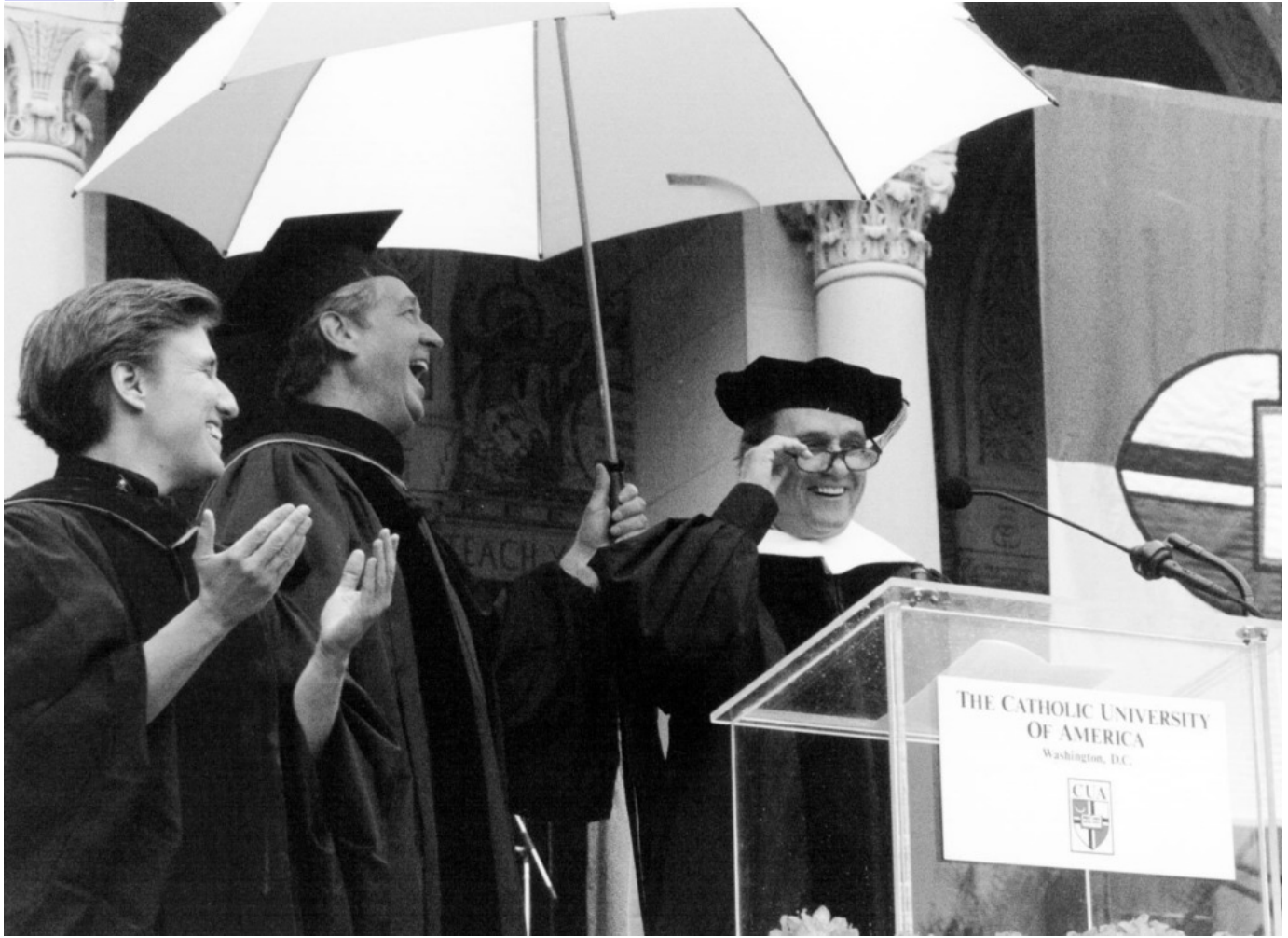


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Comedian Bob Newhart cracks up Carmen Nanko and Father Robert Friday with a joke about the rain falling on the graduation ceremony May 21, 1997 at The Catholic University of America. (OSV News/Catholic University of America, CNS archive)

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About the same time Chicago-area native George Robert Newhart was inching his way from an accounting job toward a career in comedy, his older sister Joan was professing her final vows as a Sister of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

In 1949, she entered the congregation from her family's home parish, St. Catherine of Siena in Oak Park, Illinois, and took her final vows on July 16, 1957. She spent several years teaching, including in Bogota, Colombia, and volunteered as a computer consultant later on in Chicago and Dubuque, Iowa. She died in Dubuque in 2018, a week shy of her 90th birthday.

"I always lived in her shadow," Bob Newhart said of Sister Joan in a 1979 interview. By then, he had not only two smash-hit comedy albums to his credit, but a long-running TV sitcom as well. "Maybe that's why I'm a comedian today," he continued, "because she was always the extremely bright one."

Newhart, who died July 18 at age 94 at his home in Los Angeles, parlayed his fine comedic timing and deadpan delivery into a triumphant career that spanned decades.

Highpoints included his two television series, "The Bob Newhart Show" (1972-78) and "Newhart" (1982-90), sporadic appearances as Professor Proton on CBS-TV's "The Big Bang Theory" as well as film roles, including in "Catch-22" (1970) and "Elf" (2003).

Newhart seldom told stories about his Catholic upbringing during his many talk show appearances. He usually saved such anecdotes for settings where he knew they would bring the laughter of recognition.

"I attended Jesuit schools," Newhart reflected in a 1985 interview, before going on to wryly credit the order for "the somewhat twisted way I look at life." But he was by no means alienated from the faith; he and his wife of 60 years, Virginia "Ginnie" Quinn, were longtime parishioners at the Church of the Good Shepherd in Beverly Hills.

Born Sept. 5, 1929, Newhart graduated from St. Ignatius College Preparatory School, then went on to Loyola University Chicago, where he received a degree in business management in 1952 before being drafted into the Army.

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Throughout his career on record, stage and screen, Newhart was careful to keep his routines suitable for a family audience. During an appearance on The Christophers' TV program "Christopher Closeup" in the early 1990s, he told series host Father John Catoir that, because of his faith, he refused to "work blue," meaning rely on sexual material to garner laughs.

Such a serious moral commitment didn't mean, however, that Newhart was blind to the lighter side of religion. Thus he told a Las Vegas audience in 2004 that his childhood training in Catholicism had sometimes left him confused:

"Thou shalt not worship false idols. That was an easy one to follow. You can drive around Chicago all day and not see any false idols — and if you do see one, you aren't going to stop to worship it."

"Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife," he added. "I'm 12. I thought it was, 'Thou shalt not cover thy neighbor's wife.' I didn't want to cover her anyway. I thought it meant you can cover any other wife, just not your neighbor's ..."

In a similar vein, Newhart recalled during a 1997 commencement address at The Catholic University of America that "growing up in Chicago, the best time to go to confession was during the Notre Dame — SMU (Southern Methodist University) game."

"You could tell the priest anything — 'I just killed my family' — (and the response would be) 'Well, don't do it again, my son.'"

Newhart was pursuing a less-than-stellar business career when he suddenly shot to showbiz stardom in 1960 with his first album, "The Button-Down Mind of Bob Newhart." The LP went on to earn a Grammy Award as Album of the Year — a first for a comedy recording.

Newhart worked steadily well into his 80s.

The Newharts had four children: Robert, Timothy, Jennifer and Courtney. Robert graduated from Gonzaga University and Timothy from The Catholic University of America.