Frederick D. Wilhelmsen:
Two Remembrances
Frederick D. Wilhelmsen
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On 21 May 1996, one of the Roman Catholic world’s most profound philosophers, Professor Frederick D. Wilhelmsen of the University of Dallas, passed on to his eternal reward. Dr. Wilhelmsen collapsed from a heart attack at his home and died enroute to an Irving, Texas hospital. He had celebrated his seventy-third birthday just three days earlier.

A beloved husband, father, grandfather, and brother “Fritz,” as he was affectionately known to all, was a Roman Catholic gentleman and scholar in the most profound sense. Born in Detroit, Michigan, on 18 May 1923, Professor Wilhelmsen attended the University of Detroit from 1941 to 1943, leaving to serve in the United States Army for the remainder of World War II. In 1947 Fritz received his A.B. degree in philosophy (with honors) from the University of San Francisco. The following year he was awarded the M.A. degree in philosophy from the University of Notre Dame. The University of Madrid, Spain, conferred upon him the Ph. et Litt. D. Honors in philosophy in 1958. By that time in his life a devoted Thomist, Dr. Wilhelmsen wrote his doctoral dissertation on the thought of Jacques Maritain.

As the years passed, Professor Wilhelmsen matured as one of Catholic philosophy’s deepest Thomistic thinkers and greatest apologists for the natural law. He served on the faculties of a number of prestigious universities: including the University of Santa Clara; the University of Al-Hikma, Baghdad, Iraq; the University of Navarra, Pamplona, Spain; and from 1965 to his passing, his cherished University of Dallas. In addition he taught summers at Loyola University of Los Angeles; Stanford University; Georgetown University; the Pontifical University of Lima, Peru; the Autonomus University of Guadalajara, Mexico; the Real Colegio Universitario de María Cristina; San Lorenzo de El Escorial, Madrid, Spain; and the National University of San Luis, San Luis, Argentina.

Author of sixteen books and more than 275 articles, knighted by H.R.H. Prince Javier de Borbón-Parma, founding editor and senior editor of Triumph from 1956 to 1966, and a recipient of numerous other awards and grants, Dr. Wilhelmsen was a giant among Catholic scholars. The breadth and depth of his spiritual and intellectual influence will remain for decades to come.

A Requiem Mass was celebrated at the University of Dallas Chapel of the Incarnation on Saturday, 25 May 1996, with burial following at Calvary Hill Cemetery in Dallas. Dr. Wilhelmsen is survived by his wife, Pauline Wilhelmsen, daughters Alexandra, Elizabeth, and Francesca, grandchildren Francesca and Frederick Moore, and brother Romain Wilhelmsen.
Frederick D. Wilhelmsen
-by R.A. Herrera
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The last sentence of F. D. Wilhelmsen’s last book, Under Full Sail, is today especially poignant:

Once again in my life—it was the second time and more than thirty-five years separated the one from the other—I left the sea and ships that sail.

Fritz has left this life as well as the sea and, God willing, is enjoying that eternal presence which saints, sailors, sovereigns, scholars, and even grey academicians aspire to. It is fitting that his first voyage took place on the barque, Omega, and his last on the brigantine, Romance. The symbolism is overwhelming. Suffice it to say that Wilhelmsen’s life was a romance in search of the luminous reality of that Omega who also is Alpha which he first encountered as a youth in the credal profession of the Catholic Church.

Fritz Wilhelmsen accomplished much and had the unusual merit of being more than what he accomplished. He was a profound and acute interpreter of St. Thomas, a political thinker of substance, and one of the first, together with his friend Marshall McLuhan, to explore the new and threatening horizon of electronic technology. Wilhelmsen was a writer of élan, an essayist of rare perception, something of a contemporary Belloc, a writer he admired and in many ways resembled.

He was scarcely an ivory tower intellectual. Together with his friend and colleague, L. Brent Bozell, he founded the Christian Commonwealth Institute and Triumph, its journalistic organ, the prototype of an American movement inspired by Roman Catholic principles. To this work should be added his exceptional status as a leading theoretician of militantly orthodox Spanish Carlism to which he contributed a valuable exposition of its tenets, Asi Pensamos. Wilhelmsen’s interests extended from the most abstruse points of dogma and philosophy to pertinent observations on what he called “glorious Catholic junk,” the religious gimcracks scorned by intellectuals but of such importance to everyday piety. Fritz had a way with words, ideas, and people and he put these gifts at the service of God and the Church.

A quarter of a century ago, Etienne Gilson indicated that one of the salient characteristics of the contemporary world is its antagonism to Being. This is the point of departure for those negative forces which threaten to engulf society, the ground of its aberrations and the spur to its enthusiastic apologists. Wilhelmsen resolutely opposed this trend. His work was an ongoing meditation on St. Thomas’s philosophy of Being centered on the principle of “esse” (act-of-existence) which he presented as living, vibrant, and fully relevant. He labored to
disengage St. Thomas's authentic insights from the envelope of an Aristotelian terminology which, albeit necessary at the time, has served to obscure them.

Fritz Wilhelmsen was a man enamored of existence, of things in all their often crude reality. He cherished the goodness and beauty of creation and celebrated a theophanic world which continuously stammers the name of its creator. He insisted that Being a was “doing” and cannot be signified by a noun, imprisoned by a concept, or understood as an essence. Doing so has generated a multiplicity of philosophical monstrosities. Being can be known only through the judgement which is signified by the verb “to be.” Wilhelmsen views the malevolent caricature of humanism propagated by the French Revolution as the product of analysis detached from the synthesizing power of existence. One must return to fundamentals and insist that the mind knows things not merely copies of representations. Like Orestes Brownson, the great Catholic apologist of last century, he berated thinkers of a platonic tilt, quipping that they agonized over the earth-shaking difficulty presented by the question of the muddiness of mud.

Like Brownson, Wilhelmsen was a fighter, a defender of the Catholic Church and permanent things. Unlike Brownson, he was free from inner turmoil, did not cultivate bluster, nor suffer from an inability to arouse emotion in others. Quite the contrary. The meld of theatre and instruction which comprised his lecturing style appealed effectively to both the mind and the emotions. It was unique. This elongated asparagus of a man—he often signed his letters as “el esparrago”—would seem to coil, then rapidly uncoil, with his voice ranging from a soothing whisper to a melodramatic bellow. Each word clearly pronounced, each concept fully explained.

From the time of his childhood in Detroit, Wilhelmsen aspired after beauty and the heroic. He once confided that even then, surrounded by urban blight, he knew that beauty existed and that he would find it. Find it he did in Catholic Spain, in those ranks of the Carlists, and in the elaborate complexity of the Baroque. He came to fully appreciate God’s creative generosity displayed in every aspect of the physical and human world, from the grand to the most ordinary. He loved such divers things as family and friends, good Spanish wine, lively conversation, tempered steel and ornate timepieces. The men he admired were scarcely routine: St. Thomas Aquinas, Baldwin IV, the leper-king of Jerusalem, Bonnie Prince Charlie, Hilaire Belloc, Alfonso Carlos of the Carlist succession, and others like them.

Fritz Wilhelmsen was something of a contemporary Don Quijote with perhaps a slight touch of Munchhausen. He possessed exceptional philosophical and literary gifts which he placed in the service of the highest reality. Unlike most men he was fully and vibrantly alive. As Russell Kirk once wrote of him: “so long as such men live and write, [the world] will not become a benevolent and despotic empire like the Incas, an “Empire of the Dead.” Fritz, good friend, colleague, mentor, and teacher: ADIOS! You live in God and in our memory.