



PONTIFICAL COLLEGE  
JOSEPHINUM

TRIBUTE FOR MR. PETER VERACKA

*September 30, 2021 – Memorial of Saint Jerome*  
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Good morning to everyone. As you know, today is the Memorial of Saint Jerome, the late 4<sup>th</sup>- and early 5<sup>th</sup>-century Church Father who, among so many things, gave us a new translation of the Bible. Although he is most known for his linguistic abilities, one of his great works, which we often today overlook, was a collection of brief biographies of early Christians, known simply as *De Viris Illustribus* – or, On Illustrious Men. And, in case you didn't already know, Saint Jerome is the patron saint of librarians. So, it is truly right and just that, on the Feast of Saint Jerome, we celebrate the work of one of our own illustrious men, a man who was, for forty-five years, the Director of Library Services at the Pontifical College Josephinum, a man whose name will be included among the greats in the history of this institution, Mr. Peter Veracka.

When I came to the Josephinum in August of 2015, one of the first people I met as I was putting my office together was Peter Veracka. My move from New Haven, Connecticut, to Columbus, Ohio, coincided with my trying to get two scholarly articles written at the same time while also trying to put together ideas for a new book. Because libraries expect you to return their books to them, threatening you with hefty fines and academic excommunication if you don't do so, I had been forced to return my two hundred or so library books to Yale University Library before I left Connecticut. So, I came to the Josephinum library with my list of books in hand, ready to check it all out, and eager continue the work I was in the middle of. The Josephinum library didn't have everything on my list. But I learned very quickly that Peter Veracka was an incredibly capable librarian who was more than willing to help me find what I needed and was genuinely interested in what I was doing. He and Beverly Lane showed me how to use the OhioLink system to request books from other institutions, and he set to work searching for odd, even obscure works of medieval history and literature, some in strange now-defunct European languages. Peter showed me a special kind of hospitality, coming by my office to visit and even asking me to look through the collection to make recommendations for library purchases. He wanted to know what I might need for my classes and for my research, and I felt somehow special that he took the time to do that. My ego was soon shot down, however, when I later learned that this was normal, that this was how Peter treated everyone. This was not what I had been used to before coming to the Josephinum. I had not been used to librarians who actually wanted to help people, but I somehow felt that I had to take advantage of this situation. I know that I became a pest to Peter, and, as I look back at my first months here, I realize now that he showed not just hospitality but a special kind of

patience with me as a haughty and demanding new professor who often felt that my own scholarly and academic needs should be taken care of immediately. I often told my wife, Julia, “I bet Peter Veracka hates me. I ask for this, I ask for that, and I just keep asking for more.” But Peter *almost* always smiled, and he searched, and he delivered. He knew the Josephinum collection, and he knew the collections of other libraries as well. And he knew where to find those strange and obscure things that I always asked for. For the book that I’m working on now, he actually bought the, I must say, not-very-cheap modern editions of the eighth-century Latin primary sources that I have been working with for a couple of years now. I can truly say that Peter Veracka has supported my teaching and my research endeavors wholeheartedly, in word and in deed, providing me with the source materials that I have needed but also asking questions, making comments and recommendations, and showing genuine curiosity for what I study and teach. Because of that, I made a decision quite a while back, well before Peter’s retirement was announced. That decision was that when I finish the edits of the book that I am currently working on and send it to a publisher, which should be in the next couple of months, the dedication page will say in Latin, “Thanks to Peter Veracka, an Illustrious Librarian.”

Peter Veracka is known almost universally by his colleagues as one of the most humble, most professional, most intelligent, and most reliable of people here. In fact, one of our colleagues – and, Peter, I won’t give names, but you can probably figure this one out – says that Peter is the “epitome of reliability” who flawlessly performed his job “decade in and decade out” with no drama, no anxious moments, and who, like the glorious New York Yankees right fielder and first baseman Tommy Henrich, could be referred to as “Old Reliable.” But not only was Peter a reliable colleague, he was, as another professor has said, a professional “of old-fashioned expertise.” This expertise was found in the detailed records written by hand in ledgers and in maintained in now-archaic computer databases. Yet, as this professor so rightly says, Peter “always seemed to be patiently waiting for the rest of us to catch up to where he was.” Such descriptions give us the impression of a librarian hunched over his desk working by the light of a flickering yellowing bulb, writing out cards for the card catalogue. (Some of you young-uns probably have no idea what I’m referring to here.) Yet that’s not the Peter Veracka that I know. As this professor related to me, Peter’s professionalism was honed over years of work and concentration, and his in-depth knowledge of his library and of how to do his job placed him perfectly in a position to sit back, snicker, and watch all the rest of us try to catch up. According to another colleague, Peter was an odd sort of librarian – he protected his books, which is normal, though not with the passion of many librarians who consider borrowers as nothing more than depraved barbarians. Rather, Peter acted as the caretaker of little treasurers of knowledge that must be protected but that must also be used for what they are – sources of teaching and learning, and also of enjoyment. Having spent much time and energy, true dedication, indeed a true vocation, developing the library resources into what they are today, Peter has been called, in the words of yet another colleague, “a faithful

custodian of the library collection,” which the renowned British Dominican theologian Fr. Aidan Nichols claims rivals the library collection of Cambridge University.

Peter is not only known as a reliable and professional colleague, however. Some claim that maybe something else, some higher power, is at work. One colleague, who has been here off and on over the past several decades, speaking of the great move of the library from what is now the Jessing Center to the North Wing of this building back in 1982, claims that Peter probably surreptitiously bilocated, though there is no actual proof that it happened. He took charge of a bucket brigade of sorts that involved not only getting all the books out of the Jessing Center building but also making sure that they were properly shelved when they arrived only moments later into the new library space. People still question how that happened so smoothly and effortlessly, how Peter could seem to be in two different library spaces at the same time. Might we have a miracle worker on our hands? In a possible case of bibliographic miracle-working, Peter performed a task far more complex than any request related to the Middle Ages that I might have made. This is how I’ve heard that it went down: a particular young professor of obscure ancient knowledge once approached Peter with a rather incomplete bibliographic citation of an article that he desperately needed to consult for his own research. Said article was written in German, about subtle linguistic features of the arcane Sumerian language, and had been published in a Japanese journal. (I don’t know that I ever asked Peter for anything so esoteric.) Well, as the story goes, Peter, likely trying to conceal his own miraculous abilities, forces our good professor to wait two whole days before placing this German-Japanese article on Sumerian in the professor’s hands. How long had Peter been in possession of this article? Was he trying to hide the fact that he possessed abnormally high abilities for a mere human? Inquiring minds want to know. Many librarians, faced with this same situation, and of far fewer abilities than Peter, would have said, “If you don’t have the complete bibliographic citation, I can’t find it for you.” Luckily for us, Peter was not like many librarians, and, as one of our priests commented to me, Peter used to be known among seminarians as “Mr. Find It” because, if ask Peter to find, Peter will find it.

Some of you here this morning have never actually met Peter Veracka. Some of you probably saw him from afar when he worked here but never actually spoke to him. Some of you arrived after his departure from the Josephinum last January. This last group, obviously, are the first-year students who just arrived a few weeks ago. However, there are plenty of upperclassmen and theology students who, for whatever appallingly ridiculous reason you might have had, you have never gone to the library and have never gotten to know the wonderful people who work there. Shame on you! You have a treasury of information at your disposal, so use it!

So, Peter, today, as we celebrate Saint Jerome, the patron of your vocation, who wrote his own book on illustrious men, we celebrate you as one of our illustrious men. We celebrate the nearly half century that you dedicated to the Pontifical College Josephinum. You took a small collection of

books donated by Josephinum priests and created a Catholic library that is traditional in many ways, namely, holding on to books, even old ones that many other librarians would have tossed years ago. (Though, I admit, I have seen you toss a few to the recycle bins.) Yet you also modernized the Josephinum library, introducing it to the online world of research and learning. You oversaw the library's admission into the OhioLink system of academic lending libraries, and you ensured that seminarians, professors, and researchers had as wide a variety of resources available to them as you could possibly attain. You oversaw the move of the library from a smaller space into the space it currently inhabits, and you made sure that it expanded in ways that we as a seminary community as well as the wider academic community of Ohio needed it to. You even saw to it that a rare books and manuscripts archive was established in the library for the preservation of some of the collection's oldest or most valuable possessions. You turned what could have been a quaint storage space of old Church-related books into a world-class library and space of learning. During your time here, you maintained your patience and professionalism with everyone, even during those sometimes-tense library committee discussions that revolved around JStor, Ebsco collections, and other online resources that certain colleagues so disliked and pontificated against. In fact, your patience and professionalism are mentioned by several of your colleagues in their comments to me, some calling you the quintessential gentleman, a true Catholic gentleman, and a truly gentle man. You are the perfect example of the importance of lay faculty to a Catholic institution, for you represent not just reliability but stability and continuity as well. We thank you for what you have done for us, we thank you for what you left us, and we thank you for the amazing example of human goodness that you have been to all of us. Many, myself included, have benefitted greatly from knowing you, and, as Father Beseau said last January, quoting the Gospel of Saint Matthew, we say again, "Well done, good and faithful servant."