

William Travers, O. Carm., 1918-1997

Obituary

Although he had been a more than faithful correspondent for many years during this writer's term as editor of the *Carmelite Review*, the late William Travers made his debut for most of the members of the PCM Province when he attended the 1996 Provincial Chapter at the Center for Development in Ministry at Mundelein, Illinois. A great bear of a man, with an abundant beard, his friendly greeting and smile made him a welcome presence as the group set about electing Leo McCarthy as a successor to Quinn Connors.

Gregarious by nature, Bill wanted to meet the members of his adopted province after his training and early apostolic work with the New York Province of St. Elias and almost 20 years in Bonn, Germany. He also became well known for his *Alles Gute!* (All is Good) salutation on his correspondence. He loved life and people, and was more than happy enjoying and serving both in his many years as a Carmelite.

William Joseph Charles Travers was born on 10 March 1918, shortly before the end of World War I, in Brooklyn, New York. His parents were the late William and Agnes (William) Travers who raised him and the family well, and sent them off to school in Brooklyn.

In 1932, at the age of 14, Bill felt the call to the priesthood in the Carmelite Order and set off for St. Albert's Seminary in Middletown, New York, then the initial formation house of the New York Province of St. Elias.

After finishing his high school studies, Bill entered the novitiate in Middletown, and professed his simple vows there on 16 July 1937. He had taken the religious name of "Frater Leo" after Pope Leo the Great who drove the Visigoths out of Rome in the Fifth Century. He also professed his solemn vows there on 16 July 1940.

Bill then traveled to Washington, D.C. for theological studies. In those days, both the PCM and St. Elias provinces had students who resided at Whitefriars Hall and pursued studies at the Catholic University of America. Their theological studies were conducted by a faculty at Whitefriars Hall. He received his B.A. degree in Liberal Arts in 1941 and his B.A. degree in music in 1945, both from Catholic University. He was a talented musician much of his life, and this added to his liturgy presentations. The joyful day of ordination to the priesthood came on 3 February 1945, not long before the end of World War II. The Travers family journeyed from Brooklyn for the ceremony at the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception. At that time, however, only the basement section of the Shrine had been completed.

Following ordination, Bill was assigned as a chaplain at the huge Bellevue Hospital in the Manhattan Borough of New York City. While there, from 1945-47, he lived with the Carmelite community at Our Lady of the Scapular Priory on East 28th Street. Carmelites

there have been know for decades for their round-the-clock care of the sick at Bellevue. From 1945-47, Bill also taught at St. Albert's in Middletown. And from 1947-49, he taught at the former Mount Carmel High School in Los Angeles, California.

In 1949, Bill began a 22 year career in the United States Army Air Force (later known as the United States Air Force). Shortly thereafter the Korean War broke out and the then First Lt. William Travers was assigned to the 49th Fighter Bomber Wing in Taegu, Korea. Remaining there for two years, Bill decided that he would experience what those in his spiritual care had to endure: he participated in seven combat missions in T-33 jet fighters, as well as 26 missions in B-26 bombers.

In the bitter winter of 1950, after the Chinese Communist troops entered the war, Bill marched in sub-zero temperatures with the United States Marines and parts of the United States 8th Army in a withdrawal under fire from the Chosin Reservoir. He, along with then United States Marine John Josten, were members of the elite "Chosin Few." (John Josten would later become Stephen Josten, O. Carm. [SEL] who is a staff member at the Shrine of Our Lady of Knock in County Mayo, Ireland.)

In 1952, Bill was awarded the Bronze Star for heroism in rescuing downed pilots under fire on eight separate occasions.

During his 22 years in the United States Air Force, Bill also served in Vietnam, Germany and England, as well as the United States. At the United States Air Force Academy in Colorado, he celebrated Mass for the first class of cadets. And at Furstenfeldbruck Air Base in Germany, he was awarded the Soldier's Medal, the United States Military's highest peacetime award, for his role in the rescue of two United States soldiers trapped under an overturned atomic cannon.

In 1971, Bill retired from the United States Air Force with the rank of colonel. From that time until 1978 he served as associate pastor of St. Mary's Church in Vacaville, California. During this time he earned his Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) certification.

He also went to school for 16 weeks in the Police Academy in Santa Rosa, California, and joined the Sheriff's Office in Solano County. As a pilot, he was a member of the Sheriff's Air Squadron and served as its commander for two years, as well as being a reserve sheriff. He also served as chaplain for the Solano County Firefighters.

In 1978, Bill answered a call from the American Catholic Community in Bad Godesberg, Germany, where he became pastor of St. Thomas More Church in Bonn. He had selected the name of the church himself which served many members of the diplomatic community in what was then the capital of West Germany. Later the two parts of Germany would reunite and move to the ancient capital of Berlin.

During his 17 years in Bonn, Bill involved himself in every aspect of community life, serving at times as both a medic and scorer for the high school teams, as well as a friend, confidant, and counselor. He also created outreach programs in Russia, Uganda, and the Appalachian Mountains of Kentucky.

Above all else, he was to his flock a priest and shepherd: a true and faithful vessel of God's grace.

On 5 February 1995, Bill celebrated his Golden Jubilee of ordination. The ceremony was held at St. Thomas More Church. Among the various dignitaries were John Malley, then Prior General, and former United States Ambassador to Germany Robert Kimmitt. Many sang Bill's praises on that occasion, including the then United States Ambassador Charles Redman.

When he returned to Fairfield, California, Bill helped out at our Mount Carmel parish there. He also returned to active duty with the Solano County Sheriff's department.

Death stilled his great heart on 14 July 1997. A Vigil Service was held on 18 July, and a Mass of the Resurrection shortly thereafter. A Memorial Mass was also held in Bonn, Germany on 20 July. Burial was at Suisun-Fairfield Cemetery in Fairfield, California.

In the late 1950's, the New York Province turned over their California houses to the PCM Province. When Bill learned that he could opt to transfer to the PCM Province, he wrote to the then Prior General, Kilian Healy. Permission was granted, and Bill wrote to the late Donald O'Callaghan, then Provincial of the SEL Province, and to the late Raphael Kieffer, then Provincial of the PCM Province. Bill had wanted to remain in California.

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Homily

William Leo Travers -- where do you begin? Teacher, full colonel, United State's Air Force, accomplished singer, paramedic, jet pilot, reserve line sheriff, fireman's chaplain, American embassy chaplain, Bonn, Germany, speaker of 4 languages, recipient of the Bronze Star and Soldier's Medal for heroism under fire in Korea, Carmelite friar, priest -- and a jolly friend!

A man of many hats and many talents!

We almost didn't know him, you know! In the 1930's he said: "It was touch and go for a while whether to go into a singing career or the Church." Luckily for us it was the Church. God chose him, this hulk of a man, to touch so many lives!

For Bill it would not be a life of singing and turning noted pages, but one of praise the Lord and pass the ammunition! Bill at 78, still 6 foot 3 and 220 pounds! His legs might not have been too strong, but his voice boomed! It is certainly true that he never met a microphone he didn't like, but in actuality, he refused to *use* a mike at Our Lady of Mount Carmel Parish in Fairfield, California because he said that if his voice could be heard over the roar of jets, it could be heard in a cathedral, or a dome or Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church!

For some people that one eulogizes, there's not enough information to do them justice. With Bill, it's the exact opposite! There's too much to do him justice! All of us regard him in some special way with our own personal remembrances.

As with his physical stature, he was a bigger-than-life personality! The stuff of legends and a good adventure film! Another legend in his own time, General Douglas MacArthur, coined the now famous adage: "Old soldiers never die, they just fade away." For the ordinary soldier that might be true, but General MacArthur was no "ordinary" soldier and he didn't "fade away" and would have abhorred it! Bill did not "fade away" either. That would go against his nature! He was the focal point of activity wherever he found it, wherever he went! Bill died as he lived, making his rounds, visiting the people who loved and admired him.

Given Bill's intimidating body frame, amazingly his appetite for food was rather small. "I only eat two meals a day" he would brag. But his appetite for involvement was voracious, and the telling thing about those involvements was that they were all service oriented. Helping the other: teacher, rescuer, healer, peace officer, chaplain, priest, Carmelite, friend! When he might be too tempted for all this to go to his head, he would pepper his stories with some witty self-deprecating humor. In his work with paramedics he said: "He could sew a loose artery, but couldn't sew a button!" In Korea, on a bombing run, Bill was seated behind a pilot of a jet that had to dive and then climb rapidly to avoid enemy fire. Well, the maneuver put them on a collision course; they were about to kiss a mountain! He said: "I just knew we were going to die, but I was surprisingly calm about the whole thing and decided to say a prayer, but apparently, I wasn't calm at all because what came out was the words for the blessing of a meal -- 'Dear God, may we be thankful for that which we are about to receive.'" Old soldiers never die. They just fade away. Like some last quiet note of a gentle song -- not for Bill -- never!

For me he lived and departed like a powerful wave that rolls along the California coast; he loved.

For a moment fix your mind's eye on one of those waves, one still far off from shore, tall and majestic. It stands out above the others, awesome, intimidating perhaps. Powerful,

capable of carrying enormous weight on its back. You watch it roll forward, driven by the wind and pulled by gravity. As it moves forward, bits of it begin to spill off. However, as it nears the shore, it gathers all its strength together, raises itself up to full height. It seems to touch the floor of the beach's sand on one end and on the other reaches for the sky! With a roar, the powerful wave cascades, topples over, spilling its contents down to the very last drop. With hissing and seething, it gently surrounds your feet in a cool, gentle pool of water and foam. It delivers the last drop at your feet.

This awesome wave has exhausted itself completely! It has given itself away totally. And just as soon as it is about to disappear through the sand, it withdraws! Its work is done. Subtly, it ebbs away. It slips back into the vastness of the ocean from which it came, there to be reassembled in some new combination of molecules and droplets, and on another day it will gather into another mighty wave to roll and charge onto another shore! Bill came to us, roaring into our lives with enormous vitality and talent. He carried out many a duty. Lifted many a person's troubles. Harnessed himself with so many responsibilities with the strength of his character and generosity. Finally, the decline set in, as it will for all of us. The shore of death loomed up ahead -- not to worry! Bill's work is done. He has given himself away completely. He had nothing left. He withdrew from us -- to return to the source of his being, there to be reassembled in a new and permanent way! Christ was able to say: "I have finished the work you gave me to do." Bill can pray that same prayer with Christ, and with Paul: "I have fought the *good* fight. I have finished the race. I have kept the faith." *Mission accomplished!!!* Farewell, Bill! Roar on with a fuller joy of life and a mingling with people who loved you, long since gone. This time, however, they will not follow you, the pastor, the colonel, as they once faithfully did years gone by. You follow them! They now will bring you to the fullness of God's Kingdom!

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