Father Edward M. Catich

ROBERT PALLADINO

WHEN I ARRIVED AT THE TRI-City airport in January of 1969, Fr. Ed Catich met me as we had agreed. I had only met him briefly after a lecture demonstration at Mt. Angel College in the 50's. Now I had the opportunity of being his private student at St. Ambrose College in Davenport. Catich almost never accepted private students, but with Lloyd Reynolds as my advocate, and the fact that I also was a priest and possible successor to Lloyd, I had been accepted.

FATHER EDWARD M. CATICH

Fr. Edward Catich, "Ned" to his colleagues at St. Ambrose, was, in my experience, the most accomplished writer of Roman majuscules who had come along. When I told Lloyd that I really wanted to learn to write and cut the Trajan letters, he had objected by telling me they were "too hard." Later he saw that I was determined to learn and sent me to Catich. My tutoring began as we were waiting for my luggage and continued until I was back on a plane five months later, returning to Portland. Intense was a word invented for people like Ned Catich. He was a man of directed vision who found being human something that mostly got in the way of his work. Much has been written about his background as an orphan growing up in the Depression and how he worked to learn everything he could. He played trumpet in a dance band, cello in a symphony orchestra, worked as a sign writer in Chicago and taught math, engineering, music and art. He became chairman of the Art Department at St. Ambrose College after turning down similar positions at Harvard and the Catholic University in Washington, D.C. He was a doer more than a talker, although he could hold an audience spellbound on many subjects. His expertise in Roman letters is what took me to St. Ambrose. During his years of study in Rome for ordination, he had obtained the rare permit to erect a scaffold in front of the Trajan inscription. Through rubbings and photographs he was able to produce his two great tomes on the inscription.

When I took over for Lloyd at Reed College in Portland, my goal was to bring Catich for a workshop. I finally succeeded in getting him, but realized that I would have to be his host and constant companion while he was in Portland. I had forewarned my wife that this was one tough cookie whose only interest was his work. How wrong I was!

The hard-nosed professor who put the fear of God into students at St. Ambrose, turned into the ideal guest away from the college. When he discovered that my wife was the principal clarinetist of the symphony in Portland, he came to life and the two of them exchanged endless stories of musical bloopers. My son was a preschooler at the time and Ned amused him with coin tricks. He was a most enjoyable colleague to have as a guest. His workshops and final lecture at Reed ended with a standing ovation, as spontaneous as it was enthusiastic. It was a time when the legacy of Lloyd Reynolds was in high regard at Reed, and Catich personified all that Lloyd hoped his students would appreciate. Catich put aside all pre-existing theories on how the Roman inscriptions were made and studied many inscriptions "in situ." He had studied all the existing scholarship in the field, but reached his own conclusionbased on his knowledge of, and experience in, writing letters with the pen and brush.

In 1966, when I was finally able to stand before the Trajan inscription for the first time, I felt all the instruction invade my

vision and fill me with awe. In the 50's, as a young monk, I had seen Catich's studies of the Roman letters and had immediately become a disciple. Later I studied them with the help of Lloyd Reynolds and finally I met and studied with the man who had, as he put it, placed himself in the position of the Roman sign painter who produced the inscription in honor of Trajanus.

If I could sit down with the other "chosen few" who were close associates and special students of Fr. Catich, I'm sure we could exchange stories well into the night. We would all remember a demanding mentor who expected the best and who could push us beyond what we thought we could do. We would also remember a brilliant artist, who was far more demanding with himself than with anyone else.

I think we would all agree that it was the opportunity of a lifetime to have had the privilege of learning from him. His Roman letters were the very reincarnation of the Trajan letters. His "Petrarch" reflected his own personality: clear, direct and disciplined.

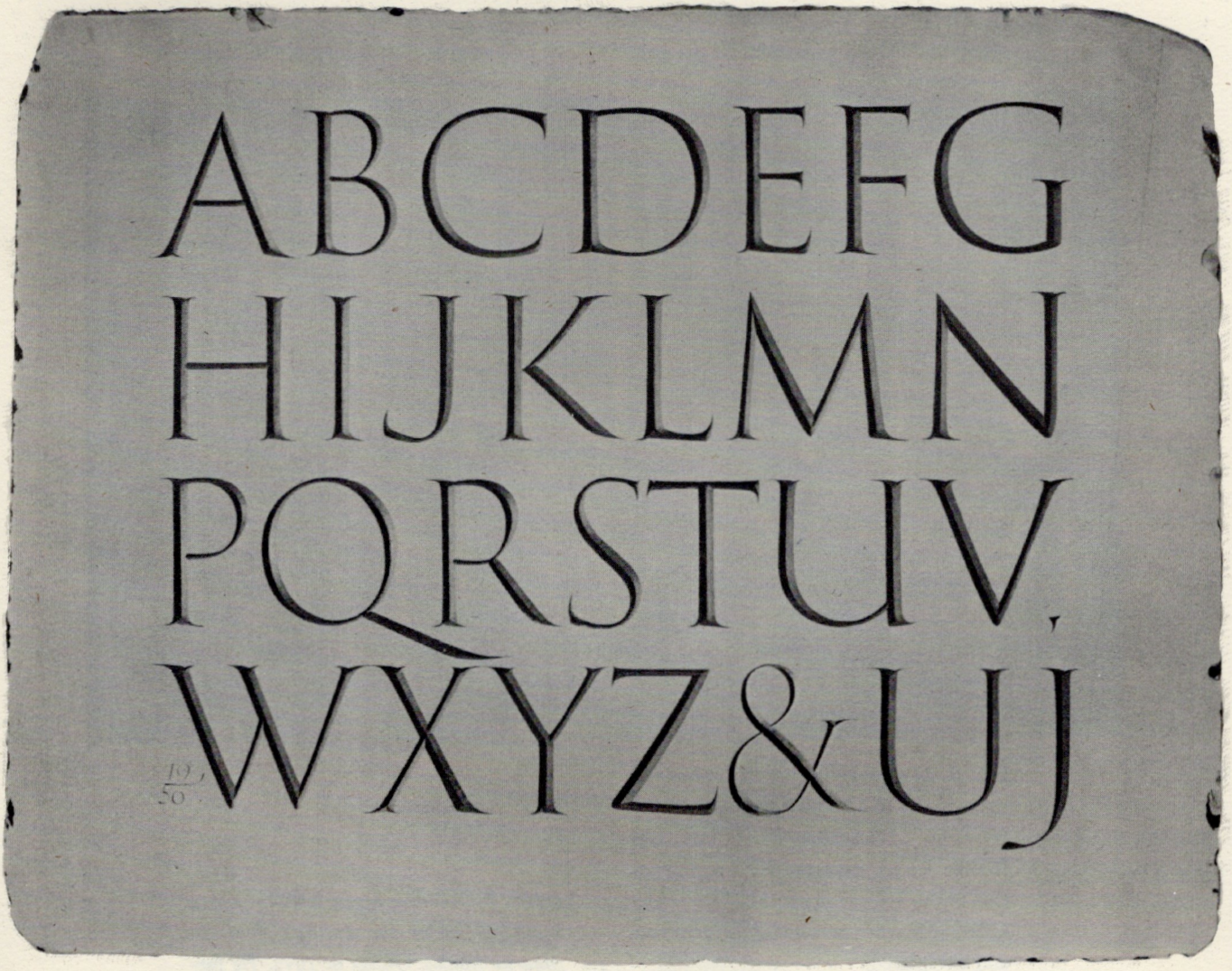
Nothing of the angularity of German scribes here, nothing of Arrighi's rhythmic "Cancelleresca", and certainly nothing of the flamboyant self-consciousness of today's style. His watercolors were, like his letters, written with as few strokes as necessary. His stone inscriptions were precise and elegant. His religious art was strong, realistic, inspired by faith, not emotion.

In an article written in 1958, he lamented the sickly sentimental in religious art as well as gross distortions of the opposite extreme. Of one crucifix he wrote, "This artist's assault on our emotions and the tears evoked by his macabre harlequinade are, fairly obviously, ends in themselves." In the conclusion of this lengthy article he wrote, "If enough individuals put a premium on artistic integrity, the future may well take care of itself." Artistic integrity might well sum up my memory of Fr. Edward M. Catich. He was the exemplification of Thomas Aquinas' famous definition of art, "Making things the right way."

As Lanore Cady remarked at the time of his death in April, 1979, "Eagles don't flock; you find them one at a time." Artists like Fr. Catich (and Lloyd Reynolds) don't come around often. They are giants who enter our lives and leave their mark of genius on those who are ready to listen and learn.

RJP "La Dimora"
February 1998

Robert J. Palladino began writing with a broad pen under the direction of of Fr. Maurice Malloy, OCSO in 1952. He furthered his knowledge by association with Lloyd Reynolds, Edward Catich, Raymond da Boll, Alfred Fairbank, Kon Kunz & Maury Nemoy. He taught at Reed College for 15 years, the Museum of Art School for 10, Marylhurst and elsewhere down to the present. He is currently pastor of 2 churches; card designer for Conception Abby Press (The Printery); freelance calligrapher and liturgical art consultant for many churches.



ROMAN INSCRIPTIONAL CAPITALS BY FATHER E.M. CATICH