

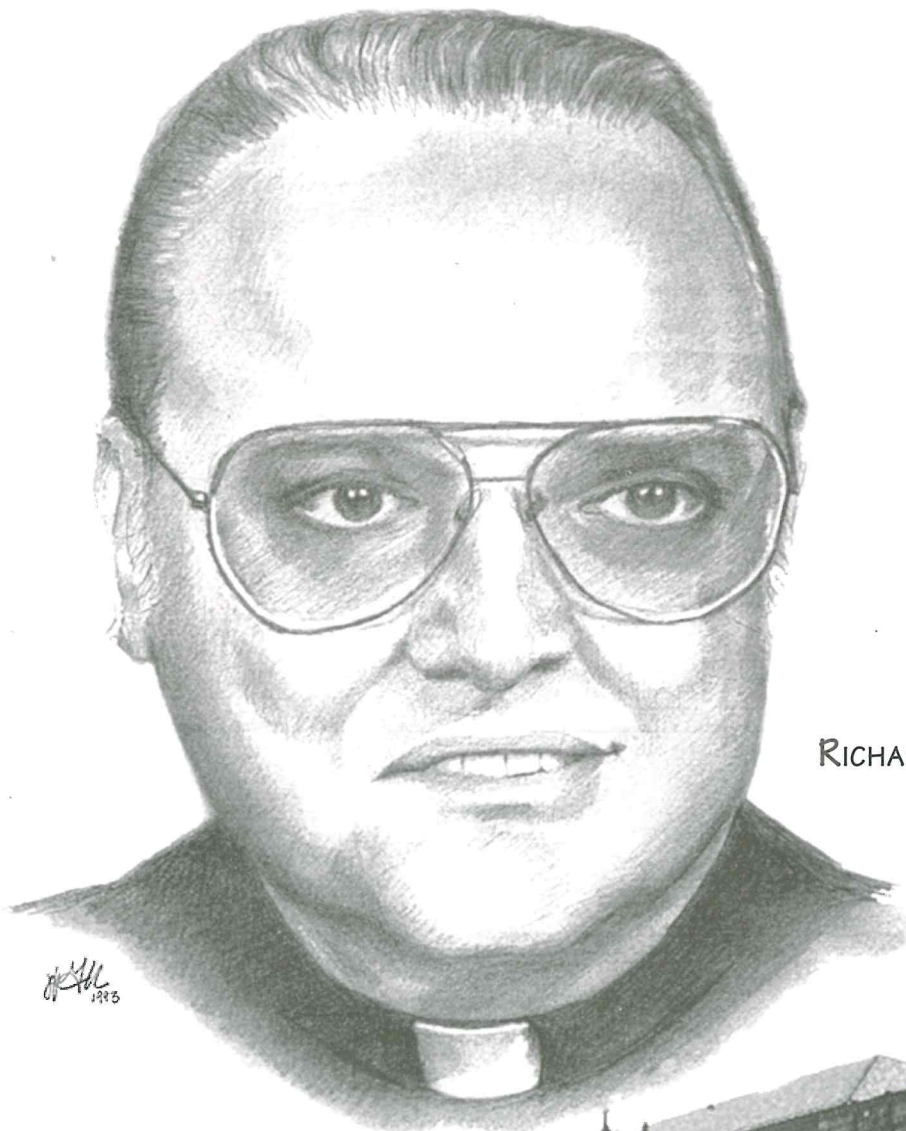
PRESIDENT'S REPORT INSIDE

Highlights



Winter '93

University of Detroit Jesuit High School and Academy



RICHARD G. POLAKOWSKI, S.J.
1932-1993



Richard G. Polakowski, S.J.

A Man for all Seasons

“GENTLEMEN, I RECEIVED A LETTER FROM AN ALUMNUS; HE’S IN ANN ARBOR NOW. NAMES DON’T MATTER, BUT DON’T KID YOURSELF, HE’S GOOD.”

So began another of Fr. Richard Polakowski’s lectures about one of his former students. By the end of his teaching career, his lectures often seemed to focus more on Rick Joseph ’86, Mike Gill ’87, and other alumni than they did on Fitzgerald, Steinbeck, and the other authors the class was reading.

The message was clear: The system works. No matter how skewed or unfair or unimportant it may have seemed at the time, Polo knew his teaching system worked. He knew because he had been teaching at The High since 1967. He knew because he’d seen the boys who became men in this old building on Seven Mile go on to accomplish amazing things in a variety of fields. He knew because he had encompassed all that it means to be a builder of “men for other for the greater glory of God” into his life.

He had done the same thing at St. Ignatius High School in Chicago from 1959-62.

When he was recognized as one of the 12 outstanding teachers in the nation in 1984, he said it was a tribute to his students. All that he had done was highlighted through their work. Don’t kid yourself, he’d tell you, they’re good.

And so it is that throughout the nation in different walks of life, there are U of D Jesuit alums who feel eternally indebted to this man. He laid a foundation of skills in them so that one day, they would write coherently—and often eloquently. But more than that, he taught, through his own actions and through the example of his former students, what it meant to be a man for others.

Evidence of the effect he had on his students can be seen in the outpouring of



Richard Polakowski, S.J., 1967

cards and letters the Jesuit community received upon his passing. What follows are just a sample of what so many felt. So while we all mourn his passing, let us remember that Polo still lives through the continuing work of his students. As long as there’s “an alumnus” who’s carrying on the U of D Jesuit tradition, Polo’s mission lives on.

Sometimes, names do matter. This is one of those times. His name was Fr. Richard Polakowski, S. J. And gentlemen, don’t kid yourself, he’s good.

DOUG HARVATH '90

The news of Fr. Polakowski’s death brought both sadness and nostalgia to my heart. As a wonderful educator and a genuine motivator, Father personified the Jesuit tradition. He provided an inspiration for his students to perform and to achieve. His was a life dedicated not only to the church, but to the success and the educational well-being of all those fortunate enough to learn under him.

Fr. Polakowski aroused ambition in me as a student. He helped establish in me a superior background in grammar and literature. To him, I am indebted for a heightened level of preparation for college.

While my experience at U of D is marked by many exciting events and fond memories, my instruction from Father has proven invaluable.

This loss to the U of D High Family is one thoroughly felt by all faculty and alumni. There will never be another “Polo” but those whose lives he touched are forever grateful for him.

He will be missed, but what he leaves behind is beautiful.

DAVID M. GREENWALD '79

Over the past few weeks, I have recalled many moments from Polo's classroom that have deeply affected me. I read *The Fixer* and learned about hate that has no name. I read Gerard Manley Hopkins and learned about the love of God that can only be expressed in metaphor. I met for the first time Alyosha, Ivan and the Grand Inquisitor, to whom I have gone back time and time again over the years at various stages of my personal evolution. I met Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer and Ferlinghetti's "Charlie Chaplin man" poised precariously between the lines.

But more than the books themselves affected me. The very way I now read a text is because of Polo: "You haven't read a book until it looks like you picked it up, threw it against the wall and slept with it." Not only are my anthologies from my sophomore and senior years held together tenuously with U of D High bumper stickers, but all of my books are marked with underlinings, straight and "squiggly" lines, checks above words to be looked up, and marginalia that reflect a living dialogue with the author, often long dead.

But even more than this, Polo taught me the intensity of a desire to learn to see things more deeply. ("Sheer plod makes plough down sillion shine.") He worked us hard—never so hard as when he assigned *The Brothers Karamazov* to our senior class during the last sweltering weeks of the school year. He played with us, like the time he opened the windows in the dead of winter to wake us up, while he, wearing his gray cardigan at the front of the room, smiled wryly. Or when he dared anyone who claimed to be done early with a test and wanted to leave before the end of the period to bring the test to him—but only if there were no mistakes. If Polo found one error, the test would be (and often was) ripped up in front of the entire class with instructions that the student should start from scratch. There was indeed method to his madness, though it took me many years to realize fully what he had been up to. Polo's five-paragraph essays proved to be a sound foundation for my early college work. His example has had a profound impact on me to this day. Polo taught every class as if it were truly for the greater glory of God. A man bright enough and dedicated enough to do anything chose the priesthood and taught high school kids because he believed and believed in us.

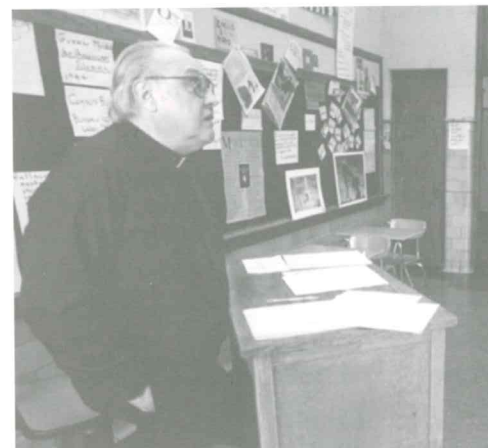
In the Jewish tradition, Kaddish, one of the most powerful of all Jewish prayers, is now said by mourners at the loss of close relatives. It speaks not of death, but rather magnifies and sanctifies the name of God and his creation. In its ancient origin, it was not for mourners, but rather it was to be prayed after studying with a great teacher and scholar. Later, it was prayed at the passing of a great teacher. Only now do I understand that tradition.

JAMES REUTTER '82

I have many fond memories of Fr. Polakowski. Foremost among these is probably his sense of humor in the classroom—often sarcastic and razor-sharp, but always making his point very effectively.

He was a great educator always challenging his students to go beyond the superficial, whether through his constant refrain of "It goes deeper than that" or requiring students to do a report on a topic in front of the class on topics they asked questions about.

His classroom antics were legendary—giving negative test scores to students to make a point; pretending he spoke only German or Russian during tests to prevent students from relying on him for answers; playing "Jelly Roll" Morton jazz riffs to set the mood for lectures on *The Great Gatsby* and proclaiming to his students "It's worth the 2,000 bucks in tuition. You get to hear 'Jelly Roll' Morton."



Fr. Polakowski in class, 1989



Fr. Polakowski at his desk, 1981

The decor in his classroom itself was a metaphor for the way he taught and the way he made us think—overstuffed with ideas, constantly changing, and presenting many different points of view, through literary quotes, articles about current events, letters to the editor and many other sources.

I could go on about many other things—reading letters

from alumni about their experiences, making us think beyond high school, and many other reflections, but this would contradict the maxim of brevity he always taught.

One final reflection: Although he always urged us to strive for depth, he recognized that we would all make mistakes. One of his classroom adages was, "Write your essays in pencil. Only God should use a ball point pen."

CHRISTOPHER RENNIE '93

Polo. To 25 years of U of D Jesuit grads, that name has meant something. It means senior year and English essays. It means alumni stories and graduation. It means a stoic Jesuit who would slick his hair back and trade witticisms with the best that any class had to offer; and to many alumni, Polo defined the U of D Jesuit experience.

For Fr. Richard Polakowski, things were "good." This was a definitive compliment from him. He loved what was good and praised it wherever he found it. Literature was "good stuff;" students occasionally had essays that were "good." The accomplishments of alumni were good and worth mentioning. His pursuit of the good in life was so evident that Fr. McClain used it to characterize him in his eulogy; and in reflection on his pursuit to find and bring out the good in others, we see the good in him. He was a good Jesuit, a good teacher, and a good friend.

Polo's pursuit of the good was quite simply a pursuit of what is of God in this world. He sought the service of God through the Christmas Food Drive when he presided over the mass. He asked two of the volunteers who helped coordinate the effort to give a part of his homily. He strove not merely to preach right and wrong from a high pulpit but to make it real to the people and to himself. His countless stories about volunteering among the sick led me to choose my service project at Oakwood Hospital. He sought the presence of God in people, looking at others on an even plane. He sought the hand of God in writing, in music, in the intricate details that make the whole panorama of life so vivid and exquisite. He relished these things because he found God there. He once told me that if I am searching for God, then I am not looking hard enough at where I am. He looked. He found God. And he called it good.

The same search for the good affected his teaching. He taught very carefully and very precisely. His choice of literature and subject went beyond the course requirement of mere English literature. He chose books by Nigerian authors, by Irish authors, by American authors, and by British authors. He molded these together into a very full picture of what was good. He wanted his students to be able to find the good as he did, not in the limited



Fr. Polakowski, 1981

scope of a textbook but in the world of literature and writings that are there for the taking. He made his students write and write well, so that they can capture the good for future generations as others captured it for them. Even the stories which seemed at the time pleasant diversions from his lessons spoke volumes in what he wanted to instill on his students: a sense that they were good. His now-famous quote, which has led to more than one bad impression, sums up this idea: "Don't kid yourselves, gentlemen; you're good." This is exactly as he said it to my English IV class. He rarely singled out his current students for praise, preferring when it was warranted to praise anonymous individuals, and here he praised us all collectively. This is significant; he felt that the "good" that he sought and loved was in every one of us; no one was undeserving of that value.

Polo was a good friend. Not every one of his students would sit with him during a free period. Many didn't want to sit with him during class. However, his friendship didn't hinge on reciprocity. Rather, it hinged on him wanting good for you. He offered his help in writing and developing college application essays to everyone. He wanted us to have the best possible future and would go out of his way to help us achieve it. He told us and showed us that we were good. That is no small favor. His constant updates on notable alumni of The High showed us that within ourselves, we have the potential to be great and to achieve great things. It is in us. We are good. // Now we see not only the good that Polo sought, but the good that he was. He was one of those teachers who make a year memorable and give substance to the memory. His memory will always fill my reminiscence of senior year, when he never returned from Easter vacation but renewed his long struggle with cancer. It is appropriate that the piece of literature with which he chose to close the year is so reflective of him in its title and in its character's courage before death. The piece was *A Man for All Seasons* by Robert Bolt, and in this work, we see the reflection of Richard Polakowski as he met every season of life with the same passion for the good. He lived a life that was good, and when he faced death, he used the joy that he found in the good to face it with faith, hope, and love.



*DEATH COMES FOR US ALL, EVEN AT OUR BIRTH;
EVEN AT OUR BIRTH, DEATH BUT DOES STAND ASIDE A LITTLE.
AND EVERY DAY HE LOOKS TOWARD US AND MUSES SOMEWHAT TO HIMSELF
WHETHER THAT DAY OR THE NEXT HE WILL DRAW NIGH.
IT IS THE LAW OF NATURE AND THE WILL OF GOD.*

— Thomas More
A Man for All Seasons, Act Two