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In Memory of Karl Malden 1912-2009 R.I.P.

by Sr. Rose Pacatte

NCR Today

In Memory of Karl Malden 1912-2009 R.I.P.

The great Oscar-winning actor Karl Malden died yesterday. He is remembered for being a fine character actor. Charles Gibson, the ABC news anchor, quoted Malden as saying he was the only actor in Hollywood whose nose qualified him for handicapped parking.

According to the IMDB, his last role was as a Catholic priest, Fr. Thomas Cavanaugh, former pastor to President Bartlett (Martin Sheen) in "The West Wing" episode #14, "Take this Sabbath Day" in 2000. He was called in by Bartlett for counsel about whether or not to commute the death penalty of a prisoner. It remains one of my favorite episodes of all time, both from the series, and from television. Whenever you doubt that television can be and is, sometimes, art, watch this episode again.

I just spoke with Fr. Willy Raymond at Family Theater and he said that Karl Malden was a Catholic. Fr. Willy also told a wonderful story that he heard when Karl Malden addressed a symposium on the death penalty.

Malden told the group that when he appeared on the set to shoot that episode of "The West Wing" he brought with him the stole and breviary he had used in "On the Waterfront," and that everyone on the set, actors, crew, assistants, etc., all went up to touch these items with reverence because of their link to this great film.

It is fascinating to think that 46 years after the film was released its hold on the popular and religious imagination remained strong.

Fr. Cavanaugh: You know, you remind me of the man that lived by the river. He heard a radio report that the river was going to rush up and flood the town. And that all the residents should evacuate their homes. But the man said, 'I'm religious. I pray. God loves me. God will save me.' The waters rose up. A guy in a row boat came along and he shouted, 'Hey, hey you! You in there. The town is flooding. Let me take you to safety.' But the man shouted back, 'I'm religious. I pray. God loves me. God will save me.' A helicopter was hovering overhead. And a guy with a megaphone shouted, 'Hey you, you down there. The town is flooding. Let me drop this ladder and I'll take you to safety.' But the man shouted back that he was religious, that he prayed, that God loved him and that God will take him to safety. Well? the man drowned. And standing at the gates of St. Peter, he demanded an audience with God. 'Lord,' he said, 'I'm a religious man, I pray. I thought you loved me. Why did this happen?' God said, 'I sent you a radio report, a helicopter, and a guy in a rowboat. What the hell are you doing here?'

Malden was the Rev. Paul Ford in Disney's 1960 version of "Pollyanna." I think people may dismiss this film as saccherine but actually it is filled with wisdom. The reverend, and the whole town, learned a lot from Pollyanna. To his credit, the reverend listened to her, really heard her, before anyone else.

Then who will ever forget Karl Malden as Father Barry in "On the Waterfront"?

Here is a link to an online article by Michael Paulson of online version of *The Boston Globe*: Karl Malden recalled for priest portrayal

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Here's a link to a great story about Malden and the priest on whom his Fr. Pete Barry character was based: Fr. John Corridan, SJ. The article is from the Jesuit magazine *The Company*: The Waterfront Priest by James Fisher 2003.

Fr. Barry quotes from "On the Waterfront":

Fr. Barry: Some people think the Crucifixion only took place on Calvary. Well, they better wise up!

Fr. Barry: You want to know what's wrong with our waterfront? It's the love of a lousy buck. It's making love of a buck ? -the cushy job ? -more important than the love of man!

Terry: If I spill, my life ain't worth a nickel.

Fr. Barry: And how much is your soul worth if you don't?

Fr. Barry: Isn't it simple as one, two, three? One: The working conditions are bad. Two: They're bad because the mob does the hiring. And three: The only way we can break the mob is to stop letting them get away with murder.

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love of a buck -- the cushy job -- more important than the love of man!

As already mentioned, Karl Malden had an interesting pop culture link with the Catholic church. He portrayed priests but the 1956 film "Baby Doll," in which he had a lead role, was condemned by the Legion of Decency for "carnal suggestiveness."

Karl Malden, interestingly enough, grew up in Gary, Indiana. He was married to his wife, Mona Greenburg, for more than 70 years. What a wonderful legacy to leave the world -- a life of art and integrity.

[This is a cross posting with Sr. Rose's blog <http://sisterrose.wordpress.com>.]

Karl Malden Bio Wikipedia

Karl Malden Internet Movie Database

Karl Malden Obituary YahooNews

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