics, apologetics, and psychology, to mention just a few areas. His *Theologies of the Body* (1985/1995) is a massively learned work that ranges over many different understandings of the human person, from the perspective of a variety of fields—ancient philosophy, Christianity, secular humanism, and

modern science among others. Ashley's *Living the Truth in Love* (1996) is what he calls "a biblical introduction to moral theology"; it is organized by the four cardinal virtues and the three theological virtues, which themselves are coordinated with each other. *Health Care Ethics*, now in its fifth edition (2006), is Ashley's (and his late co-author Kevin O'Rourke, O.P.) major contribution to theological bioethics. *Choosing a World-View and Value-System* (2000) is Ashley's effort to show the truth of Christianity by bringing it into dialogue with other, non-Christian religions. Hence, its subtitle: *An Ecumenical Apologetics*. And *Healing for Freedom*, to be released in 2013, is Fr. Ashley's attempt to bring to bear "a Christian perspective on personhood and psychotherapy."

In *Barefoot Journeying*, the last book to be published during his lifetime, Fr. Ashley also brings us into contact with Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas—his two favorite philosophers. Also, Ashley's family and many friends (Herbert Schwartz and Leo Shields, to name only two) are spread out across his autobiography like the Great Plains of Kansas and Oklahoma, where he was born and raised. As with all stories of friends and family, there is much joy as well as much heartbreak—the "trials," as he calls them. You can read about such people and events in his engaging memoir. Many know Ashley only in his many public roles: for example, as priest, author, teacher, lecturer, educator, consultant, and administrator. Unlike his scholarly works, in *Barefoot Journeying* Fr. Ashley reveals himself in a more personal way, decade-by-decade. But more importantly, he reveals our "wisest and best friend" (*ST* I–II, q. 108, a. 4), whom he came to know these last six and a half decades—the one who transformed him. That friend is Jesus Christ.

I consider myself very blessed to have known Fr. Ashley and studied with him. I will miss him but forever treasure his memory. N.V

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