News



by Joshua J. McElwee

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A young Irish theologian with a global reputation as an eminent ecumenist and moral ethicist has died unexpectedly, leaving theologians across the world shocked at the loss to their field and of a colleague known for his kindness and support of others.

Gerard Mannion, who had been a senior research fellow at Georgetown University's Berkley Center since 2014, died Sept. 21 after apparently collapsing during a morning jog in the Washington area. He was 48.

Mannion's sudden death left theologians on several continents struggling to evaluate the life and work of a colleague and friend often remembered for his gregarious nature and as the lively heart of national and international theological gatherings.

Among those posting tributes on social media were academics from the U.S., Ireland, Britain, the Philippines, and Nigeria.

Richard Gaillardetz, a theologian at Boston College and a former president of the Catholic Theological Society of America, called Mannion "an indefatigable theological entrepreneur, a fine scholar, and a wonderful colleague and conversation partner."

"He will be greatly missed in the theological guild and by all who knew him," Gaillardetz said in a Facebook post.

Agnes Brazal, a theologian at De La Salle University in Manila and a former president of the Catholic Theological Society of the Philippines, said in a post that Mannion's published works were "among our major sources" in the area of ecclesiology, or the study of the shape and structure of the global church.

Tina Beattie, a theologian at the University of Roehampton in London who had known Mannion personally for decades, said in an emotional email to NCR that she could not remember when they first met because it felt as if Mannion had always been there.

"It's hard to imagine the Catholic theological community without this friend and colleague, with his passionate commitments and convictions, his intensity of life, his laughter and sometimes his fury, and his amazing capacity to bring people together and to bring a gathering alive," said Beattie.

"Gerard was an Irish Catholic in a sense in which it's impossible to separate those identities … driven by a love of the church of Vatican II, an ecumenical zeal and a commitment to Catholic social teaching which were the hallmarks of all his theological endeavors," she said.

Mannion was the author or editor of nearly two dozen books on a range of theological topics. He was known most in recent years for his work in ecumenism and for his efforts to build global, cross-cultural bridges among colleagues across continents.

At the time of his death, he was the president of the International Network of Societies for Catholic Theology, a group created in 1996 on the initiative of renowned German theologian and priest Peter Hünermann to connect the various national and regional Catholic theological societies.

Mannion had been helping organize the network's next global assembly, to be held in Rome in September 2020 on the theme "A Kairos for Catholic Theology."

Mannion was also the founding chair of the Ecclesiological Investigations International Research Network, a group that he began in 2005 as an initiative tied to the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion.

Partly through Mannion's organizational persistence, the research network has since hosted 17 of its own conferences in locations across the world. The most recent of the conferences was held in July in Stuttgart, Germany, and focused on the ongoing dialogues between Orthodox and Eastern Catholic Churches.

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Whether the host or an attendee of a theological gathering, Mannion was known as a proponent of after-hours networking. He often took large groups, sometimes including this reporter, out for dinner or drinks after the last keynote address of the day, frequently paying the sometimes-exorbitant bill before others had even seen it.

Fr. Stan Chu Ilo, a Nigerian theologian who teaches at DePaul University in Chicago, remembered one such dinner on the sidelines of a meeting in Sarajevo, Bosnia-Herzegovina, last year for the Catholic Theological Ethics in the World Church group.

Ilo said that Mannion sat next to him at the dinner, just so they could speak about the possibility of organizing the Ecclesiological Investigations group's first conference in Africa.

"Gerard was truly an outstanding scholar with a magnanimous spirit, who dreamed and worked for a church that reflects fully the many faces of God and the many faces of the people of God," said Ilo on Facebook.

"He had unmatchable energy for building networks, partnerships, friendships, and bridges," he said. "He is one of the most important Catholic theologians of our age and accomplished in his short life what many of us could only think of in our dreams."

Mannion had recently edited *Pope Francis and the Future of Catholicism:* Evangelii Gaudium *and the Papal Agenda* for Cambridge University Press and *Where We Dwell in Common: The Quest for Dialogue in the Twenty-First Century* for Palgrave Macmillan.

Born Sept. 25, 1970, Mannion earned his bachelor's degree from King's College at Cambridge University and then earned his doctorate at New College at Oxford University. He had previously held teaching posts at Oxford, the University of Leeds, and the University of Liverpool in the UK and at the Catholic University of Leuven in Belgium.

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>
> *— Fr. Stan Chu Ilo*
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Before coming to Georgetown, Mannion had taught at the University of San Diego, where he served as the director of the institution's Frances G. Harpst Center for Catholic Thought and Culture.

Mannion's tenure at San Diego sparked some unintended controversy when in 2012 he invited Beattie to take on a visiting fellowship at the Harpst Center.

Mary Lyons, then the president of the university, canceled Beattie's appointment less than two weeks before her expected arrival in California, citing pressure from financial contributors over some of Beattie's writings.

Lyons' action led to an international outcry from theologians and other academics, who said it would stifle academic freedom. In place of one of Beattie's canceled lectures at San Diego, Mannion helped organize a public panel discussion on freedom of thought at Catholic universities.

"Gerard fought an unrelenting battle for the academic freedom of Catholic intellectuals and we shared what Andy Warhol would describe as 15 minutes of fame as academics and students across the country took up the cause," Beattie remembered in her email.

"But this was only one incident in a long and enduring friendship," she said. "I owe to Gerard some of my happiest memories of Catholic theological gatherings — and some of my worst hangovers."

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