Tribute to Dean Joseph Bellacosa

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I first became acquainted with Joseph Bellacosa in February, 1959 when he began his studies as a law student at St. John’s Law School. I had entered school the previous September and ordinarily would not have had occasion to cross paths with this serious and earnest looking young man, but for some reason Joe and I quickly became good friends. Our law school class consisted of some very intelligent and highly accomplished students, many of whom went on to outstanding careers in the law, business, and academia. But none surpassed Joe Bellacosa. He was a gifted student with a highly developed instinct for the law in all its varied aspects—the practical, the jurisprudential, and the ethical. Joe served on the Law Review and was elected an editor in his third year. He was immensely well-liked and greatly respected by his colleagues. Joe was also more mature than many of us, perhaps because of his earlier training to become a priest and his great good luck in having been introduced to Mary, the sister of a friend of his at the Seminary. Mary provided him with love and support from his earliest days as a law student. Equally important, she always kept Joe grounded with her insightful comments and down-to-earth approach to life.

I have been particularly fortunate to remain Joe’s good friend for over forty years. I was honored to serve as the “Best Man” at the Bellacosa wedding in 1962 and, thereafter, as godfather to Michael, Mary and Joe’s first child. We have shared our successes together and have helped each other through life’s occasional hard times.

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Joe Bellacosa has had enormous professional success. He was an outstanding law professor on the St. John's faculty and went on to be Chief Clerk of the New York Court of Appeals. But he received his highest honor when he was appointed to the Court as an Associate Judge, where he served with distinction for some fourteen years. Thereafter, he returned to his Alma Mater as Dean of the Law School. He worked tirelessly to restore St. John's to a leadership position in the legal academic world and his legacy in this effort is priceless.

Yet, with all the success he has enjoyed as an accomplished lawyer, a judge of the New York Court of Appeals, and the Dean of a law school, Joe Bellacosa has never changed from the outgoing, decent and principled young student who attended St. John's Law School on Schermerhorn Street in downtown Brooklyn in 1959. He has remained steady in his journey through life because he has never taken his eyes off certain compass points—his relationship with God and his love for his family and friends, all the while maintaining a strong work ethic and a deeply held compassion for the poor and the under-served.

Joe Bellacosa has had more careers and enjoyed more success than most people could hope for in several lifetimes, but anybody acquainted with him knows that he is not finished yet.