Opinion
Appreciation
Passionist Father Donald P. Senior, president emeritus and chancellor of Catholic Theological

Passionist Fr. Donald P. Senior, president emeritus and chancellor of Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, delivers the English-language keynote address during the annual New York Catholic Bible Summit June 18, 2016, at Cathedral High School in New York City. Senior died Nov. 8, 2022, at age 82. (CNS photo/Gregory A. Shemitz)



by Barbara Reid

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

December 5, 2022
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

It is with great gratitude and deep sorrow that the family of Fr. Donald Senior, his Passionist community, and the community of Catholic Theological Union celebrates the life and ministry of our dear friend, brother, colleague and leader. Father Don, a world-renowned biblical scholar, who served on the CTU faculty for 50 years, 23 of those as president and eight more as chancellor, died peacefully on Nov. 8.

Don was born Jan. 1, 1940, in Philadelphia, the second of four children born to parents Margaret and Vincent. His family moved to Louisville, Kentucky, when he was young, where he grew up with his older brother, Vincent, and his younger sisters, Miriam and Rita. In high school, he met the Passionists, whom he joined in 1960. In his reflections on his 60th anniversary with the community in 2020, he spoke of how the Passionists' sense of mission and excitement for taking the Gospel

out into the world attracted him. And, indeed, it was this sense of mission and sharing the Gospel that was at the center of his 55 years of priestly ministry.

Jesus' words to his followers at the Last Supper express well the way that Don lived the Gospel: "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13). "Dear friends" was how Don most frequently began his homilies and teachings. He had a unique way of making everyone he met feel like they were a beloved friend.

In the decades that he led CTU as president, he was constantly making friends and inviting them to participate in its mission: to prepare effective leaders for the church, ready to witness to Christ's good news of justice, love and peace. These were not utilitarian friendships, but genuinely deep relationships that he forged by sharing meals; leading trips to the Holy Land; lending a listening ear and wise counsel; and presiding at friends' family weddings, baptisms and funerals. Making friends for CTU was a way he helped so many people deepen their relationship with Jesus.



Passionist Fr. Donald Senior, then president of Catholic Theological Union, stands next to his sister Miriam's paintings during the Summer Institute on Theology and Disability at CTU in Chicago, July 16-20, 2012. He died Nov. 8 at age 82. (NCR photo/Teresa Malcolm)

His friendships extended to peoples of many different faiths, particularly among the Jewish and Muslim communities, which led to the establishment of programs at CTU in Catholic-Jewish Studies and Catholic-Muslim Studies. He was a leader within the Council of Religious Leaders of Metropolitan Chicago and served a term as its president. Don's friendships in ecumenical circles also led to him taking on the presidency of the Association of Theological Schools of the U.S. and Canada.

He cultivated strong friendships with the leaders of the church in Chicago, including Cardinals Joseph Bernardin, Francis George and Blase Cupich. At Bernardin's request, he established the Bernardin Center at CTU to continue the legacy of peacebuilding, interreligious dialogue and seeking common ground, priorities dear to the cardinal's heart. His friendships extended to Rome, where he served two terms on the Pontifical Biblical Commission.

What enabled Don to make friends so easily was his genuine interest in others, his humility and his selflessness in serving others. As CTU board chair, Tom Brown, remarked at Don's funeral liturgy, he had "not an iota of arrogance or entitlement or clericalism … not a scintilla of selfishness or pride or gamesmanship. His mission was spreading the good news of God's love for us, and he spread that good news in every action he took and every idea he espoused."

These qualities were cultivated throughout his life, rooted in deep prayer and intense study of and living out the Scriptures. Early in his Passionist vocation, Don was asked to set aside his own desires to serve as a missionary in South Korea and instead go to Louvain, Belgium, to pursue a doctorate in Scripture. He became a highly sought teacher, preacher, speaker and retreat director, as he was a master at making biblical scholarship accessible to anyone who wanted to know more about the Bible and through it, to deepen their faith. His scholarship was equally appreciated by his colleagues in the academy, especially at the Catholic Biblical Association, where he was a frequent presenter and served as president.

Advertisement

Among his many books and recordings, one with which he was most delighted was the most recently completed Jerome Biblical Commentary for the 21st Century (Bloomsbury, 2022), which he edited along with John Collins, Gina Hens-Piazza and myself. We three readily agreed that without Don's leadership, this project would likely not have come to be. Don delighted in showcasing the great contributions that have been made in Catholic biblical scholarship in the last decades, as this third edition of Jerome included emerging scholars from all over the globe along with senior exegetes, and displays all the critical methods and approaches now in use by serious biblical scholars.

This disposition to respond to the needs of the church in ways that did not align with his own aspirations took a new form when Don was asked to serve as CTU president in 1987. He agreed to be acting president for one year on the condition that he would not be considered for the position in the ensuing search. Seven years later, he returned to full-time teaching, only to be asked to resume the presidency again from 1997-2013, a ministry to which he gave his whole heart and soul.

One of the things Don enjoyed most was introducing friends to the lands of the Bible. He led innumerable trips to Israel, Jordan, Greece, Turkey and Egypt, setting fellow pilgrims on fire with love for the Scriptures, for the Holy Lands and for the people who live there today.

He was a friend, mentor, colleague, brother, and leader, living Christ's mission and that of the Passionists to touch with compassion the crucified of today. We have seen the power of the Gospel at work in him and rejoice in the hope that he is now enjoying the fullness of Christ's presence, whom he loved and served so well.