

March 2017

## Harold F. McNiece

John V. Thornton

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarship.law.stjohns.edu/tcl>



Part of the [Catholic Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

John V. Thornton (2017) "Harold F. McNiece," *The Catholic Lawyer*: Vol. 19 : No. 1 , Article 7.

Available at: <http://scholarship.law.stjohns.edu/tcl/vol19/iss1/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at St. John's Law Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Catholic Lawyer by an authorized editor of St. John's Law Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact [cerjanm@stjohns.edu](mailto:cerjanm@stjohns.edu).

# HAROLD F. McNIECE

JOHN V. THORNTON\*

I knew Harold McNiece as well as anyone. Yet I find it hard to summarize the essence of his all too brief lifetime. The list of his accomplishments in *Who's Who* is not a measure of the man.

Harold was a first ranking student in college and law school, a renowned author of books and articles, an outstanding teacher, and a dean of national stature. Yet his scholarly achievements, impressive as they were to others, were subordinate in his own mind to more human concerns. He was the active man, not the contemplative except in one important part of his life—religion—where he had the touch of the mystic.

The enduring impression I have of Harold is of a man intensely interested in the happiness and welfare of his legion of friends. His gift for making friends and keeping them exceeded that of anyone I have known. This gift was attributable in no small part to his willingness, in the midst of a busy life, to go the extra mile—to accept the invitation, to remember the anniversary, to make the phone call, to send the present—in situations where most people would have declined, forgotten, or omitted.

Nor was Harold's gift of friendship in any way dependent on sycophancy. He wore no man's collar. His friends were friends because he found in them something worthwhile, not because they were—as were many—the rich, the powerful or the exalted. Hypocrisy was unknown to him. Perhaps this is why he was such a favorite of children and young people. He had the simplicity, the enthusiasm, and the lack of guile characteristic of the young.

Harold was a superb administrator and leader. People would do for him for free what they would not do for others for compensation. This was because he appreciated their efforts, understood the significance of their work, and saw to it that they were recognized and rewarded.

Harold had unparalleled ability to bring out the best in students, faculty and other associates. By humor, cajolery and, where necessary, discipline, he made them better than they realized they could be. Even the discipline he invoked was a loving one. It was an aspect of his ingrained belief that people, if they but use their talents fully, can achieve more than

---

\* John V. Thornton was, since their college days, friend and collaborator of Prof. McNiece in legal writings and other projects. Mr. Thornton, Vice President and Treasurer of consolidated Edison Company of New York, Inc., was formerly adjunct professor of law at New York University School of Law and professorial lecturer on law at St. John's Law School. He is currently chairman of the board of New York Law School.

they think they can. Harold knew from experience that man to a substantial degree is the master of his fate, for, by spartan self-discipline, he had overcome the physical and psychological handicap of a withered arm and, by force of will, transformed himself into a leader of men.

Harold had no taste for mediocrity. Although he wore personal honors lightly and had no interest in amassing material wealth, he believed in "going first class" whether the matter at issue was a restaurant, an ocean liner, or a law school. As dean, he insisted that the students and faculty of the Law School act at all times as first class professionals. Under his aegis, the spirit of "going first class" caught on—or so it seemed to me—and produced a quantum jump in the caliber of the School and its graduates.

It is said that first rate men surround themselves with associates who are as good as they or better, that second rate men surround themselves with third rate men, and that third rate men surround themselves with fifth rate men. This maxim helps explain Harold's extraordinary success. He made a conscious effort to surround himself with top-notch people in all his endeavors. He never worried, as lesser men do, whether top-notch colleagues would overshadow him.

If I were to distill the essence of Harold McNiece in a few phrases, I would say he had a combination—unique in my experience — of extraordinary strength of character, simplicity of spirit, selflessness, and immense interest in the welfare of others. He was a burden to no man, a help to most, a model for many. One never left his presence without feeling enriched, better than when one entered. Even the burdens of a decade of sickness, which would have embittered or made melancholy a lesser man, did not appreciably dull his zest for life, his willingness and ability to help others.

Medical men tell us that, when a man has a heart attack, it leaves a scar on the heart which the victim carries for the rest of his life. A part of the heart literally dies. So it is, I am convinced, with the death of a loved one. Harold's death has scarred many hearts. A part of many of us died when he died. As he would insist we do, we must—and shall—carry on, helped along the way by the knowledge that a man of this stature counted us among his friends and hoping and believing—as he hoped and believed—that death has not separated us forever.