

Spiritual Theologian

The present article is a personal reminiscence about a man I respected and loved as teacher, mentor, friend and colleague in our mutual specialty of spiritual theology. I do not have the resources for a detailed, academic evaluation of his contribution to the field, but I think this aspect of his work is secondary. His main contribution was in the practical and pastoral order. His life was his spiritual theology and provided the best model of his spiritual doctrine. He first assimilated the riches of the Christian and Carmelite tradition and then passed it on in the classroom and the conference hall as well as in significant writings. Kilian the spiritual theologian is revealed in his personal life and his leadership in the Order. This Kilian is the subject of my paper. My sources are primarily my memories and the writings that are available here in the west at some distance from the *Carmelitana Collection* in Fr. Kilian's beloved Washington, D.C.

My first meeting with Fr. Kilian was in 1940 or 1941 at Mount Carmel College in Niagara Falls. He was recently back from Rome, having returned in 1939 when the threat of war drove him and the other American students home. On the return boat Kilian was assigned a berth with a young Holy Cross student named Theodore Hesburgh, later to become the famous president of Notre Dame University.

It was a Sunday afternoon and Kilian was out for a stroll in full habit in the playing field behind the gym on Stanley Avenue. A few of us fifth year students, young Carmelites recently professed after the novitiate year in New Baltimore, were throwing a football around. He was the new

teacher of philosophy for the sixth and seventh year students as well as professor of theology for a handful of the displaced Roman student priests that included Paul Kirchner and Edwin McGowan. We engaged him in conversation.

I remember being a bit stage struck at the meeting. After all, he was like a man from Mars, a foreign professor who looked the part. What his background meant we did not exactly know, so he had an aura of strangeness and otherness about him. These qualities are not far from their spiritual or transcendent counterparts. Kilian always projected a spiritual persona. When we got to know him better, we found a mix of down-to-earth human qualities and other-worldliness. We found out eventually that he had been in Rome since 1934, had done his theology at the *Collegio Internazionale di Sant'Alberto*, was ordained in 1937, and stayed on for a licentiate and doctoral studies at the Pontifical Gregorian University. All this history was impressive, and some of it must have seeped through even in that first meeting. In any case he definitely was someone special.

Kilian was a spiritual leader all his life. This set him apart. Our questions at the moment were pedestrian: could he tell us what it was like to study in Rome? How was it living in a foreign country with Carmelites from many nations?

He was friendly enough, as I recall, but not too communicative about life overseas. Perhaps he suffered a bit of shyness, or humility, or he just wanted his privacy, a Bostonian quality that he inherited and never lost. In that first meeting he shared no secrets, so we had to wait for his

thoughts about Rome until a later time. Over the years he had much to say about Rome, and most of it was admiration for the great men in the Order who were his superiors and teachers, such as John Brenninger and Bartholomew Xiberta.

Sant' Alberto was an international Carmelite community in Rome, and in the thirties it had the reputation of being a place where the life was strict, if not rigid. Some criticized it for its tough life style. Not Kilian. He had only admiration and respect for the leadership of men like John Brenninger and Gabriel Couto, as well as for some holy classmates like Blessed Hilarion Januszewski, who died in Dachau in World War II.

There was typically an air of mystery, a quality of otherness and distance, about Kilian, at least until one got to know his warmth and kindness. I first got to know him on a personal basis as a student in Washington; he was my teacher for three years and my prior for two at Whitefriars Hall. He took the role differences seriously and even appeared a little aloof. Sitting in classes or conferences was not the best way to know his all-around personality. It was a beginning, however, and over the years I was able to get to know him from many encounters and conversations. I returned to Whitefriars Hall in 1951 as a member of the faculty, but he went off shortly to finish his degree in Rome that spring.

He returned to Rome the following year (not his first choice) in the role Assistant General (1953-1959) and teacher, and then as Prior General (1959-1971). In spite of the separation we had the good fortune of staying in touch whether in Washington or in Rome or even farther afield in east and west.

We had the same interests in the spirituality of the Order, in practical questions about Carmelite life and in ecclesiastical events and studies. These areas were his life, although he also had a few mundane interests like the Boston Red Sox or ice cream--always in moderation. He studied the journals and read widely in the Catholic press, so he was well-informed in theological matters and church news. Citations in his books and writings illustrate his wide reading. He had a deeper take on all these things than mere curiosity: they fit under the umbrella of the life of the Church, and they were the raw material of his spiritual theology.

Kilian=s Style of Spiritual Theology

For Kilian all theology was spiritual. In everything that happened the question was, where is God in all of this? The answer would be a strand of his spiritual theology. Spirituality was life and it was his primordial interest, the lens through which he observed events, the perspective in which he analyzed and interpreted everything. Thus his spiritual theology was not bookish or academic; it was the questions of the day and daily life. He had learned the tradition in the schools, lived it faithfully, and he kept it alive and vital by applying it to what was happening in the Order and the world. The foundational principles of his theology were the lessons of the gospel, such truths as living out of faith, practicing prayer, accepting the cross, and rejoicing as followers of Jesus Christ and Our Lady.

Kilian was a theologian after the heart of the fathers of the church, who defined a theologian as one who prayed. He was a bright man and well-schooled, not only under the best Carmelite teachers, but

also the great lights at the Gregorian University, like the well-known Joseph de Guibert, S.J.

Kilian did original research on the Reform of Touraine, the reform in 17th century France that survived in the Order and affected its entire membership, because its principles formed the *Stricter Observantia* which eventually spread throughout the Order and became the Constitutions of 1930.

The research became his doctoral dissertation, which was finished after a fifteen year hiatus and published under the title, *Methods of Prayer in the Directory of the Carmelite Reform of Touraine* (Rome: Institutum Carmelitanum, 1956).

He was a respected member of the theological fraternity in the USA, a charter member of both the Catholic Theological Society of America and the Mariological Society of America. He authored a serious theological study, *The Assumption of Mary* (Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier Publications, 1982) and published two spiritual books of high quality, *Walking with God* (New York: Declan X. McMullen Company, 1948) and *Prophet of Fire* (Rome: Institutum Carmelitanum, 1990). Both works popularized his deep convictions about the Carmelite life.

He also wrote several articles, some of them circular letters as prior general, some reflective studies, and others popular question-and-answer pieces for the Peabody Mall Chapel clientele. Most of this writing promoted his strong ideas about the contemplative life.

His thinking and writing were grounded in the viewpoints of the Reform of Touraine, but he did not simply repeat, he expanded and enriched the material with other sources, notably with his favorite

Carmelite saint, St. Thérèse of Lisieux, other Carmelites like Bl. Titus Brandsma, papal teaching and church documents.

Fr. Kilian was a master communicator in the classroom and in the pulpit. His teaching was primarily seminary work in the United States and in Rome, but also in the Pontifical Institute "Regina Mundi," an advanced school for religious women in Rome. His classes blended clear exposition, adroit repetition as a pedagogical tool, dramatic storytelling (which was sometimes rehearsed beforehand), and humorous routines. Their signature quality, however, was fervor: Kilian the teacher was also preacher, and his goal was not simply to communicate information but to convert people, to form hearts as well as minds.

Most classes had one or two *Aexcursus* on some aspect of prayer--its necessity, its place in Carmelite life, its difficulty, its fruits, its neglect. These 'sermonettes' were not speculative disquisitions, nor even corollaries or pious applications of the material of the course. They represented what was deepest in Kilian's mind and heart, the lessons he most wished to inculcate. There is no way any student in his classes could be in doubt as to how prayer related to the identity of the Carmelite, or whether prayer was the *sine qua non* of Carmelite life. His overarching goal in the seminary classroom, or pulpit, was to prepare students for the future, and the task weighed heavily on his shoulders. He used every stratagem to make sure that the students knew what they were getting into as Carmelite priests.

Fidelity was a key value for him and it was secured by prayer. Without prayer no one would be faithful. That was his message. All else was secondary, although he taught other values as well: for example,

profound respect for the teaching of the Church. He was by no stretch of the imagination anti-intellectual; solid theological formation was imperative. But knowledge had to be in service to life in community and to ministry.

He espoused the triple goal of Carmelite identity, which is prayer, community and ministry. All these positive values were seen in the context of the frailty of human life and the fact that a life in ministry was full of perils.

His classes were often like mini retreats. He covered the material very well, but he spent a lot of time on the spiritual life. At Whitefriars Hall the dogma courses, now called systematics, at that time followed a three year cycle, and there were seven hours a week in this subject. Why so many hours of class? Whatever the original intent, the arrangement gave Kilian ample time to digress on the really important lessons for life. I would guess that we actually had five periods a week of dogmatic theology and two periods of the assigned time were taken up with spiritual direction. Nobody minded these interruptions; we were mesmerized by his fervent preaching. We had two more hours a week assigned to formal ascetical and mystical theology, but we did not mind the total of four intensive hours in Kilian's forte.

The spiritual side of life dominated his consciousness. When he actually preached in the weekly conferences as prior, he offered well-crafted and eloquent appeals to live the life we had vowed. Each conference was like a kaleidoscope of the whole Christian message. One walked away with the conviction, "Do this and you shall live," as if the one lesson preached that day contained the whole message of the gospel,

whether the topic was silence or the Eucharist or daily meditation.

The Master's Message

St. Vincent de Paul is credited with saying that every priest has one sermon that he twists and turns to fit all occasions. Kilian had one sermon and it was prayer, personal prayer that he described as conversation with God. The emphasis in that phrase is not on words, but relationship. Prayer is loving attention and presence. The prayer could be vocal or meditative or silent, but its true measure is the outpouring of the soul in love with God.

Kilian was hesitant to recommend any one method, Asince there are as many ways to pray as there are people who pray@ (*Prophet of Fire*, p. 68). He once told me that he preferred the language of love to that of contemplation in talking about prayer, because contemplation was a vague and controversial term.

This is the language of Touraine: intimacy with God is continuous, loving conversation in the sense of the motto, "*Vacare Deo*," which means "to be occupied with God." This was the simple, practical goal of the Carmelite life according to Touraine and to Fr. Kilian, and it is its main daily task. Over and over again, in writing and in speech, Kilian emphasized that occupation with God is the primary goal and *pars principalior* of the Carmelite vocation; everything else is secondary. A Carmelite is authentic if he is a man of prayer; his service and ministry flow out of that prayer life. Ministry belongs in the life now, as Touraine taught, but "the primitive spirit of Carmel...was primarily (though not exclusively) contemplative" (*Methods of Prayer*, p. 16).

It would be tedious to document this assertion in Kilian's words. One need only pick up *The Prophet of Fire*, a book on Elijah in the biblical texts but as interpreted in the Carmelite tradition, especially in the early *Institution of the First Monks* (A.D. 1370). The ancient sources find full expression in Touraine, and Kilian presents these facts in abundance. He finds support in *The Carmelite Directory of the Spiritual Life*, which was written by John Brenninger with heavy dependence on Touraine (published in Latin in 1940 as the official directory for the order).

Kilian Healy, faithful disciple of John Brenninger, continues the tradition. Kilian's one sermon comes through page after page in *The Prophet of Fire*. So does it also in his popular *Walking with God*, which puts into modern English the teaching of the *Methodus orandi* of Touraine on the ways to practice the presence of God. *Walking with God* follows the *Methodus orandi* chapter for chapter.

The emphasis on contemplative life may strike some Carmelites as excessive, or even negative, in view of the actual life-style of Carmelites today. For students at Whitefriars Hall in the forties and fifties it was inspiring and life-giving. Kilian would engage in histrionics at times to make his point and he was not above jeremiads about conditions in the Order.

But he never forced his ideas on others, and even as Prior General he was positive and optimistic. He manifested a serene acceptance of reality and radiated hope rather than discouragement. His words were too authentic to be questioned by us. We left the seminary determined to be faithful to our chief heritage as Carmelites. We may not have always lived

up to those high ideals, but there was never a doubt but that these were the ideals of Carmel. This was the immense legacy of Kilian, the spiritual theologian.

In this reflection I have not discussed Kilian's position on different questions in academic spiritual theology. The direction he received from John Brenninger and other Carmelite sources, his studies with the Jesuits, his grounding in Touraine, and his wide reading in Thérèse of Lisieux and Titus Brandsma gave certain directions to his thinking. He believed, for example, in acquired contemplation and he thought that contemplation, acquired or infused, was the normal, though not the necessary outcome of a faithful life. He saw the Carmelite school as neither intellectualist like the Dominicans or purely affective like the Franciscans, but a mixture of both tendencies. He did not address the contemporary dialogue about contemplative prayer forms, such as centering prayer or Christian Meditation, but he did mention *lectio divina* as a ladder to contemplation and centering prayer as a way to practice the fourth act of *lectio*. (*The Prophet of Fire*, pp. 69-71) His mission was the basic one of convincing others, especially fellow Carmelites, that the contemplative life of loving union with God was possible, eminently rewarding, and the most fruitful gift one could give to the Church. We thank God for the gift he has been to the Carmelite Order.

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