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Dr. Sean O'Reilly - Saint, Scholar, Gentleman

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Saint, Scholar, Gentleman

The following was reprinted with permission from the Christendom College Newsletter. Dr. O'Reilly was a Region III director of the National Federation of Catholic Physicians' Guilds.

Dr. Sean O'Reilly who gave of himself unsparingly to Christendom College since its beginnings, died on April 19, 1982. Day after day, month after month he toiled endlessly for the college, giving of his influence and wide contacts, giving unstingily of his money, asking and begging for alms for the college, cultivating the interest of many people till his efforts bore fruit in their help, visiting the highly placed and the low, asking for their aid, sending his children to the college, lecturing at the college, giving his sabbatical leave completely to the efforts of raising funds. Only his wife must have any real idea of how he gave of himself to Christendom.

He was born in one of the most beautiful places on earth, Killybegs, Co. Kerry in Ireland, where he had hoped to return in five years time. His father was master of the local school and was well known and loved. An Irishman of prominence said recently to Dr. O'Reilly, "Your father was the holiest man in Killybegs, and when I was a boy I modeled myself on him and I still do."

Sean was a brilliant man. The father of a large family, he was director of the neurobiology research training program at George Washington University Medical School. Beyond that great achievement, his talents ranged far, wide and deep, but always in a self-effacing way so that few knew of his varied talents and accomplishments. There were early indi-

cations of his future accomplishments: piano recitals at age 5, translations from Latin to Greek and reading Aristotle in the original at age 16. He graduated from high school with four university scholarships, was top of his class in medical school, and did postgraduate studies at Oxford.

The ethical issues in his profession and problems of the Church dominated the last decade of his writings and his efforts. His path led from combats over sex education in his children's local Catholic school to battles with physicians on issues of abortion and killing the terminally ill . . . not unknown in his area of medicine. His advice was sought by doctors, theologians, and dedicated politicians. One of the first publications of this phase of his life, "In the Image of God," on sex education, is being republished by the Daughters of St. Paul. Other writings have over 300,000 in circulation. A more recent publication, *Bioethics and the Limits of Science*, is growing in reputation as a brilliant work.

A very short time with Sean was all one needed to know that he was an extraordinary man. He gave knowledge away as readily as he did money, and in his profession knowledge and insight meant wealth, fame and prestige. He never sought recognition, and whatever came his way was the result of his generosity of effort in situations thrust upon him. "If you are doing it for gratitude, forget it," he would often say. He frequently borrowed on the strength of his professional name if, when asked for alms, he had nothing more to give. "If you wait until you can afford to give, you can never afford it," was another of his sayings. His only material love was of books and that so that he could serve others better with his immense intellect. Just a few months prior to his death, while in debt from his earlier giving to the college, he pledged \$10,000 over the next five years — not as loans but as outright gifts, putting into practice one more of his sayings: "It is only justice to give of your surplus. It is charity to give of your need."

He had a great love of suffering and could cover things so well with humor. Recounting his first heart attack of early April, he said he searched for his pulse and heartbeat and finding none he commented: "I was dead standing up." All this was made possible by his love of daily Mass, the rosary and meditation.

Those who knew him understand how the early Church canonized her saints: by a profound belief shared by all that here is a man to be loved and imitated should we desire to see God. Christendom now has its own special intercessor in heaven.

His body lies in peace in his beloved Aghadoe on the lakes of Killarney. And how heaven welcomed him! As his body passed the house where he was born, on the way up to the small graveyard above the lake, a breeze blew a heavy shower of pink blossoms over the stone wall onto the coffin. Everyone noticed it and smiled with the intuition that if God so comforted those who were left behind, how must He have received his faithful son, Sean.