

IN MEMORY

106th Anniversary of
Mortimer J. Adler's Birth



December 28, 1902 - June 28, 2001



The UNIVERSITY of ST. THOMAS
today honors with the
St. Thomas Aquinas Medallion

MORTIMER J. ADLER

Mortimer J. Adler, for more than 70 years you have labored tirelessly to improve the minds of millions of people around the globe by helping them understand the great ideas and ideals that have shaped the history of the world.

Philosopher, teacher, lecturer, author and essayist, your passion for liberal education and lifelong learning never has dimmed and always has been driven by a bedrock conviction that a person must look to the past for wisdom to face the future.

Born December 28, 1902, in New York, you displayed feisty independence as a teenager when you dropped out of high school after refusing the principal's demand to fire a reporter on the school newspaper, you passed an equivalency test and enrolled at Columbia University, but you were denied a degree because you wouldn't attend gym class and take a swimming test.

Your life was profoundly shaped at Columbia by professor John Erskine, who started the first great books course in the country. You fell in love with the classics, and when you joined the Columbia faculty in 1923 you conducted great books seminars with Mark Van Doren while pursuing your doctorate.

You were wooed to the University of Chicago in 1930 as the result of a challenge from its new president, Robert Hutchins, to help him transform the curriculum by basing courses on the great books. A rigorous two-year great books course was offered to select undergraduates. "What those students derived," an observer once wrote, "often became the invisible hand that shaped the order of their values, judgments, and personal commitments."

During your 22 years as a philosophy of law professor, you worked with Hutchins to turn the great books into an industry. Your seminars became the model for the great books discussion groups movement for people of all

ages. You selected 443 works by 76 authors and published them in the 54-volume set, *Great Books of The Western World*. Your companion index, *Syntopicon*, included 102 essays that you wrote to explain the Great Ideas that recur in the Great Books.

You later expanded the Great Books collection and *Syntopicon* to include 20th-century authors.

The Great Books also inspired your involvement with the fledgling aspen institute in Colorado. You agreed in 1950 to develop a two-week executive seminar based on the Great Books, and the seminar remains the cornerstone of the aspen experience to this day. The seminar readings, according to the *Aspen Quarterly* editor, contain “tough thinking about social, economic, and political problems” and deal “with ideas such as equality, liberty, justice and property—ideas of central importance to an understanding of democracy and capitalism as well as of their opposites, totalitarianism and communism.”

“It is not the aim of the Aspen Executive Seminars to make a better treasurer out of a treasurer,” you once said. “The aim is to help American business leaders lift their sights above the possessions which possess them, to confront their own nature as human beings, to regain control over their own humanity by becoming more self-aware, more self-correcting, and hence more self-fulfilling.”

You joined the Board of Editors at Encyclopaedia Britannica in 1947 and edited its landmark 15th edition in 1974, the same year you became its chairman. You founded the Institute for Philosophical Research in 1952 and under its auspices established the Paideia group, which in the 1980’s issued a series of reports calling for major reform of public school education. You co-founded the Center for the Study of The Great Ideas in Chicago in 1990.

You also are a prolific writer; your four dozen books

range from *Aristotle for Everybody* to the best-selling *How to Read a Book: The Classic Guide to Intelligent Reading* and *How to Think About God: a Guide for the 20th Century Pagan*. Your book, *Six Great Ideas* (on truth, goodness, beauty, liberty, equality, and justice) was turned into a PBS series with Bill Moyers.

Pundits call you “Mr. Great Books,” although you prefer the title “Philosopher at Large.” It fits. “You don’t have to do any research,” you once confided to an interviewer. “You don’t have to use your hands at all. You don’t have to use your body. All you have to do is think. Thinking is hard, but you get used to it.”

The University of St. Thomas long has felt a special bond with you, clear back to the spring day in 1940 when you gave the commencement address. You spoke that day about “Hierarchy” and quoted Aristotle, Homer, St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas. “The simple rule,” you told graduates, “is never to rest in less than you can be, because fullness of weight is the only measure of true happiness. Never strive to be more than somebody else, because no one else is a measure of your perfection.”

Fifty-five years later, we take solace in the timeless wisdom of those words, which reflect well our ideals. Further, your words and your works clearly embody the ideals and the values of our patron saint and namesake. We thus salute you on this day, Mortimer J. Adler, as we proudly confer upon you the St. Thomas Aquinas medallion for outstanding leadership.

**Citation to accompany the conferring of
St. Thomas Aquinas Medallion
by the University of St. Thomas on the
twenty-fourth day of April, nineteen hundred and ninety-five.**