



# Gathered Fragments

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## A Giant Named John Wright

By Patrick G. D. Riley

I was at a meeting in Pittsburgh in 1998, when a friend suggested out of the blue that I write a memoir of Cardinal John J. Wright. The idea struck me as happy on several counts. The Cardinal was an important figure both in the Second Vatican Council and also in the crisis over *Humanae Vitae*, so he held a certain historical interest. His persona was larger than life: eloquent, deliciously witty, and with ways that were more than winning. Moreover his later life was one long drama: he fell from the pinnacle of admiration to the pits of vilification, only for doing his duty. Hence I felt that the book, if it did anything approximating justice to its subject, would not be without readers.

Moreover, my friend pointed out that as a memoir rather than a full biography, it wouldn't require years tracking down the minutiae of the Cardinal's life; I could knock it out in months. Or so we thought.

But these were only *conditiones sine quibus non*, that is, reasons why undertaking this book would not be an exercise in futility. The reason I actually wanted to undertake this work (I say this because it is still under way) came under the heading of *pietas*, a favorite term of the Cardinal's. Crudely

transliterated, *pietas* is of course piety, but that does little justice to the term itself. *Pietas* means an attempt to show gratitude for what can never be fully or even adequately repaid. Cardinal Wright had given me, as he gave to great and small, and to so many, a joy in his company, a light from his mind, an inspiration from his example, that I felt honor-bound

to do this service to his memory. Moreover I felt the book might stand in aid of the causes he held so dear, causes that consumed his life, causes for which he suffered misunderstanding and humiliation.

I also saw a need for this book. Those who knew the Cardinal would soon pass from the scene, and their

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*Then-Bishop Wright visits a young friend at Pittsburgh's Rosalia Foundling Home.*

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memories of him would vanish with them. These memories demanded to be recorded for those yet unborn, men and women the Cardinal would never know but whose good he held passionately at heart. That the convictions of this great churchman would be lost to posterity, that delight in this man would never be known and enjoyed by future generations, seemed to me a cruel deprivation.

Is there an equivalent of *pietas* toward those yet to be born? If there is, I felt bound to pay them that debt.

What qualifies me to write this book? I had known Wright in Rome during the years of the Second Vatican Council, and from

the time he returned in 1969 as Prefect of the Clergy Congregation until my return to the United States in 1974, found myself on intimate terms with him.

Here I should make it clear that I was far from the only person of inconsequence whom Wright brought into his confidence. Great and small won his sincere and passionate interest. Appreciation of the immense import of each and every person was integral to his faith. I happen to have met two men who claimed to be his best friend, undoubtedly for good reason, and have read the same claim by a woman; I am told there are literally dozens more, and believe they are far from deluded.

What I am convinced brought us close together was our shared conviction — tragically uncommon in those terrible years — that contraception was the pivot on which sexual morality, hence family solidity, hence again social stability, would turn. On his return to Rome in 1969, Cardinal Wright referred obliquely but unmistakably to an essay I had published making this claim; it had appeared

shortly before Pope Paul VI reaffirmed the Church's millennial condemnation of contraception. This gave us a unity of purpose that, once again, makes the writing of his memoir a duty not to be shirked.

Nor can I exaggerate the role that the Church's stand on contraception played in what must be called the drama of his final years. He died in 1979, aged 70, blind and scarcely able to move, after years of physical suffering. Yet the moral pains he bore after the See of Peter — to which he was utterly devoted — had reaffirmed

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the Church's condemnation of contraception, pains he endured because he supported that millennial tradition and the See that reaffirmed it, were far worse.

This most lovable man was literally a martyr — the word means witness — to purity of marriage. He knew its desecration is a stain on modern society outdone in ugliness only by the murder of countless millions, including the littlest of children. He knew that society might seem to be in its death throes, but that so long as the living cell, that "little church" known as the family, held firm by maintaining that lifelong devoted marriage which is its foundation, a new society would be born, all the stronger for remembering what strove to destroy it. And if the memory of that champion of the family, of husbands and wives and little children, somehow remains, the family and the broader society will be all the stronger. I could not in conscience, then, fail to undertake this book on John Cardinal Wright.

*Patrick Riley worked for years as Rome correspondent for major print and broadcast media. He later served in the White House. Author of several books, he holds a doctorate in political philosophy from the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome. He writes from Milwaukee, Wisconsin.*

## Catholic Schools Then and Now

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They have something to say as we make our decisions, live our lives and strive to fulfill the mission the Church has given to every age.

Our Catholic ancestors would teach us the values of sacrifice, parental responsibility, Catholic identity, school choice and citizenship.

If we fail to heed the history of our schools, we will not have the privilege of repeating it.

*Father Stubna is diocesan secretary for education and co-author of What Catholics Believe: A Pocket Catechism (Our Sunday Visitor, 1999). This article is condensed from the address he gave to the Catholic Historical Society on Feb. 4, 1996.*

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