

Robert F. Taft SJ (1932-2018)
In memoriam

November 2, the day on which the Roman Church celebrates the memorial of All Souls, Father Robert Taft SJ, eminent scholar and historian of Christian worship, was called by the Risen Lord to unite himself with the Divine Liturgy of heaven.

He was born in Providence (RI) on 7 January 1932 and after a long Jesuit formation begun in Iraq and finished in Leuven with post-doctoral studies, he settled in Rome in 1967, where he remained until 2012 as professor of languages and Eastern liturgies at the Pontifical Oriental Institute. His bibliography, including translations, exceeds 800 titles, but the works that made him famous were a fortunate volume on the Liturgy of the Hours in the East and in the West, and the history of the Byzantine Mass across several volumes, in the midst of being completed by the undersigned.

Much has been written on the biography, personality, works and method of Robert Taft, and whoever is interested will find in the footnote all useful information. At this moment, however, I intend to honor his memory by briefly illustrating the relations he shared with the Ateneo Sant'Anselmo.

I have known Father Robert Taft since I was twenty years old, when, after leaving my studies in Jurisprudence, I took my first steps into Eastern liturgies, not as a scholar nor as a student, but as a simple apprentice, in the Church of Sant'Antonio all'Esquilino, attended at the time also by another apprentice of the Christian East, my colleague and longtime friend, Father Manel Nin OSB, now bishop in Greece. My reflection is not scientific but rather the testimony of a friend and of a disciple.

Unlike his master Juan Mateos, even though he was repeatedly invited, Robert Taft never held courses at Sant'Anselmo. One day I asked him the reason for this stubborn refusal and, adjusting his glasses, as he used to do whenever he intended to express an important thought, he told me: "See, Stefano, I work for Sant'Anselmo in another way, and I believe that the ubiquity of professors in more teaching posts to repeat the same things in the same city is not at all ideal; rather it takes time and energy away from research. Whoever wants to attend my lessons knows where to find me".

But how did Father Robert work for Sant'Anselmo? Well, you must know that during the '90s of the last century, our Jesuit was the only non-Benedictine member of the special Commission desired by the Congress of Abbots for the Ateneo. I remember that he considered it to be a great honor and was proud of it. Together with members of the Commission, Taft found a way to manage a difficult moment of transition in the history of the PIL and suggested some unpopular measures that the other members believed had to be adopted. Once the task was finished, not infrequently in our conversations did he return to that experience, repeating to me to have wished several times, with respect to his own surroundings, for greater synergy and cooperation between the PIL and the specialization in Sacramental Theology. It was a point that he truly took very much to heart.

Along with Robert's temporary entry into Sant'Anselmo's "control center", what naturally will be remembered is his collaboration as a scholar in some activities and initiatives of the PIL and the Ateneo. I recall here his participation with a report given to the III International Congress of the PIL in 1988 on the Easter Triduum (SA 102), the International Symposium of 2004 for the 50th Anniversary of the Monastic Institute (SA 140), his contribution to the anthology in honor of the Benedictine professors Adrian Nocent (SA 95) and Jordi Pinell i Pons (SA 105), articles on the Liturgy of the Hours for the fifth volume of the manuals *Scientia Liturgica* and *Handbook for Liturgical Studies*, and the articles on Ecclesia Orans 3 (1986) and 9 (1994). Finally, in 1993, the series *Studia Anselmiana* hosted the prestigious *Festschrift* in his honor (SA 110), which saw the participation of a large number of scholars both Eastern and not, and of international caliber. There also were numerous publications of Taft in the book series of the Benedictine Saint John's University in Collegeville (MN), to which he was particularly connected also through personal friendship with a great scholar like Aidan Kavanagh OSB.

But at Sant'Anselmo, Robert also could count on good friends like the late Father Daniel Gelsi OSB, monk of Chevetogne, who died prematurely in 1988, and above all Father Adrian Nocent. At that time, I was a young student who had the privilege once each year of participating – but without opening his mouth! – at the dinner of “the greats”. It was entertaining and at the same time formative to witness the passionate debate on liturgical themes and the latest church events between Father Adrian and Father Robert, ably encouraged by Father Daniel. Once I became a professor, my wife Elena and I invited Nocent and Taft to our house, often together with other

colleagues. The obligatory dish was the "carbonara" that Bob would cook for everyone, generously abundant in the ingredients and leaving the kitchen in miserable condition. Adrian Nocent, on the other hand, would bring some excellent bottles of red, of which he was an appreciated connoisseur.

Finally, it was at Sant'Anselmo that Bob Taft held his last Roman lesson. On 12 December 2012, a few days before his definitive return to Boston, the PIL organized a seminar reserved for doctoral students, where some young students from the PIO who were writing their theses under my direction met their Anselmian colleagues to share their research. Taft was present and intervened at the end with a very passionate reflection on his experience as a scholar: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ioSRYT_OyQ&t=1s

Another aspect that is important for me to highlight, at a more personal level, is how Taft would join together, without difficulty, his religious choice with the demands of research. When someone would ask him, "Father, how have you managed to write so much?" Taft would respond: "I carried out my religious obedience. The superiors asked me to fulfill my vocation as a professor: well, I have done so. I have dedicated myself to research, to teaching; I have directed dissertations and theses, and I have participated in and organized conventions, being sure to respond to what has been asked of me". And he would add: "I feel absolutely no guilt if I have not preached spiritual exercises right and left, or heard confessions in some communities of nuns, because this was not the obedience that had been asked of me". In full coherence with his Jesuit being, Bob was well aware that teaching in a pontifical Faculty is an ecclesial service, and so either it is of quality, or else service becomes disservice. It is in the name of this profound coherence with the mission, entrusted in this specific case to the Society of Jesus, that he deliberately rejected a series of confreres whom his superiors had proposed to him at the time as possible successors at the Pontifical Oriental Institute. Taft was not a man of compromise, the corporate logic of belonging did not take hold of him, and the future of his school would have been provided for differently.

So Robert Taft was a teacher not – or not only – because of his immense scientific production, but because he cultivated and launched a significant number of disciples into research. Names like Gabriele Winkler, the first female ordinary professor of Liturgiewissenschaft (Tübingen), now emerita, and Maxwell Johnson of Notre Dame, who have left lasting contributions in their respective fields of inquiry, are more significant examples. These

disciples in turn have broadened the circle with new entries and, even if not everywhere, today Eastern liturgical science is in good shape, and the average age of its enthusiasts is relatively low. Currently at Sant'Anselmo, beyond the undersigned, is yet another disciple of the Roman school of Eastern liturgy, Professor Thomas Pott OSB, who wrote his doctoral thesis under the direction of Taft on Byzantine liturgical reform, published in French and translated into English.

Here conclude the memories of Robert Taft's ties to and collaboration with Sant'Anselmo, put together in a bit of a hurry and also under the effect of uncontainable emotion. I met Bob in person for the last time at Yale University's Institute of Sacred Music at the end of April 2014, on the occasion of a Symposium in which we both took part. He was reading with difficulty a text printed in 16-point, but his spirit was strong and his jokes witty. On the last day, we embraced one another and said goodbye, knowing that most probably, it would be the last time, and it really was. Bidding farewell, Bob told me: "Courage, Stefano, my legacy is in your hands; make it bear fruit". This challenging legacy now belongs in some way also to Sant'Anselmo, our daily field of work.

May the Lord welcome Robert into the tents of the just, may He give him rest where the light of His face shines and where the song of the saved resounds. And with the Byzantine liturgy of the dead we say: "Eternal your memory, unforgettable brother".

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Εὐλόγημα. Studies in honor of Robert Taft, SJ, edited by E. Carr, S. Parenti, A.A. Thiermeyer, E. Velkovska (Studia Anselmiana 110 / Analecta Liturgica 17), Rome 1993.

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S. Parenti, "Il lascito di Robert F. Taft alla scienza liturgica", *Studi sull'Oriente Cristiano* 16/1 (2012), 35-49.