

The Write Stuff: The Influence of Western Pennsylvania on Writing and Faith

Regis Flaherty

Regis Flaherty served as master of ceremonies for the Catholic Writers Dinner. The director of Gilmary Retreat Center, he is the author of six books. His most recent book, God's on the Phone: Stories of Grace in Action (Servant Books) will be released September 1, 2011.

Western Pennsylvania has been blessed with many Catholic writers whose words and works have inspired generations to grow in their faith and love of God.

In 1880, Monsignor Andrew A. Lambing laid the foundation for what would become the Catholic Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania.

Monsignor Lambing was not only an exceptional priest and historian, he was a writer.

Monsignor Lambing translated and wrote the introduction to and notes for one of the most precious accounts of our faith here in Western Pennsylvania: The Register of Fort Duquesne.

The founding of Fort Duquesne marked the establishment of Catholic worship in present-day Pittsburgh. The Register of Fort Duquesne, published in 1885, sheds light on the pastoral concern of the early French missionaries for the spiritual welfare of the soldiers, Catholic settlers, and Native Americans of this land at the confluence of the three rivers.

In Monsignor Lambing, we find a quality important to all Catholic writers: remembrance. In remembering and honoring the past in the many books he wrote, Monsignor Lambing testified to the faith and those forbearers who shared it.

Ethel Danforth graduated from Seton Hill High School and the University of Pittsburgh. It was not enough to write flawless copy, she would later say, "if you do not have the gumption to see an editor and get him to print it." Ethel Danforth had gumption -

another quality for which Catholic writers are known. Graduating during the Great Depression, she was hired on as a reporter for the Pittsburgh Press. In 1933, she left her beat and Western Pennsylvania to enter the Maryknoll Sisters. As Sister Maria Del Rey, she served as a missionary in the Philippines for 11 years including three years in a concentration camp. Sister Maria Del Rey made the ultimate sacrifice as a writer - she destroyed her prison journal lest it incriminate her and the other sisters.

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During the 1950s, she wrote several books about her ongoing missionary

adventures as well as a vocation book well-known to a generation of Catholic girls, "Bernie Becomes a Nun." And, then, there was Father Lawrence G. Lovasik. Father Lovasik was the oldest of eight children born in 1913 to Slovak immigrants in Tarentum. A Society of the Divine Word priest, Father Lovasik labored as a home missionary in the coal and steel regions of the eastern United States and later preached missions and gave retreats.

Frustrated that he could not reach more souls, Father Lovasik took up writing. "At least ninety percent of any writer's accomplishments," Father later said, "are due to plain and ordinary hard work." By the time Father Lovasik died in 1986, his "plain and ordinary hard work" had yielded more than 30 books and 75 pamphlets on the spiritual life. Children might know him best for the many books he wrote about saints and sacraments.

The book "The Hidden Power of Kindness: A

Practical Handbook for Souls Who Dare to Transform the World, One Deed at a Time” still inspires adults. We recall Father Lovasik as a writer known for his virtue of perseverance.

Remembrance of, and respect for the past, gumption, and perseverance tell only part of the story of our Western Pennsylvania Catholic writers. It is their end goal that we must never forget. Sister Maria Del Ray perhaps said it best. “No doubt about it,” the nun and author wrote, “writing is a little bit of Purgatory. The only thing that drives me to it – besides my superiors – is the thought that it might lead souls to God.” And—she added, “I hate to see a good story go by the board.”

Remembrance of and respect for the past, gumption, perseverance, and the desire to lead all to Christ are the marks of yesteryear’s and today’s

Catholic writers. On April 25, 2009, the Catholic Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania celebrated the area’s writing heritage by hosting the Catholic Writers Dinner. Sponsored in part by Our Sunday Visitor and the Gumberg Library of Duquesne University, the dinner drew more than 125 guests to hear four local Catholic writers speak of the influence of western Pennsylvania on their faith and writing.

The dinner was held at the Power Center of Duquesne University. Father Joseph Mele, Ph.D., a board member of the Catholic Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania and currently Rector of Saint Paul Seminary, gave the Benediction.

In this and future issues of Gathered Fragments, the Catholic Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania will share the remarks of our writer honorees.



**left: Catholic Writers Dinner group photo
below: Regis Flaherty, master of ceremonies**

