

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

James Ambrose Raftis
1922-2008



James Ambrose Raftis was born 24 August 1922 in Arthur, Ontario, one of six sons of James and Blanche (Dineen) Raftis. He received his early education at the public schools in Arthur, graduating from Arthur High School in 1940. He entered Novitiate on Tweedsmuir Avenue in August of that same year and professed first vows on 15 August 1941. Other members of his profession class include John Wilson, and the late Joseph Abend, Frederick Black, John Burke, Albert Butler, Roger DeBilly, Fernand Geneston, Anthony Kelly, Armand Maurer, John Mullins, Walter Principe, Georges Reynouard, Norman Roy, and George Silvester. Ambrose pursued his undergraduate studies at the University of Toronto and in 1945 was awarded his B.A. in Honours Political Science and Economics. A year later he was awarded his M.A. in Economics. Theological studies began at St. Basil's Seminary in 1946; he was ordained to the priesthood by James Cardinal McGuigan on 29 June 1948 in St. Basil's Church, Toronto.

Following ordination, Ambrose began a long and distinguished career of study, research, teaching, and administration. He studied at Laval University 1949-1951 receiving a *Doctorat en Sciences Sociales* in 1951. From there he moved to Cambridge University from which he earned a Ph.D. in History in 1954.

Born on a small farm in Arthur, Ambrose Raftis became a citizen of the world. He was a man of great stature both physically and academically. He was an imposing figure on the ice playing hockey and an equally imposing figure in the world of academicians and researchers. From his earliest days as a young student in a one-room school house, Ambrose developed a passion for history and geography. This passion eventually developed into an interest in and study of history and economics which he pursued in studies at Laval and Cambridge.

As a professor and Fellow at the Pontifical Institute, he pioneered an innovative approach to medieval social and economic history that was admired by and influenced international scholars. His work sought to uncover the human dimension in medieval villages, especially in the lives of the medieval peasants. He helped students appreciate the significant role these seemingly nameless and invisible individuals played in society.

Jim Farge, in his homily, quoted one of Ambrose's early students: "What he did was create an atmosphere of open-ended inquiry that went in several different directions. All of it, in one way or another, was affected by an "attitude" – an attitude which posited that every individual life is worth taking seriously, that every person mattered."

Ambrose also developed a life-long interest in the papal social encyclicals of the past 120 years. Most certainly, their emphasis on social justice had an effect on his own research. While very much committed to the Basilian Fathers and his academic pursuits, Ambrose always remained close to his brothers and their families. When home for visits, he organized nieces and nephews for hockey games. Birthday and anniversary celebrations were important to him and, if possible, he would be present for those family occasions. Ambrose is predeceased by his parents and his five brothers Thomas, Edward, Leo, Wilfred and John. To his sisters-in-law, nieces, nephews, cousins, colleagues, and former students, the Basilian Fathers offer their condolences and a promise of prayers.