

Stephen Diekemper, O. Carm., 1921-1998

Obituary

Although he was one of the premier St. Louis "Cardinals" baseball fans, and lived in that Missouri city for part of his younger life, Stephen Bernard Diekemper was actually born in New Baden, Illinois, a predominately German ethnic community, on 21 February 1921.

Stephen was the middle child of the late Theodore and Frances (Fuehne) Diekemper. He was a brother to siblings Aloysius, Anthony, Wilfrid (deceased), Roman, Sr. Petronilla, Cornelia, Elnora, and Marian. The family's focus was faith, hard work and education. The elder Diekemper was a blacksmith for the area but moved his family to St. Louis during World War II because of the decline of his trade and the burgeoning war industries.

Stephen attended the local parochial school, St. George's, and also spent a year at New Baden High School. Many years later he would complete his high school studies at the Clairemonth Adult School in San Diego, California, while he was a member of the formation house of Mount Carmel Priory near the University of San Diego. But during the years of the Great Depression of the 1930's, however, finding work was often more important than completing one's formal education.

During this time, the years of his mid-teens, Stephen experienced the first of his serious medical problems. His appendix had burst and the doctors, in the days before antibiotics, gave the family little hope for his recovery. But intercessory prayers for Stephen were made to St. Therese of Lisieux, not long canonized, and he made a remarkable recovery. He often attributed the beginnings of his vocation to Carmel to those long-ago prayers and the intercession of the Little Flower.

With the bombing of Pearl Harbor in Hawaii on 7 December 1941, the United States entered World War II against the Axis Powers, especially Germany and Japan. The following year Stephen was drafted into the United States Army, along with some of his siblings, and served as a cook. Much of his service time was spent at Fort Hood, Texas. He later received a medical discharge from the Army because of stomach ulcers.

It was at this time in 1945 that Stephen's thoughts turned to religious life. He was 24 and wanted to spend his life serving the Lord. He joined the Carmelites at Mount Carmel College in Niagara Falls, Ontario as a postulant brother. Ordinarily, he would have spent a year or so as a postulant and then entered novitiate. But his skills as a master carpenter and capable builder were needed at the time. It was also at this time that he requested leave from Matthew O'Neill, the then provincial, so that he would be able to return to St. Louis to build a home for his mother.

During the post-war years, materials of almost any type were more than scarce. This was especially true of building materials. But with his usual enterprising way, Stephen drove to Fort Crowder, Missouri and bought a war surplus Army barrack building, transported it to St. Louis, and built a comfortable home for his mother.

When Kevin Cahill, the founding prior and rector of the Carmelite Junior Seminary, was assembling his first faculty and staff for the new minor seminary in Hamilton, Massachusetts, he requested that Stephen (then known by his religious name of "Brother Paul") be added to the group. Provincial Matthew O'Neill agreed and assigned Stephen to Hamilton in the summer of 1945.

There was much work to be done to renovate the former Mandell Estate to prepare for the 30-member class of 1949 which was due to arrive in September 1945. Stephen seemed to be everywhere that summer with his building and carpentry skills being put to excellent use. No job seemed too difficult for him and his tremendous energy. What he was asked to do, he did well, joyfully and obediently.

As a member of Hamilton's first class, this writer well remembers the hard-working and dedicated Stephen. Whether it was digging a new sewerage ditch, making sauerkraut in the root cellar, or painting a room, we felt as though we were working "with" Stephen rather than just "for" him. He was the type of boss who made you feel very appreciated for your talents and efforts. We enjoyed working with him, especially in the Spring of our freshman year when we spent a good number of days outside the "fish-bowl" classroom for which he had built a portable blackboard to help the teachers.

In addition, Stephen was a die-hard "Cardinals" fan who told us of his playing sandlot ball with the famous second baseman "Red" Schoendienst who later was manager of the St. Louis team. When the "Cardinals" were in Boston to play the "Braves," Stephen's boyhood friend would send him tickets for the games.

We became greater friends with Stephen when the 1946 World Series pitted the "Cardinals" against the Boston "Red Sox." As a Brooklyn "Dodger" fan, this writer stayed with the National League, along with classmate Ernie Warshaw who was a New York "Giant" fan. We were practically the only ones at CJS who rooted for the "Cardinals" who won in the last game of the World Series.

In 1947, the PCM Province decided it was time to open a separate formation house for the brothers. This was to be at the Infant of Prague Villa in Akron, Ohio. Again, the skills of Stephen were needed to put the old house already on the property into living condition, and later to help in the construction of the new main building.

Finally, from 1949-50, Stephen did his novitiate at Mount Carmel in Niagara Falls, Ontario, and professed his first vows there on 15 September 1950. He then returned to Akron to help with the construction still going on there.

From 1951-54, he was again assigned to Hamilton where he had been a familiar sight in his khaki work clothes. This time, however, he was recovering from surgery. He helped with maintenance, and virtually anything else that was happening at both the seminary and the new retreat house. And from 1954-56 he returned to Akron as the manager of the farm there. He also found time to profess his solemn vows there at 15 September 1953.

After spending much of his life in the East and Midwest, Stephen was assigned in 1956 to Salpointe Catholic High School in Tucson, Arizona. It was, to some extent, a medical transfer to lighter duties to give him a chance to heal from some additional medical problems. And in 1960 he moved to Sacred Heart parish nearby to aid the staff there.

In September of 1965, the PCM Province opened a house of formation for the West Coast near the University of San Diego, California, with Cecil Pickert the first director/prior of Mount Carmel Priory. It was to prepare suitable candidates from the area for the seminary system in the East.

The following year Stephen was assigned to this pioneer formation group as procurator/purchaser. Again his devotion to duty and affinity for things Carmelite added much to the community there. It seems, too, that about this time Stephen first became interested in the Charismatic Movement as an outlet for his apostolic zeal and a way of deepening his own spirituality. This continued during his assignment, from 1969-77, at Mount Carmel Priory in Los Angeles, California. He was in charge of maintenance there, but also spent time with various Charismatic groups.

During the summer of 1974, Lukas Schmidt, then prior and pastor, set up a summer program in prayer at St. Boniface Priory in Scipio, Kansas. Carmelites from all over the PCM Province were invited to spend all seven weeks, or some part of that time, in the prayer program. Stephen was one of those who accepted. According to Lukas Schmidt, he showed up with two cartons of carrots and a blender. He was on a total carrot diet, and his skin reflected such!

But the prayer experience, as Stephen related, gave him a "second vocation" in Carmel, and a new ministry.

In 1977 Stephen was assigned to hospital ministry out of Mount Carmel Parish in Newport News, Virginia. Having suffered from ill health for a number of years, Stephen was more than empathic with those who suffered from various diseases. He ministered to them quietly, joyfully and spiritually, and brought great help and comfort to many.

His success in the Healing Ministry is attested to by a notice in the parish bulletin from Mount Carmel after news of Stephen's death was announced. Lukas Schmidt read the "thanks" from the parish from all to whom Stephen ministered so well and faithfully.

In 1986 Stephen took a medical retirement and returned to Mount Carmel in Los Angeles. He wanted to continue what he termed his "Praise the Lord" (PTL) Ministry there. He then spent from the Summer of 1995 to the Fall of 1996 at Whitefriars Hall in Washington, D.C., as a help and inspiration to both faculty and students there.

His final assignment was at the Casa Santa Teresita in Houston, Texas. This is the formation house for Hispanic students, who were inspired by Stephen's devotion to Carmel and acceptance of his sufferings. On Sunday, 8 March 1998, at the Hospice of the Texas Medical Center, Stephen entered the eternal reward of the Lord he had served so faithfully for so many decades. It was truly a friend meeting a Friend.

In his publicity file for the Carmelite News Service at Aylesford, Stephen wrote simply: "I give all thanks and praise to God for calling me and choosing me to minister to His people. I cannot count the times I have seen the Lord's Love and Power come through to touch and heal His people. All Praise, Honor and Glory to You, O Lord! Alleluia!"

These words, which one may consider the "leit motiv" of Stephen's life, were echoed by Ronald Oakham, the Western Commissary Provincial, who presided at the Mass of the Resurrection at Mount Carmel Church in Houston on 13 March 1998. There were also echoed by Lukas Schmidt of Whitefriars Hall who preached at Stephen's Memorial Mass at the National Shrine of St. Therese in Darien, Illinois on 18 March 1998.

A great Carmelite on earth has become a greater Carmelite in heaven.

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Homily

We gather on this Lenten weekday to CELEBRATE the memory of Stephen Paul Diekemper, our brother in Carmel, and your brother, relative, and friend. We celebrate and we are thankful for the Lord's many gifts to him in his lifetime. We celebrate also Steve's many years of gifting us Carmelites and the Church with his varied talents, and above all, Steve's profound awareness of God's love for him and, indeed, for each one of us.

In today's Scripture from the Old Testament we heard from the Book of Job, where Job speaks of a deep desire in him and in each believer to see God. Job's words are really our own as he says: "I know that my Redeemer lives and that he will stand forth and my own eyes shall behold him. My inmost being is *consumed with this longing.*"

This conviction and this longing in Steve's life led him to a religious vocation among us Carmelites. He joined us in 1945 at our priory in Niagara Falls, Ontario, at the age of 24, after being in the military during the Second World War. Steve has been a member of our

Carmelite Community for nearly 50 years. He had the distinction of being a postulant or pre-novice, which generally lasts a year or two, for four to five years. The reason for the delay in Steve's case was that they really needed him -- he was such a good and willing worker -- ready to serve the community with his talents and skills as a maintenance man and plant manager. Both at Niagara Falls and in many other assignments through the years, Steve's carpentry skills were especially useful and much appreciated. He used the talents and gifts that God gave him. Steve's greatness is found in the service he rendered to the communities in which he lived.

This Lenten Season is one in which we are each invited to take a look at where we are and try to see where we want to be and ought to be in our relationship with God and with one another. It involves testing our values and discerning how they stack up against the values that Jesus offers his followers.

Over and over again in the Scriptures, Jesus advises his followers that true greatness in God's sight lies not in any titles we may have or talent we may have cultivated. Rather greatness as God sees it lies in our willingness to serve our brothers and sisters as agents of the Loving God. Everything other than that is secondary. Greatness lies in service. Jesus proclaims us to be exalted -- not because we have achieved importance, but because we are willing to serve. "I assure you as often as you did it for one of the least of my sisters or brothers, you did it for me."

I think these Scriptures and the message they contain are epitomized in the life of Steve, whose memory we recall and whom we commend to the love and mercy of God in our celebration here today.

My first experience with Steve came some years ago and is a rather humorous one. In the Summer of 1974 I had organized a summer prayer experience at our priory in Scipio, Kansas. It was a seven week prayer and retreat experience to which members of the Province could come for all or some of the weeks. About 25 men in all were participants that summer. Each week we emphasized a particular prayer form -- with presentations and experiences led by people familiar with them who came in for the week -- there was a week dedicated to liturgical prayer, another to "centering", another to Christian Zen and Yoga, another to praying with bodily movement, and one week given to "charismatic prayer".

Steve arrived for the period in which he would participate. He had driven in a small van from California, his current assignment, to Kansas, and at the time he was on a "carrot" diet. Other than water, all he ate and drank were carrots. In the van there were two large crates of carrots and a juicer -- and having been on this diet for a while, Steve looked like a carrot -- yellowish/orange complexion. We have had some good laughs over the years about his carrot diet.

This summer prayer experience is important -- because it was during this time that Steve began, as he himself often said, his "second" vocation as a Carmelite. From this time on, Steve began to recognize in himself certain abilities and gifts which he used to help people who were sick or in some physical or emotional pain. He prayed for them, but especially he prayed with them and dedicated himself to helping them experience for themselves the tremendous gift of God's love. He helped many find peace and joy even in the midst of their sufferings with this new awareness of God's love in their lives.

While I was pastor in Newport News, Virginia, Steve was assigned to the parish and became for the parish the hospital visitor. Thankfully, Steve was off his carrot diet by then, and I can't count the number of times that people of the parish commented on the patience and compassion and love that Steve showered upon them in some difficult medical and emotional situations. Steve had prepared himself for this ministry to taking two units of Clinical Pastoral Education and attending the Program for Spiritual Directors in Pecos, New Mexico, also a charismatic center of spirituality.

In the years of his retirement and even while at Whitefriars Hall for a short time in the recent past, Steve remained dedicated to his charismatic spirituality. He never lost an opportunity to make himself available to those who needed prayer and an assurance of God's love to face the trials of their lives.

Steve's willingness to serve is exemplified in another story about Brother Joe, an elderly man who lived in our community in Joliet for many years. While I was living in that community with him, Joe continued to perform his job in this community of high school teachers by answering the priory phone. The kids from the high school would call the priory in the evening or on weekends for information about the time of the dance, time or location of the basketball games, and Joe would give his stock answer: "How the heck do I know, I'm not going." And then he would hang up the phone. In the community we knew we had to act to remedy this situation. Our decision was helped by the fact that Joe was always cold and began showing up at supper in his overcoat. We arranged to have Joe assigned to one of our communities in California, where we thought he might be warmer and he could be kept away from the phone! In this California community, Steve was living and he asked old Joe, "What are you doing here?" "Oh," Joe replied, "they sent me here to die." This man in physical and emotional distress became the object of Steve's concern. Some months later, I visited the California community and there I found Joe outside in his shirt sleeves and working in the flower garden. Steve's attention and care gave this man a new lease on life.

As the Scriptures today indicate, true greatness consists not in lofty titles, or offices of importance, but in a willingness to serve. We celebrate today and thank God for having among us a brother who lived this Gospel message and gave witness to it in his life. May the same be said of us when our journey is ended and we are remembered by our brothers, family and friends.

Brother Stephen,

The Lord has carried you through life's long day,
Now the shadows have fallen and the night has come.

The busy world is hushed and the fever of life is over.
May God in his mercy grant you a safe lodging and a holy rest,
And a place at the Banquet Table in that Kingdom
For which you always longed.

*Lukas J. Schmidt, O. Carm.
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