

“Raymond E. Brown and the Catholic Biblical Renewal”

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Transcript:

[1] Jonathan Armstrong: Today it is our distinguished honor to be speaking with Father Donald Senior. Father Senior is a Catholic priest of the Passionist order and President Emeritus, Chancellor, and Professor of New Testament at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago. He's also the author of the text that we'll be discussing today. Raymond E. Brown and the Catholic Biblical Renewal available from Paulist press in 2018. Father Senior, thank you so much for joining us today.

[2] Donald Senior: Thank you. It's my pleasure.

[3] Jonathan Armstrong: Father Senior, as we look at this life that you've reconstructed of Father Raymond Brown, you note early that the problem of sources is very real in the project that you've brought together. Father Brown didn't leave many personal accounts whatsoever of his life, of course, is published Bibliography is huge, but very few accounts of his personal life. How did you go about reconstructing the life of Father Raymond Brown?

[4] Donald Senior: Well, you're right, he was not an introspective type of person, I think, very outward directed. So, he didn't keep a diary or reflect a lot on his own reactions. However, he did write a number of significant letters that are preserved in the archives at St. Mary's University in Baltimore, which is run by the order to achieve along the Sulpicians. And some of the letters. The majority of them were very businesslike, you know, arrangements for speaks. lectures he was giving or regarding his teaching and so on. But he did write a number of very heartfelt letters to his religious superior. And this had to do with some of the moves that he decided to make leaving St. Mary's and going to Union Theological Seminary, they had to do with some of the hurt, he felt the kind of criticism he was suffering. And he shared that with his religious superior. And then there were a number of letters that were preserved by people to whom he wrote, which were very personable, heartfelt, he had many strong friendships in his life.

[5] And so, one of the big sources besides the archives, and I had full access to them, at the outset of the religious order that was sort of sponsoring this biography said, you know, don't-don't make it a hate geography. Joe, tell it like it is. And so, I had full access to all of his personal papers and so on. But he, his friends, you know, had deep memories of him, I interviewed maybe 30 people that I knew him: colleagues, former students, and so on. And then the other source was that in his writings, he in the preface to them, many of these had been, like, originated his lectures that he gave, and there would be some occasion or some issue or some controversy. And he would always introduce this writing with something of an autobiographical account of where he stood. So cumulatively, those sources enabled me to put things together. And I had

known him fairly well, I wouldn't try to claim no close personal associate of his, but I didn't know him, and I thought of him as a mentor. So, I had a deep impression of his personality as well.

[6] Jonathan Armstrong: Father Senior, would you be willing to share perhaps a favorite personal memory of Father Raymond Brown?

[7] Donald Senior: Ah, that's a good question. I went to him in his last sort of stage of his professional life. He was out at Menlo Park at the seminary. They're also run by the Sulpicians at that time St. Patrick's, it's the seminary for the San Francisco archdiocese. And they had a program for like a renewal program for priests, like a sabbatical program and several times I was invited to, to give some input into that. And when Ray Brown was there, he always wanted me to come around and, you know, sit for a few minutes in his office, and the first time I went there, I was startled that he was working away, and he had the television on. And I think of it something like you know, one of these soap operas. And I, you know, was talking with them and listening to this that and I couldn't help say, I said Ray do you-is this a special program? He was sort of startled as if he discovered for the first time that it was on. But I learned that this was part of his personal habit, he was this very profound scholar, and he was listening to the soaps and sort of background noise in his in his work, I don't know if that's the most exciting thing. But that's what comes to mind when I think of, he was quite a mixture, you know, have a profound scholar and incredible work habits, and also very down to earth, very human person. So that was the mix.

[8] Jonathan Armstrong: Thank you very much, Father, senior for sharing that. And Father senior in your portrait of Raymond Brown, you-you show him to be not only this internationally acclaimed scholar, but also as a devoted priest, how do you see father browns, priestly life affecting his academic lectures and presentations?

[9] Donald Senior: Well, I think there's a very close, close connection to that. He never thought of himself. And he says this a number of times, in conversations he had, and letters and so on, he never thought of himself as a scholar, simply for the scholar's sake. He wanted to pursue the truth, but he thought of himself as a minister of the word, and that his intent was to bring the beauty and richness of the Scripture to as many people as he could. And he was living at a time this is part of the, you know, sort of the thesis, I guess, you would say, of this biography of him that it was a very extraordinary time in Catholicism, when, with the Second Vatican Council, the scriptures are being opened up much more to the ordinary Catholic, the lay Catholic. And Brown was very prominent in that and something of a spearhead for that.

[10] And he saw that, you know, this biblical study, in the profound sense of the term would amplify his ministry of the word. And he was a very devout priest. He said, mass every day when he could, he wasn't the people around him said he wasn't fanatical about it, if circumstances didn't permit it, he didn't get uptight. But he was very

devoted. He preached every weekend, when he was able at a local parish. And he, you know, was very faithful that way. And that, he saw that as integral to what his personal mission was, and His work of scholarship, it was never like a byline or something detach from his own religious call.

[11] Jonathan Armstrong: Father Senior, Raymond brown produced both works for specialists. And for the general reader, what are some of the books that we might want to pick up and read from Raymond brown that you would first recommend to the general reader?

[12] Donald Senior: Yeah, just to preface it, one of the interesting things about him that his popular works, of which he wrote many, and gave so many lectures and workshops, it's incredible. The amount of these were his these were not like byproducts of his more serious work, he would be working at the same time, on, you know, very scholarly studies of the Gospel of John and also doing a, you know, a retreat talks on the Gospel of John. So, he saw those popular works, as-as important as his major works contributing to, you know, serious scholarship. But the one book that he himself seemed to prize the most, is a book that might be recommended to someone trying to dive into his thought, and it's called *The Churches the Apostles Left Behind*. And this actually originated as a series of lectures that he gave it at Union Theological Seminary in Richmond, Virginia. And it was an ecumenical context.

[13] And what he does in that book, he studies the period in the first century, when the first generation of apostle's nigh witness and passed away, and you start to have the production of some of the New Testament writings, and he was interested like the titles suggests what, what did these writers and like the last quarter of the first century, inspired by the Spirit, what did they see as crucial for the churches moved out into history? And how did they sort of wrap that into the letters and texts that were produced during this period. And since this originated as a lecture series, it's very accessible work, even though what it has to say is very profound. And it's also very ecumenical in its spirit. Maybe another one, I would say that would show the courage of Brown was the book entitled, *Critical Issues Facing the Church*. And this was a collection of previous lectures, he had given a different occasion. And, you know, there's sort of data there, back to the late 60s, the 70s, and early 80s, and so on.

[14] But he took up issues like, you know, what is the basis, the biblical basis for the Catholic priesthood in the scriptures? How do we square that, or the Episcopal order, or ordination of women, or the nature of the resurrection that's on issues that, you know, are challenging issues, and his spirit and writing these is not at all reductionist. But he tries to he has one of his Greek convictions was that, you know, the pursuit of truth is the work of the Spirit. And so, one should not be afraid to pursue the historical background, as best we can the context of these early texts, but also being loyal to the convictions of the church and the traditions of the church that are at the core of our Christian faith. So, he tried to show to bridge those, and this collection of very difficult

challenging issues, some of them, a lot of them pretty much debated at this time in the wake of the Vatican Council. He was not afraid to tackle them and to offer his-his perspectives and what he was seeking in all of these was the biblical roots of the biblical foundations for these church practices or the evolution of church life. That's part of our history.

[15] Jonathan Armstrong: Father Senior thank you so much for that reflection, Father, senior you demonstrate or show Father Raymond Browns career to be peppered or consistently touched by Controversy. And as I understand it, the basic controversy concerned Raymond Browns use of historical critical methods, methods developed in the 19th century in German universities mostly, then come over to the United States and to other universities. And it seems that Browns writings never were completely outside of that controversy. Now you present Raymond Browns works in a very positive light. From your perspective, what is it that the critics failed to recognize about Raymond Browns scholarship and use of the historical critical method?

[16] Donald Senior: Yes, a very important question that goes to the heart of a lot of the things he worked on and struggled. And as you are aware, just the way you frame the question that, you know, the historical critical literary approach, in some ways to the Bible originated A lot of it in 19th century post enlightenment, Europe, and in many cases, the practitioners of these methods, couple them with a kind of reductionist perspective, kind of philosophy that was skeptical of religious phenomena of the transcendent and so on. And part of their purpose on many of them was to sort of to debunk the transcendent or spiritual dimension of the biblical text, among other things. And as a result, there was a great reaction on the part of Catholic leadership as there were with other Christian groups as well. Highly suspicious of this method, fearing that it was inevitably reductionist, anti-religious.

[17] And so, in the Catholic Church in the, especially the beginning of the 20th century, there was really a repression of critical biblical scholarship. And over time, that lessened, particularly Pope Pius the 12th and famous and cyclical, if you know, Fonti, spiritual in 1943, sort of, you know, lifted the veil And allowed for legitimacy, legitimate historical inquiry of the biblical text and the biblical history, separate from this kind of, you know, philosophical reductionist empirical spirit, as well Brown began his work as that was mushrooming, he finished in the early 50s, his professional preparation, and then he was there through the Vatican Council. And he became, he was convinced that the incarnation of that the heart of the Christian mystery, that we embrace history, we embrace the human as well as the divine, that should lead us to study the Scriptures, not only as the inspired Word of God, but is also the work of human authors, inspired by God. And so, their-their style, their history, their context, their language, and so on. All of this was a fair game for full inquiry, a to better appreciate the-the beauty and context of the Scriptures.

[18] But many of his critics still viewed the historical critical method as something that was dangerous for Catholic faith that would-brought with it skepticism that reduced people's reverence for the scriptures and so on. And they didn't rely, I think a lot of them when I was preparing this bibliography and would read some of the articles severely criticizing Brown, I was convinced they never read his stuff. Really, I mean, it sounds remarkable, but I think they were working with an idea of what they thought he was saying, and had not read his careful conclusions, his sort of threading the needle on sort of, you know, rounding from the historical basis for this house, where the, you know, biblical transcend message emerged. So, he, you know, was very prominent, he was very popular, he had wrote so much and spoke so much in Catholic circles, that he became sort of the target for a certain group, I would say a small group, Brown was revered, particularly by, by priests, by teachers and by the academic community. And he also, he was very shrewd man. He cultivated relationships with church leaders, deliberately, you know, sharing with them, talking with them, reassuring them. And this was something that was a consternation for some of his opponents, they couldn't figure out how he survived without being silenced or criticized by church authority. But he, he really, he suffered, though very much.

[19] Some of the letters we had talked about earlier, of his painful experience of, of people criticizing him for the very things that he considered most sacred, know, his commitment to the church and to sound doctrine into religious practice. People were painting him as someone who didn't care about that or was trashing it and so on. And that was very difficult for him for all of his life. So anyway, he, I think he was the point person for this for the Catholic community. And a lot of what he achieved was to make this you know, something rather serenely accepted in Catholic scholarship, to approach the Bible not only from a historical point of view, not just as an artifact, but to realize that there's historical context to the scriptures that deserves our attention.

[20] Jonathan Armstrong: Father, Senior, I've recently been working through the United States version of the Catechism of the Catholic Church. Even in the introductory pieces within the first couple chapters there they're describing the reductionism and how that needs to be removed from the formal study of the Bible reductionism in the in the language of the Catechism being there that essentially naturalism or the belief that there is no external training influence, so, and Raymond Brown was certainly not de mythologizing X to us other 20th century terminology for that project. Where are things headed in Roman Catholic Biblical Studies today, a story that you have followed through your entire career. My understanding is that many Protestant seminaries the traditional historical critical methods, so form criticism, redaction critic, isn't my understanding and perception is that those are less popular than they used to be? Where-where is Catholic biblical scholarship headed these days? If you would?

[21] Donald Senior: Oh, that's a good question. It's interesting, Raymond brown himself. The last major book that he wrote was the introduction to the New Testament. And it's a massive book. And it, you know, it would be something again, your earlier question

about what to read with. But he meant this book as an introduction for students. But it, it's somewhat formidable. No. But what it does is, it shows his thinking, towards the end of his career, he didn't know it was the end of his career, he died suddenly, but-but it had to do with just this question of the evolution, where the historical critical method was the focus, because it was sort of the battleground for legitimizing critical studies in Catholicism, at least. So, defending the validity of an historical critical approach the scripture which took up a lot of Browns energy. But as he moved along, and he, you know, learn from others, that the biblical text has layers of meaning that transcend just the historical intentionality of the original setting of it. He knew that all along, but he was attending to it. And people were giving much more attention to the texts, as they say, have a life of their own, there is a, you know, world of meaning that develops between the-the reader of the text and the biblical texts, and the readers own assumptions and social context that they bring to the reading of the Scriptures has something to do with what they discovered there. And he mentioned that in introduction to in his New Testament introduction himself.

[22] And that's where I think a lot of Catholic biblical scholarship along with a lot of other non-Catholic or Protestant scholarship as well, is exploring dimensions of the text and particularly exploring the world of the reader, and the assumptions the reader brings to this. So, you have, for example, the development of feminist perspectives. What is that a feminist Christian feminist coming to the Scriptures? What are they aware of that others might not be and what, you know, what is their suspicions about the text, some of its more patriarchal dimensions that can be offset with other readings or people from a different social and economic perspective, from a post-colonial perspective, and so on. So, you have a lot more attention to those dynamics of interpretation, and the role that our own assumptions play in it. And I would say that's very strong in Catholic biblical scholarship.

[23] The other thing I would say is that when Brown was starting out, you know, and he, one of the first major projects he started was called the drone biblical commentary, which was a major commentary with all Catholic scholars, because it was soon to be in a way a demonstration that the biblical movement was vigorous among Catholics, so it's not overt against, you know, Protestant perspectives, but, but what has happened in the years the 50 years since the council is-is a lot of collaboration and working together with Protestant scholars of various approaches, also, Catholic and evangelical scholars Catholic and mainline scholars and so on.

[24] So, that is also you know, trying to see, you know, sort of find an ecumenical bridge through the Scriptures is something very important. A final thing I might say in this realm, and this is maybe not as positive as that, because a lot of Catholic biblical scholars today, unlike previous generations, most of the biblical scholarship and browns day and so on, was exercised by priests, or religious who had had extensive theological training. prior to going into their Biblical Studies, now, today, that is less feasible. And you have a lot of wonderful Catholic scholars, men and women, women scholars now,

you know, just flourishing, but there's not the, the depth in many cases of theological background, and also the teaching opportunities that this generation of scholars would have, or often in religious studies, programs, rather than theological programs or seminary programs, so that they, they cannot really lift up the theological dimension of the biblical text.

[25] I've taught that, you know, University, Northwestern, and so on, and these are wonderful programs, but you have to be aware that the classroom there you cannot make it a confessional type of stance. So that, you know, raises a question that that one can become very specialized and very technical. But is the message, theological, spiritual message of the text is going to be transmitted? Through the ensemble of Catholic scholarship, that is a concern among many. Today in the church, how do we supply in a new circumstance? How do we supply that? Which was sort of second nature for an earlier generation of interpreters? I don't know if that makes sense or not, but

[26] Jonathan Armstrong: It certainly does. So, thank you very much. Thank you very much, Father, Sr for those reflections and comments you're making. They're just made me think, well, this probably is. It's all the more important than that. We'd be reading Brown and such scholars to take us back into a world where there were a lot there were a lot of different opportunities to access that theological dimension of the texts that you mentioned. So, Father Senior, Raymond Brown served on both the Catholic-Lutheran and also the Catholic-Methodist ecumenical dialogues. What was the impetus for Father Raymond Brown to engage this ecumenical work?

[27] Donald Senior: Again, a very good question, and it goes into his background. One thing I would say his personality was very outgoing. And he appreciated people and had so many different kinds of wonderful friendships, lifelong friendships. But more specifically, one of the great life changing experiences for Raymond Brown was going to graduate school at Johns Hopkins University, and coming under the tutelage of William Foxwell Albright, who, as you know, and people may not be aware so much today, he was probably the most outstanding American archaeologist and biblical professor of his time. He was the one who really authenticated the first fragments of the Dead Sea Scrolls personally and his, his knowledge was exceptional. And he was from a deeply religious missionary family background. And one time later in his life, Brown was asked, what did you learn from William Foxwell Albright, and he said that what it means to be a Christian gentleman, and he studied under Albright.

[28] His first seminar was on the John's gospel and the Dead Sea Scrolls, he admired Albright very much and all bright Of course, recognize that Brown was a brilliant student, but Brown, this was the first experience going back now to the late 1940s, early 50s. This was Brown's first experience in a Protestant or non-Catholic of a secular kind of context. It was interesting, he had asked his religious superior if it was okay for him to go to graduate studies at Johns Hopkins. And the superior was-was hesitant. But then he learned that Albright's wife was a Catholic, so that made it alright to go to this. But in

fact, his fellow Browns fellow students and the environment in which he was-very ecumenical and Protestant Students, Jewish students and everybody in between. And that made a very deep impression on him.

[29] He then through Albright received a fellowship in Jerusalem in the course of his doctoral studies. And he spent this time in Jerusalem and he was able to work directly with the fragments of the scrolls. And with Joseph Fitz Meyer, who became a lifelong friend, a Jesuit scholar, who was there in a fellowship before Brown, the two of them did a concordance of the Aramaic words in the Dead Sea Scrolls that have been, you know, decipher to that point. But that experience of Johns Hopkins being with Albright deeply Christian person and a wonderful scholar, and then going to the sort of the, at that time, a very exciting period, in Jerusalem with the Dead Sea Scrolls and so on. And then Brown also went to the first session of the Second Vatican Council, and his Bishop invited him he was not an official position there, but do observe for a few weeks before he began teaching it in Baltimore, and there through connections with some of the bishops that were there, they were looking for a Catholic speaker for the faith and order commission meeting that was going to take place in Montreal, and Brown was on the spot. And they said, would you do this, this young budding scholar and he, he did, and became, you know, an observer to the faith in order commission and thus launched for Brown, a very important dimension of his, his life was a collaboration, ecumenical collaboration.

[30] It led to also two very important projects, Peter in the New Testament, an ecumenical collaborative study, and then Mary in the New Testament, the same way, by a team of ecumenical scholars, he, that he carried that through all his life, he taught, ultimately at Union Theological Seminary, because he wanted to be in that context. Also. He maintained a close ties with the Mormons, he beheaded close personal friends as Mormons, and it's so interesting about him that this, he was raised in a very Catholic environment, went to Catholic schools went to Catholic seminary, you know, he was not exposed, as far as I could tell to his family life or early life to you, other than Catholic context. But that experience with the Albright and his own openness, I think, and the spirit of Second Vatican Council, which was encouraging ecumenical outreach, she really made it part of his repertoire.

[31] Jonathan Armstrong: Father, senior, we're so grateful for your reflections today. If I could close this interview with a question that I've been asking all of the interviewees on this program, and that is this. What would it mean for the church to be united today? How would we recognize this unity and what is it that we can do to pursue the Unity for which Jesus prayed in John 17?

[32] Donald Senior: Right, well, what a powerful question. to respond to one of the things first of all, where I am located here at the Catholic theological union in Chicago, we are have been for close to 50 years, part of an ecumenical collaboration among seminaries here, the association, Chicago theological schools, and several

denominations are involved in that. That means cross registration, sharing of programs and so on. And sometimes people feel that the Ecumenical Movement has has waned, but in my experience, is certainly in this setting. It has become routine. It's become an advance that has been digested and the attitudes that were prevalent in brown stays a defensive posture, certainly the part of Catholics guarding Protestants, you know, that really had a breakthrough at Vatican two is has now become routine. That's not to be naive or there are differences and competitions and so on.

[33] But I think that's one fact that, you know, there has been an advance in the ideal of one faith, one Lord, one baptism on many levels, and one of the things, I think, as far as, and in fact, brown raised this question himself, teaching at Union and his contacts with also with Judaism to with the seminary right across the street, he had very strong ties with the people there, but that the diversity of the, you know, landscape of a Christian life is to be preserved. This unity cannot mean conformity under one structure, one system, that there has to be, not only because of different cultures and, and histories, but also there are different ecclesiology ease, and he made the case that, you know, we can go to the New Testament and find, you know, different articulations of what it means to be church, valid ones, not ones that are absolutely contradictory, but perhaps complimentary.

[34] And some will accentuate the local church more some will accentuate the universality more. And I think we see that I know, from the Roman Catholic perspective, and the last couple or two or three Pope's have emphasized, you know, the question of moving towards a kind of patriarchal structure, which would, you know, allow for local articulations, regional articulations. You know, people united and fellowship, but making space, this would be particularly true of the Catholic orthodox dialogue, but it offers a glimpse of what could happen with other ecclesial bodies, as well. There's a lot to surmount. There's, you know, ancient hostilities on the part of some and there are certain features that are very different than our ecclesiology is in our, our order, and our practice. But I think there is a way there could be a way in God's providence that the unity of the church could be symbolized. Maybe, you know, from the Catholic point of view, there's a Petrine ministry, that is not, you know, holding control over the juridical aspects of the church, but is a visible sign of Christian unity, some ministry at the heart of the church that acknowledges its diversity and works for its unity.

[35] And you know that all of these dialogues and conversations and good faith collaborations, particularly on the level of the mission, will lead to something a type of unity, hard to imagine, one of the things I was struck with the last couple of years from the Middle East, I go to the Middle East a lot, and have for many, many years, and we're all aware of the anguish there. But the Patriarch Bartholomew, and Pope Francis issued a joint statement a couple of years ago, about martyrdom in the Middle East. And they noted that when the opponents of Christianity attack, Christian representatives there, they don't ask, Are you orthodox? Are you Catholic? Are you Presbyterian, or evangelical whatever, you're a Christian. And so, they're the blood of the martyrs is bringing a kind

of unity in moments of deep crisis and challenge and with us, and that transcends what can be perceived as insurmountable difficulties.

[36] There are certain circumstances where the depth of our faith is tested, and our witnesses tested and that can lead us through. So, I think you know, in the world the way things are developing, certainly in the Western world, the Christian witness may be more solitary and more challenged. The values of the Christian faith challenge that may be that will be a dynamic that brings Christians closer together and enable us to, in the midst of our diversity, also experienced the unity that Christ desired for us. So, anyway, it's a very interesting time. And I don't think the unity is going to come by finding some silver bullet. I can use that metaphors right now to go one that, you know solves all of our structural problems, I think it's going to be more on the level of mission and witness that we will find our way towards a deeper unity. And then structural expressions can follow that. So

[37] Jonathan Armstrong: It's been our extraordinary privilege today to be speaking with Father Donald senior father, Donald senior is the author of the text that we've been discussing Raymond E. Brown, and the Catholic biblical renewal available from Paulist Press. 2018. Father, senior thank you so much for your time and insights today.

[38] Donald Senior: Thank you.