Obituary: George H. Tavard / Respected theology professor at Mount Mercy College
Feb. 6, 1922 - Aug. 13, 2007

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By Eleanor Chute, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

The Rev. George H. Tavard was a theology professor for just seven years -- 1959 to 1966 -- at Mount Mercy College, now Carlow University, but his impact was so great that for decades alumnae looked forward to seeing him at reunions.

Father Tavard, 85, died suddenly Monday in a Paris airport. He had been visiting a brother and a sister in France and was on his way back to Boston, where he resided.

Father Tavard, who chaired the theology department at Mount Mercy, was a charming man with a French accent -- he was born in Nancy, France -- and the ability to teach students at the then women's college how to think for themselves.

"He was invaluable in my life," said Catherine Linarelli-Hammack, of Arlington, Va., class of 1963. "It was an awakening experience to take a theology course from him. It wasn't the usual catechism, laid out stuff. It was historical and thought-provoking. ... He taught me to think on my own about a lot of things."

Father Tavard officiated at her wedding 42 years ago, and he visited the couple's home enough that their grandchildren referred to him as "Uncle Tavard."

He awoke at 5:30 each morning to pray.

"There was just this feeling of continued intellectual pursuit and peace when he was with you," Ms. Linarelli-Hammack said.

Cassie Greco Ruane, of Shadyside, class of 1965, said that as she visited other Catholic colleges for student government activities she saw what Father Tavard was teaching was "way beyond" the others.

"We were learning 20th century theology," she said. "It was an intellectually rigorous approach and a departure from what was standard fare in Catholic colleges at the time."

Former Carlow President Sister Grace Ann Geibel was not at Mount Mercy during Father Tavard's tenure but saw him repeatedly over the years.

She said, "If you ever met him, what you would see is a simple person, very quiet, but he just showed this genuine interest and warmth. This came through to the students," she said.

She said students looked forward to seeing him at reunions and "hung on every word" when he said a closing Mass.

His impact reached beyond Mount Mercy.

During his Mount Mercy years, Father Tavard attended Vatican Council II as a "peritus conciliaris" named by Pope John XXIII and consultant to the Pontifical Secretariat for the Unity of Christians, according to the Web site of his order, the Augustinians of the Assumption.

Jubilee, a Catholic magazine, once called him "one of the most articulate ecumenists in America."

His biography on the Web notes that he has "lectured and written extensively in the areas of historical theology, ecumenism and spirituality."

His work included being part of dialogues between the Catholic church and the World Methodist Council as well as the Catholic church and the Anglican church and the Catholic church and Lutherans.

Father Tavard studied at the Grand Seminaire de Nancy and the Catholic Faculties of Lyons in France and earned a doctorate of sacred theology from Lyons. He was ordained in 1947.

In addition to Mount Mercy, he taught at Assumption College, Penn State University and Methodist Theological School in Ohio, where he retired as professor emeritus in 1990. He also has been a visiting professor at various universities, including Catholic University of America and Princeton Theological Seminary.

A memorial is planned for the alumni reunion Mass at 11:30 a.m. Sept. 30 in St. Agnes Center of Carlow University.

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