Nat Hentoff, Self-Described Jewish Atheist Pro-Lifer

Pro-lifers mourned the death of Nat Hentoff, 91, who passed away Jan. 7—a rare combination of Jewish atheist, political liberal and pro-lifer.

“It’s not surprising an atheist would be against abortion, because all he knows is life,” said Maria McFadden Maffucci, president of the Human Life Foundation and editor of its journal, the Human Life Review.

Ms. Maffucci said her father, the New York City-based organization’s founding president and journal editor, got in touch with Hentoff more than 30 years after the longtime jazz scribe had written columns in the Village Voice about the “Baby Doe” cases in which two infants were denied life-saving treatment because of their physical disabilities. “I think that woke him up,” Ms. Maffucci said of Hentoff.

He also became one of the first recipients of the foundation’s “Great Defender of Life” award in 2005. “As an atheist, Nat took much heat from his fellow liberals and rigid fundamentalists among the ‘free thinking’ crowd for standing against abortion,” said a Jan. 7 blog posting by Wesley J. Smith for the National Review.

“Nat Hentoff was an indefatigable writer, a man whose deeply ingrained integrity compelled him to willingly lose good friends and professional opportunities if that is what it took to remain steadfast on behalf of causes he thought to be right,” Smith said. “We will not see his like again.”

Hentoff also wrote a weekly syndicated column, “Sweet Land of Liberty,” on First Amendment issues.

On a 1992 PBS public affairs program, “Life and Choice After Roe vs. Wade,” one panelist expressed surprise that a “liberal” would be against abortion. “I believe in what used to be called the seamless garment,” Hentoff replied. “It can also be called a consistent ethic of life. I am against capital punishment… I am pro-life all the way.”

That same year, Hentoff tried to quiet hecklers at Cooper Union, a college in Manhattan, who had prevented then-Pennsylvania Gov. Robert Casey from giving a speech, “Can a Liberal Be Pro-Life?”

He appealed to respect for liberal traditions of free speech, comparing hecklers to Stalinists and fascists and by arguing pragmatically that they would have a better chance of influencing Casey by entering into debate with him. His efforts went for naught.

In 2002, Hentoff was one of many to file a friend-of-the-court brief on behalf of the Pro-Life Action League’s Joseph Scheidler, who had been sued for damages under the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act, or RICO, for organizing protests outside abortion clinics, arguing Scheidler had a First Amendment right to free speech. —CNS

Sister Rosemary, Educator, Lawyer

Sister Rosemary McSorley, S.H.C.J., who taught at Our Lady of Lourdes School in Manhattan, died on Dec. 2 at Holy Child Center in Rosemont, Pa. She was 84.

She taught at Our Lady of Lourdes, 1964-1996. She also taught in Pennsylvania and Illinois. She taught children in Chile and helped educate adults there.

She served in parish ministry in New Jersey, where she also practiced nonprofit family law.

Born in Philadelphia, she entered the Society of the Holy Child Jesus in 1951 and made final vows in 1958. She was also known as Mother Mary Beata.

Maryknoll Brother Hickey, Served in Japan, Rome

Brother Thomas A. Hickey, M.M., who served in Rome for 12 years and Japan for four years, died Dec. 23 at Westminster Medical Center in Valhalla. He was 73.


He lived in Japan, 1969-1973, where at a parish in Hokkaido and worked at the Kyoto Sanjo office of Maryknoll’s regional superior.

Brother Hickey was at Maryknoll, 1973-1980 and 2007-2016, where he served as a representative on Maryknoll’s Extended Leadership Board, coordinator of continuing education, admissions board member and director of Mission St. Teresa’s Residence.

Born in Yonkers, he entered the Maryknoll Brothers Novitiate in 1961 and took his final vows in 1969.

A Funeral Mass was celebrated Jan. 5 in Our Lady Queen of Apostles Chapel in Ossining, followed by burial in Maryknoll Society Cemetery in Ossining.

Maryknoll Brother Hickey

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