RITZ WILHELMSEN—NO ONE WHO knew him ever called him Frederick, and I was privileged to know him well—was a man born out of his time. To the children of this world, this is a reproach; but to those who understand the true moral quality of the last third of the twentieth century, the age of apostasy from Christendom, it is a very good time to be born out of. Fritz was born a crusader, who could have taken part almost exactly as he was in the councils of Raymond of Toulouse and Richard the Lion-Hearted and St. Louis IX of France and Isabel the Catholic and Don Juan of Austria. All these would have understood and appreciated him much better than his own age did. It was his supreme good fortune to link up with, and find soaring inspiration in the last living crusaders, whom the world has forgotten but the Church remembers, the Catholic heroes of the Spanish Civil War. Among them he found a home. To them he was so gracious as to introduce me, and they changed my life as well.

Fritz Wilhelmsen was a Catholic’s Catholic, a Catholic to the marrow of his bones. He loved the Church Christ founded with a true romantic passion. He called himself a “citizen of Rome,” and no man who still dwelt on this earth in the Year of Our Lord 1996—the year of his death at the age of 73 had a better right to the title. Rome was ever the center of his life, his work, and his loyalty. The Pope was ever his supreme commander.

Fritz Wilhelmsen was the greatest teacher I have ever seen or heard. He was a showman, often a spec-
tacular one, as in some way or other all great teachers must be. But behind the show was a substance both solid and luminous. The keen blade of his mind struck to the heart of the great issues with which his teaching dealt. His knowledge was encyclopedic, and extended far beyond his own primary field of philosophy. For thirty years he held the chair of Philosophy and Politics at the University of Dallas, a rare combination indeed; beyond that he was a true authority in my field of history, especially the history of European monarchy. I will never forget how in the pages of Triumph magazine (which he did so much to launch and sustain during its ten difficult but fruitful years of existence) he demolished a critic of James II, the last Catholic monarch to reign in England, by quoting a rare and little-known historical source which he described as “essential to the understanding of James II,” and which he just happened to have in his personal possession.

But his central commitment as a teacher was to philosophy, and his supreme contribution to it lay in the teaching of metaphysics, as befitted a philosopher who acknowledged St. Thomas Aquinas as his guide above all. Metaphysics has been called a study “a little too high for man,” but it was not too high for Fritz Wilhelmsen. I watched him teach it to students at the Triumph summer program at El Escorial in Spain whose ages ranged from 16 to 80 and whose preparation for undertaking metaphysics ranged from barely sufficient to virtually nil. It did not matter. To be taught metaphysics by Fritz Wilhelmsen was a kind of cosmic experience. The universe could never seem the same again. For his theme was the nature of God, of whom being is essence, who alone of all we know or can conceive must be, and therefore alone can give us being. Exodus 3:14 was his text, following his mentor St. Thomas: God’s own name, proclaimed to Moses from the bush that burned but was not consumed, was I Am. And to demonstrate and illustrate what this Font of Being truly meant in practice, he turned the quiet copulative English verb “to be” into a kind of celestial volcano erupting throughout the universe, “is-ing” (he would draw this unique word form out into a prolonged and glorious roar of “izzzzzzzzz-ing”) into every creature, animate and inanimate, sustaining them in existence, without which they would instantly disappear, indeed would never have been.

He showed the profundity of this truth in another way when he quoted the atheist Marx as admitting that the argument for God from contingency is logically irrefutable, but then immediately pronouncing “this question is forbidden to socialist man.” All the soul-destroying totalitarian oppression of communism was summed up for me in that statement.

Though a recent convert to the Catholic Faith when I first met Fritz, I had always believed in God, mainly by the argument from design. I was not philosophically inclined, nor had I learned much from my philosophy courses in college; I was not sure I had ever heard of, and certainly had not previously understood the argument from contingency. After Fritz, it became and has remained for me the central proof of who and what God is. I am sure the same is true for many, many others whom he has taught.

In this and in many other ways Fritz Wilhelmsen was my mentor. More than anyone else, he showed me what it truly means to be a Catholic teacher, scholar, and writer. We both found inspiration in G. K. Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc, but there is a limit to how much any man’s writings, however brilliant, can guide and inspire a questing spirit without the personal presence of the man himself. I greatly honor Chesterton and Belloc, but Fritz Wilhelmsen was my friend and pathfinder.

He guided me to appreciation and enthusiasm for the Catholic people and heritage of Spain. Early in the 1950s Fritz came to Avila in the heart of Spain, straight from (of all places) Baghdad; he had only a limited knowledge of Spanish and little previous contact with the country. But in its Catholic spirit, especially in those years, he found an echo of his own. Spain when he came to it was less than twenty years removed from its great and terrible civil war, the last crusade. The country was full of men who had fought in it, who had known some of its thousands of martyrs, or their relatives and friends. He spent more than ten years there, absorbing its culture and its history and learning to speak its language like a native. (I remember the conference I arranged in Miami where he gave a lecture in Spanish to the Cubans, and one of them came out saying, “He speaks better Spanish than we do!”) He became active in Spain’s then still lyrically Catholic Carlist movement, writing for the Carlists a statement of their political theory, Asi pensamos (So We Think), which they accepted as though written by one of their own. The last commander of the Carlist militia, the requete, which had put 100,000 prime fighting men into the field against the Communists and their allies in the Spanish Civil War, was Fritz’s close personal friend. In
1975, the last year Franco lived, I had the privilege of accompanying Fritz for several days among surviving faithful Carlists.

Carlism was a monarchist movement, though Catholic first: its motto and battle cry was *Dios! Patria! Fueros! Rey!* (God, country, local rights, and the king—in that order). Fritz Wilhelmsen understood the theory and significance of monarchy in European history better than anyone else I have ever known. He knew it could never find a place in the United States, for true monarchism is inseparable from tradition, and we have no monarchist tradition. But where monarchy did exist it had often been Catholic and spiritually fruitful. Despite the conceits of this age, it was at least as good a form of government as any other, and more in tune with the Catholic view of the universe. Catholic monarchy, of course, could never be absolute monarchy, since the primary duty of the king was to promote the salvation of his people and therefore to protect, honor, and in religious matters obey the Church which brought salvation. Fritz’s hero and exemplar of the monarchist tradition was Otto von Habsburg, eldest son of the last European Emperor, Charles of Austria. I had the great privilege of being introduced by Fritz to Otto von Habsburg, whose father was the only real hero of my first book, *1917: Red Banners, White Mantle.*

Fritz Wilhelmsen was in spirit at least as much a Spaniard as an American. He had much to say for the benefit of both peoples, each in its own context. He often reminded us Americans that we are not the standard by which the rest of the world is to be judged, that ours is not the only good form of government, that we are no historical messiah. When as a nation we serve the right as in the Second World War against Hitler, and the long “cold war” struggle against communism we deserve praise, but should give thanks to God for the opportunity. When we do evil, it should be confronted and denounced. Fritz was present at the very first “Operation Rescue” in 1970, even before the Roe v. Wade decision, at an abortion clinic in the District of Columbia. He gave the speech which inspired several of those present—Brent Bozell, the founder and leader of *Triumph* magazine—to try to save the babies being killed inside.

In art, Fritz was an unashamed admirer of the baroque. In his last speech at Christendom College he spoke of a recent visit to Germany in which he had beheld with joy “thousands of angels” in the cathedral of Eichstadt, now a small city hidden away in the verdant countryside of south Germany, whose bishop had for a long time been the only German bishop who had dared to go to the Council of Trent. Not for Fritz Wilhelmsen was the shrinking back of so many modern critics from exuberance in praise of God and His Church. The more angels the better! He was nothing if not exuberant.

That exuberance ran through everything he did. He was, as he said in the title of a book of his about Belloc, “no alienated man.” For him romance, reason, and faith were one. He was tall and slim, handsome in an unusual way, and naturally flamboyant—he loved to wear a large cape, smoked theatrically during his classes (now totally politically incorrect), and drank substantial amounts of wine and brandy. Contrary to current expectations, he was neither an alcoholic nor contracted lung cancer. He took his chances and beat the odds. In one memorable episode in Spain, he used his walking stick to break the window of a shop displaying pornography (when Franco still lived and the sale of pornography in Spain was therefore still illegal). When the police came he told them just why he had done it, whereupon they took him around the corner to a bar and bought him a drink. Alas, nothing like this would happen in Spain today.

One of his great themes was the call he heard for Catholics to “sacramentalize the world,” to bring everything they could reach into the orbit of Christ and put it to some holy use. To him this flowed naturally and logically from the towering fact of the Incarnation. This supreme miracle was ever in his thoughts and feelings. By it God had taken the world into Himself in a more intimate way even than by giving His being to His creation. In his lectures Fritz put special emphasis on the humanity of the Risen Christ. In my annual class on the historical importance of sacra reliability of the Gospels, beginning the second of our three required history courses at Christendom College, I always quote his recalling the appearance of the Risen Lord to the disciples on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, when they thought Him a ghost until He asked if they had anything to eat. They offered Him some fish which He took and ate. After retelling this, Fritz would throw back his head and shoulders, spread
his arms (and his cape, if he was wearing it as he sometimes did in class), and intone: “Ladies and gentlemen, on those fish I base my faith!” For indeed, if the Incarnation did not actually happen, then in the words of St. Paul we Christians are of all men most unfortunate. If the Risen Lord could not really eat real fish, we are still in our sins and God never was with us.

Fritz Wilhelmsen did not have an easy life, though his joy in life never faltered. Marital happiness eluded him. From the age of seven he had the use of only one eye. His whole professional life depended on that eye; it never failed him, but inevitably made him uneasy. But no one seeing him could guess it; both eyes, very dark, were exceptionally brilliant. The changes in the liturgy following the Second Vatican Council were a severe trial for him; with his love of Latin—he was as much at home in Latin as in Spanish or English—his profound respect for tradition, and his vivid sense of the importance of sacramentals, he could never feel at home with the execrable translation of the Novus Ordo into English, nor the trendy popular music and the lack of reverence characteristic of the late twentieth century Mass. To reject the new liturgy, however ill-advised, when it had been changed by the authority of the Pope, never occurred to him. He was always the “citizen of Rome.”

For at least his last two decades, Fritz knew that he was a man born out of his time. Though always ready to battle for his Lord and his Church, always full of confidence, he had moments when, as he once said, he was “haunted by our many defeats.” He knew that the Catholic political tradition was fading, that true Catholic monarchy in Europe was dead or dying, that his beloved Carlist movement had lost its unity and ability to lead and inspire Spain. All this distressed but did not discourage him. He always burned with the virtue of hope. Quite late in his life I heard him conclude one of his magnificent addresses, after a long pause and quite out of direct context with what he had been saying, with the four ringing Latin watchwords of so many champions of the Faith: “Ave crux, spes unica!” (Hail to the Cross, our only hope!)

No one who knew Fritz Wilhelmsen or heard him lecture was unaffected by him. He was not a personality anyone could pass by or ignore. God gave him great charisms and he used them all in His service. He had a special appeal to the young, who are usually more open to glory and romance than the often disillusioned old. To the very end of his life, Fritz was always reaching out to them. One of those to whom he reached out was my own new colleague in teaching history at Christendom College, Dr. Christopher Blum. He is nearly forty years younger than I, but we share the same mentor.

When the end came for Fritz, it came as he had always wanted it to be. He was fully active, speaking and writing, until the day he died. He never had to be shut away from the world. When his heart, which had never before given him any trouble, began suddenly to fail, he remained conscious almost to the very end. He had several hours in which to make his confession, to be anointed, to receive Viaticum. Indeed, it would have been very hard to imagine so vital a man dying in his sleep. He went to meet his Lord with his mind alert and his soul full of anticipation. In the immortal words of St. Paul, he had fought the good fight, he had finished the race, he had kept the faith.