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## REMEMBRANCE OF A PHILOSOPHER-SAILOR

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FREDERICK D. WILHELMSSEN DIED ON MAY 21, 1996, THREE DAYS AFTER HIS SEVENTY-third birthday. He was a sailor, a Thomist philosopher and writer, a medic in World War II, an outstanding teacher, a great *raconteur*, and a very good friend of mine. When I received, on this side of the Atlantic, the news of his death from his daughter, it was hard to believe, for she had just written to me barely a week earlier, about how her father had come through with flying colors a two-year battle with throat cancer. My last conversation with her father had been a few weeks earlier. I had called him concerning the translation from English into Spanish of his memoir of life in Avila, Spain. During our conversation, his voice sounded a bit weaker on the transatlantic phone, but I chalked it up to a poor connection. When I hung up, I remember being grateful that he seemed to have lost little of his tremendous vitality.

I first met Don Federico, as he is known by friends here in Spain, when I was a university student headed for the Iberian peninsula on a summer program called the Christian Commonwealth Institute. He was one of the founders and was to be one of its philosophy professors over the summer. Little did I know then that I would eventually marry a Spaniard and settle in Avila and that my husband and I would become some of the many friends that he had over here. What impressed me on the eve of our departure was the passion with which he talked about Spain, a country he considered to be his second home. As I listened, there was no doubt in my mind that it was going to be an extremely interesting summer. One of the first tours that the Institute took was to Avila. As we were en route on an old bus whose suspension caused it to lurch precariously along the narrow mountain roads, Don Federico stood up in the middle of the aisle and waved his cane in the air with one hand. So that he would not fall, he grabbed the back of the seat with the other hand and told us about a famous street in the city called the Street of Life and Death, located right alongside the Cathedral. He said that sculpted high into a facade overhanging the street was a coat of arms with the face of an angel representing life and a skull-and-crossbones representing death. These brooding stone images had hung silently over the bare cobblestones below for centuries. A famous duel had taken place there and Don Federico gave a dramatic demonstration with his cane and coat of the sword and cape work of those long adversaries ... all the while the bus continued to careen dangerously around the curves. It was quite an introduction to this medieval city. However, I have strayed off course a bit, which I do not think he would mind, for he loved good stories.

The portrait of the man that I wish to share with you comes from the latter years when he used to visit us during the summer at our home in Avila. After his early morning walks around the city, he would work for several hours writing or preparing classes and then go down to our garden, which he especially enjoyed, and would spend time reading two or three different Spanish daily newspapers by the pool. During these visits, there were many memorable conversations and moments, but three stand out in my mind.

One is a conversation we had about his sailing jaunt on the square-rigged ship *Omega*, that he and his brother had arranged to sail in off the coast of Peru. I should interject here that Don Federico loved sailing and even in Texas had a small sailboat that was docked on a reservoir-like lake near Dallas. When the auxiliary motor was stolen, he

simply did not bother to get a replacement. He decided that he would just sail in and out of his dock space using only the wind ... if there were no friendly breezes around, he would sit, contemplate, and wait. He was fond of saying that part of the real challenge of sailing was to use only the winds. Who needed a motor? At any rate, one summer afternoon in our garden, we got to talking about his experiences on this ship Omega. For one who was usually very frank and outgoing, he was curiously reticent about the whole journey. He did say that one night the sea was incredibly calm, smooth as glass. Everyone on board had been sitting, waiting for several days for even the slightest breeze so that they could move. The guano they carried as cargo was getting very smelly. The sails hung like limp ghosts under the silver, eerie rays of the moon. Then, all of a sudden, a whisper of a breeze arose out of nowhere and the sails billowed up like great shadowy beings and, as he put it, "Our phantom ship sailed off into the darkness."

Another distinct memory I have of Don Federico is one of the classes that he taught nearly every summer in Spain on metaphysics. Over the years he had taught this course repeatedly at many different universities and institutes and he never lost any of the tremendous power in his class delivery. There was one lecture within the framework of the course that came to be known as his "isszzing" lecture in which he offered what he thought were some of the definitive proofs of the existence of God. This lecture always started off in a low, subdued tone with a series of well-presented Thomistic examples. There would be a slow, gradual crescendo; he would pace back and forth with long strides, the noisy bellows of his lungs inhaling and exhaling the acrid smoke, all the while punctuating the important points of the examples as he flicked the ashes with his index finger. The "isszzing" lecture that I decided to attend once again, one of those last summers, was another one of his command performances.... The dramatic tension had been slowly mounting during the hour. I could see that he was again approaching the moment of great truth in the lecture—the climax - the moment of greatest intensity when he would attempt to offer a final proof of the existence of God. I saw how, as before, at that very peak moment, his baritone voice began booming forth: "God is *Esse*, God is pure Being, God *is*. God is *isszzzzing*, God is *isszzzing* his way into all *eternity* ... *isszzzing*, class, *isszzzing!* !! We mortals simply cannot and do not fully comprehend the great dimensions of His Being!" And then, as always, he suddenly stopped, stamped out his bent black tobacco

cigarette into a tiny ashtray and said, "Now, ladies and gentlemen, I invite any of your questions or comments." That summer "isszzing" lecture went off like so many others, but it was one of his last. It was also one of those extraordinary and unforgettable experiences that a person has in life, when you are lucky enough to be able to witness the inspiring force and energy of a great teacher.

The final remembrance that I have of Don Federico occurred during his last summer visit. That summer my husband and I also had the young teenage son of some friends staying with us. One evening, the four of us, Don Federico, the lad, my husband, and I, were at an outdoor cafe that overlooks the medieval walls of Avila. We were having a typical Spanish "merienda" of strong Manchego cheese, chorizo sausage, black olives, salad, and thick pieces of crusty bread. Somehow the topic of abortion came up and this exuberant boy, who was so earnest and so wanted to impress his newly-found philosopher friend, joined in the conversation. He and Don Federico had been playing chess earlier and even though Don Federico had won, the boy had played a good game. At any rate, the young fellow mentioned something about how abortion might be all right in cases of rape or incest. I will never forget Don Federico's response. He leaned forward slowly on his brass tipped cane, he cleared his throat, and after a very long pause, his baritone voice finally responded. He said, "My boy, my boy ... abortion is murder, it is *always* murder, and there are no *ifs*, *ands*, or *buts* about that one. Now let us have a toast to you young life!" And so we raised our wine and Coca-Cola glasses and toasted the young boy's life. I remember that evening, as I looked at the walls of Avila, they were a brilliant, burnt bronze in the setting sun. Then, very slowly, the sun slipped over the horizon and the walls were shrouded in a dark silence.

For those of us who had the great privilege and pleasure of knowing Frederick D. Wilhelmsen, we shall all miss him deeply. We shall mourn not only for his untimely death, but his spirit, his incredible zest for living, his zeal for the Catholic Church, and his marvelous sense of humor. He was blessed with that rare wit that appreciates not only the comedy but also the tragedy of the situation. During the next few months here in Spain there are many who will ask about "Don Federico." I, for one, shall have a difficult time answering. *Requiem aeternam dona ei, Domine* ... for a fine sailor.