Charlie Rice — an Un-eulogy

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At Charlie Rice's wake I whimsically asked his son Joe, "So, did your father leave any instructions regarding the funeral?" Joe smiled and pulled a folded piece of paper from his pocket. "It's good that you asked. I haven't had a chance to pore over this yet."

What Joe then unfolded was vintage Charlie — think of it as Charlie's 'transitional' *Observer* column — complete with an opening excerpt from *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* on funerals. What he especially emphasized was that a Catholic funeral is not meant to be a celebration of the life of the deceased and that "the homily in particular must avoid the literary genre of funeral eulogy" (no. 1688). Charlie even threatened to "haunt eternally" anyone who would dare to give a eulogy or "disguised eulogy" at either his wake or his funeral. I suspect that the threat was meant to extend to post-funereal reflections as well. I will proceed with caution.

Even though Charlie was largely unaware of it, he played a crucial role in the lives of a handful of us Catholic junior faculty members in the mid-1980's. We could see the doctrinal, moral, and educational devastation already wrought by the 'progressivism' that had taken over Notre Dame, and we could also discern clearly the trajectory of infidelity along which the university was travelling into the future — so much so that hardly anything scandalous that has happened since the mid-1980's has come as a shock to us. (Included among us were two women who did not survive their tenure decisions; one of them is today a college president and the other is a prominent Catholic educator who has been invited to lecture all over the world.)

It was important for us at that time to be able to look to senior colleagues for advice and encouragement and inspiration, and the two who loomed largest in this respect were Ralph McInerny and Charlie Rice. Ralph and Charlie could hardly have differed more in literary style, the witty novelist versus the plainspoken lawyer. But what they shared in common was something much deeper: not just a passion for *the truth*, but a passion for the *life-giving* truth *of the Faith* and, beyond that, a passion for *sharing* that life-giving truth. Both of them were pilloried for it, as is to be expected in this vale of tears. But like the Apostles before them, they departed from Notre Dame and from this world "rejoicing that they were accounted worthy to suffer reproach for the name of Jesus" (Acts 4:41).

On a personal note, one of the joys of my life has been getting to know several of Charlie's ten children (and even a couple of the grandchildren). If it is true that "by their fruits you will know them," then Charlie and Mary have little to be concerned about on Judgment Day. And what a death! Charlie was surrounded by Mary and the children up to the end. He went out praying the Divine Mercy chaplet with them — and, of course, bantering with the nurse. He took no pain medicine for the last few days, so that he could remain more alert and so that, naturally (or is it supernaturally?), he would have more to offer up.

Now just to make sure that this reflection does not count as a eulogy, I will report that I have some slight evidence that Charlie has spent at least a bit of time in Purgatory. After the funeral I had to come back to campus, and that meant a late-morning search for a parking space near what my son Peter has dubbed the Isengard Construction Project. In such straits, I usually invoke a holy soul for help in finding

a space close in — or as close in as is possible nowadays. (Bishop Sheen seems to be really good at parking spaces, by the way.) On that day I decided to give Charlie a chance to show his stuff. Sad to say, he failed miserably, and I ended up somewhere out near the baseball stadium. To be sure, this evidence is defeasible; maybe an already beatified Charlie thought it better for me to get some exercise. Still, I can't hide my disappointment ...

So, Charlie, maybe you weren't so great after all! (There, that should do it.)