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IN MEMORIAM FR. THÉODORE A. KOEHLER, S.M.

Time flies but the memory of good people and their kind deeds stays with us to form tradition. One of these traditions is *Marian Library Studies*, a journal intended to foster original and scholarly studies on "the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God, in the mystery of Christ and his Church."¹ Fr. Théodore Koehler was one of the founding fathers and a tireless promoter of *Marian Library Studies*.

He died on May 15, 2001, in Dayton, Ohio, the 90th year of his life. Fr. Koehler left us with the rich heritage and legacy of his marian thinking and the noble task to lend it expression for present and future. Exploring and pondering the mystery of Mary is a sacred endeavor. According to Fr. Koehler it takes on the form of witnessing:

In studying tradition, we encounter information bequeathed to us by many brothers and sisters from past and present. As we travel through many centuries and cultures, their words lead us to an encounter with persons. In the gospel, in the Trinity, and in tradition, we encounter Mary and the God who reveals to us the mystery of Mary. Our research is the questioning of persons by persons, all within the Communion of Saints. We study who Mary was for those who formed the tradition and who now are in the presence of God with the fullness of life. These texts we study are not simply writings of the dead; they are the voice of witnesses.

Study of historical tradition is not mere information; rather it forms us and becomes part of us. Mary participates in this formation, accomplished through the Holy Spirit. Mary is the mother of the one who renewed humanity; she is also mother of the humanity which has only one body because it has only one head. God has begun the recapitulation of creation with his Son, the Son of God and the new Adam, born of a woman whose person was formed and renewed in grace – *kecharitomene*.²

This issue of *Marian Library Studies* is not so much a tribute to the person of Fr. Koehler as it is a pledge to continue his work of studying marian tradition in order to witness Mary's person and role in salvation history. May the recollection of Fr. Koehler's life and personality be like markings for this journal, reminding us that research is service, knowledge for giving away, and gathering of information the bridge from past into present and on to the future.

¹ *Lumen Gentium*, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Chapter 8, Title. AAS 57 (1965): 1-67.

² Théodore Koehler, S.M., "Response to the Doctorate from the Marianum," in *The Marian Library Newsletter* 19 (Summer 1989): 3.

God's Gift to the Church³

Théodore Koehler was born in Strasbourg, France, in 1911 (at the time, Strasbourg in Alsace was German territory, to be ceded to France in 1918). At the age of eleven, he enrolled in the Marianist school in Strasbourg, Collège St. Etienne. After five years at the school, he asked to be admitted to the Marianist novitiate at Rémy-Signeult in Belgium. At that time, he wrote, "During my five years at St. Etienne, I came to appreciate the Society of Mary. I was a member of the Sodality, from which came my devotion to the Mother of God. Through my contacts with Fr. Mossler and Fr. Kieffer, the desire to dedicate myself to the Virgin Mary was strengthened. Now that I can appreciate what the Marianists are doing in the school, I have decided to enter their society." In his letter to the French provincial, Fr. Mossler gave his impressions of the sixteen-year old Theodore: "For the last five years, I have been in contact with him. Without pressure from me, he decided to ask to enter our society. He has a wholesome intelligence, open and firm in character, a sensitive conscience, a generous nature – all the stuff from which saints are made." He professed first vows in 1927, perpetual vows in 1936 in Strasbourg, and was ordained a priest in Fribourg, Switzerland, on July 27, 1941.

French religious were not exempt from military service. In 1935, as a reserve officer, he studied at Saint-Cyr, the French national military academy, and graduated in 1936. In 1937, he was sent to the seminary in Fribourg. In his second year of theology, 1939, he was activated in the French army and served as a lieutenant along the Rhine where he was taken prisoner. While still in German territory, he obtained permission to visit a relative in St. Die. From there, and with the help of a Marianist who served as the mayor of a small town in German territory, he obtained papers allowing him to return to Fribourg for the third year of theology.

He received the License ès Lettres from the University of Strasbourg in 1934, the Licentiate in Theology (1940) and the Doctorate in Sacred Theology (1945) from the University of Fribourg. From 1944-52, he was professor of philosophy at Institution Sainte-Marie, in Paris, where he served as chaplain for "Le Sillon Catholique" (an apostolic association) and wrote articles on Christian responsibility for *L'Ame Populaire: Organe du Sillon Catholique*. From 1954-69, he was professor of Mariology and spirituality, as well as spiritual director, at the Marianist International Seminary in Fribourg.

He joined the French Mariological Society in 1946 and participated in every meeting until the late 1990s. Some of his major contributions were studies on the medieval witness to the spiritual motherhood of Mary and the medieval commenta-

³ Thomas Thompson, S.M., "Fr. Theodore A. Koehler, S.M., June 23, 1911-May 15, 2001," in *The Marian Library Newsletter* 43 (Winter 2001-02): 2-3.

ries on John 19:25-27 (Mary at the Foot of the Cross – an esteemed Gospel passage in the Marianist tradition). He was part of the French Catholic theological revival which plumbed the patristic and medieval sources in the 1940s and 1950s, whose work influenced the documents of Vatican II in the 1960s. Later, he would bring to the Mariological Society of America, struggling to assimilate Vatican II, calming insights from deeper European currents.

A new chapter of his story began in 1969 when he was invited to the United States – where he would spend the rest of his life – to be director of the Marian Library at the University of Dayton. In the view of Fr. Vincent Gizard, S.M., the French Marianist provincial and a close friend, a “crowning” achievement of Fr. Koehler’s lifelong efforts to promote Marian studies occurred in 1975 with his founding of the International Marian Research Institute (IMRI), a theological institute affiliated with the Pontifical Theological Faculty Marianum in Rome and empowered to confer theological degrees in Marian studies.

He was recognized in several ways: membership in the Pontifical Marian Academy (Rome), 1973; the Patronal Medal of the Catholic University of America, 1976; an honorary doctorate from the University of Dayton, 1987 (the citation noted his “whole-hearted devotion to his profession ... his remarkable capacity for work ... and his contributions to the intellectual life of the Church and the university”); an honorary doctorate from the Marianum (Rome) in 1988. During the 1991 General Chapter of the Society of Mary in Dayton, Ohio, on his eightieth birthday, he was presented with a Festschrift, *Mater Fidei et Fidelium*, a volume of more than 800 pages, to which forty-nine scholars, personal acquaintances, from Europe and the United States had contributed. The volume also contained a bibliography of his major articles and smaller reports, which at that time numbered 200, and he added more during the last decade of his life.

In a recent UD Marianist Directory, he wrote of himself, “Alsatian before being French, and French in spite of having been stationed in Dayton 30 years, I am first and foremost a Marianist.” He described himself as an “enlightened devotee of Mary and indefatigable researcher of her vestiges and ways. And I have a secret passion for micro-chips and megabytes.”

A Loving Contemplative⁴

The man with the beret, as faculty and students remembered him, has left us. And one last time, Fr. Théodore Koehler has taken us all by surprise. Unable to return to France, and skillfully avoiding his eventual transfer to St. Leonard’s, he

⁴ Johann Roten, S.M., “Homily at the Funeral Mass, May 18, 2001,” in *The Marian Library Newsletter* 43 (Winter 2001-02): 4-6.

opted for home in heaven, and escaped like a song in vertical direction. May his soul rest in peace, his mind find the answers to all the questions he assiduously pursued in this world, and may his heart – the heart he so carefully shielded from sodium, saturated fat, and strong emotions – blossom without restraint unto eternal spring.

I

Most of our memories are visual, and so we will probably remember Théodore Koehler's proud bearing, the distant look gazing upon an imaginary horizon, and the demeanor of noble distance which, for him, came with the combined effort of French *savoir vivre* and a certain type of religious education.

Obscure to some of his interlocutors and lacking clarity, he could be – especially where persons, their opinions and feelings were concerned – so beautifully oblique, indirect and convoluted that he drove to despair all those for whom the truth can be summed up in a bold statement or expressed in a simple equation. Deeply steeped in Pascal's spirit of finesse, Koehler would never allow himself to cause an affront to anybody by saying out loud what a perceptive mind should be able to intuit in swift anticipation.

There was, however, in Théodore Koehler a quality of immense respect for all that is human and potentially human, and simultaneously a quality of gracious understanding and sympathy for what seemed to be all-too-human. And human he was himself, as will confirm those who had to brave the Armageddon of his office and living quarters, or have met him clad in an old flyer's cap and worn raincoat: "After all," would Koehler say, "we will find perfection only in heaven." He had a good sense of fine humor and the calm patience and perseverance that go with it. And may I remind ourselves that this calm patience and perseverance of his had also been described as "persevering tenacity," "gracious resilience," and, less graciously, was called "Alsacian single-mindedness." But thanks to his scholarly tenacity, the *Mariale* by Servas Sanctus of Faenza († ca 1300) was rescued and returned from oblivion, for "in the face of reversals and delays, he had the uncanny ability to adjust course ... and to continue undaunted."

II

Fr. Koehler's life spanned some of the more galvanizing periods in modern Church history and coincided with a cultural metamorphosis that inspired as much awe as it prodded encouragement and elation. Fr. Koehler had been an impassioned witness of these events, thrilled by new apertures into the unknown and heartily

applauding the setting of new milestones in scientific progress and technological advancement. A critical and compassionate spectator of the *theatrum mundi*, he considered himself an active and acting part thereof as well. Much of his meditation on the world found its way into his private and community prayer.

He ardently debated political conjectures for a new world order, but even more ardently put them in perspective and context with history and its many lessons from the past. While having a special liking for the integrative and consolidating powers of the human intellect, Koehler also readily advocated its critical function and called it discernment. For him, discernment was as difficult as it is necessary.

This difficulty appears especially in the moral field. There, for individuals as well as entire societies, it is crucial to discern what is good and what is evil. The destiny of persons and human societies is constantly in crisis for lack of moral discernment.

A scholar he was, but he had a very practical mind as well when it came to the diligent use of the commodities of high technology. Part of his heart may have been with the great figures of the Middle Ages, yet there was nothing that would stop him from studying them with the most up-to-date tools of the twenty-first century.

Born into a country of two cultures, French and German, Koehler almost naturally outgrew the narrow geographic confines of his native Alsace. Living on and off in international settings from the days of the novitiate, he developed a European mindset that was soon to become cosmopolitan. The roots and deeper strata of his personality were German, but the basic patterns of his life and the mental structure he acquired over the years seem definitely French. There was in Koehler something of the physical and moral robustness of the German character, the strength of optimism and "the instinctive absorption of all that is great ... and making it greater still." It took the skillful hand of his uncle, at La Ferté-Bernard, to lay the foundations for what gradually evolved into Koehler's intellectual profile *à la française*: "his intellectual calmness and mental detachment, his lofty outlook, his silent understanding and mastery of things." There exists in both the French and the German intellectual tradition a long-standing and at times tragic acquaintance with what the Germans call *Geist* and the French *esprit*. Where the Germans may indulge in their natural penchant to radicalize the spirit into an absolute system of occasional deadly practicality, the French delight in shaping "*l'esprit*" into the brilliant toy for "games people play" or the proud standard-bearer to uphold the ideals of rationality. Koehler avoided and stood clear of both German idealism and French rationalism.

He was a person guided to his own form of life by personal or literary encounters with some important intellectual and spiritual figures in the Society of Mary and the Church. Not without reason did seminarians nickname him "Scheeben"; the map of his mind was staked out with names such as Emile Neubert, M. J. Nic-

olas, Hubert du Manoir, Henri Barré, Gabriel Roschini, Carlo Balić and Charles Journet, to mention only those who are more intimately related to his Marian intellectual vocation. Yet the close encounters of the mind never enslaved him. He developed, on the contrary, a healthy skepticism about becoming a "disciple" of any master of the mind. It was his firm belief that scholars who are ardent followers of a particular theologian or school of theology "often entrap themselves in a kind of narrowness that may be harmful." Freedom and openness of mind enabled Koehler to meet any other mind in all its positive substance and also to bring into play his own position in full identity. An ideal partner in ecumenical roundtables, he effectively acted out the fundamental Christian attitude, which is to receive everything from the fullness of the Incarnate Word of God, even things well beyond the ecclesiastical area of faith.

Ultimately, according to him, the way of knowledge and research leads to an encounter with persons – and this has made Koehler into a "migrant scholar," for there was hardly a new idea or project which he did not put to the test in extensive consultation with close-by collaborators or faraway correspondents. In the end, everything for this seemingly most cerebral of scholars revolved around a deeply engrained personalist world view – his scholarly ethos, the methodology implied, and the very object of his scholarship – all had only one goal: the transformation of the human person in truth and love, so as to open the human heart and mind to the grace of God.

III

Koehler was a scholar, indeed. His literary production encompasses a variety of writings, mainly articles in reference works, journals and periodicals, but also contributions to conferences and symposia, monographs, reports, chapters in books, and a few books, such as the five-volume history of Mariology in Italian. A cursory look at the list of almost 200 titles leaves the observer with the impression of an exuberantly growing English garden. Koehler's writings cover a wide range of historical and theological topics, from the rose symbolism to the convergence of sciences, from the crisis of devotion in Erasmus's times to Bernard's ladder of sinners. They cover a period of almost sixty years, several (original) languages, and three different continents.

Koehler was one of the few twentieth-century Marian scholars to have experienced pre-conciliar times, the period of reassessment, decline and rebirth of Marian studies, its budding promises of the recent past and consolidation in the present. And so it may come as no surprise to learn that Théodore Koehler's work bears the typical marks of at least indirectly commissioned scholarship, which he considered as part of his priestly ministry and Marianist vocation. For him, scholarship

and research were a form of service. In Koehler's understanding, knowledge and research were not something to be jealously guarded, an artificial barrier to be erected between the initiated few and the common people. Truth, goodness, and beauty – as everything in Christianity – are for giving away. Thus, Koehler's joy as a scholar and researcher was the sharing and giving out of the treasures he himself had so joyously received through hard work, the grace of the moment or in inspiring debate and dialogue. He firmly believed that goodness – as the scholastics put it – is *diffusivum sui*, meaning that knowledge, especially the revealed truth, attracts and convinces the hearts and minds provided we do not stand in its way.

What mattered to him was not to be remembered as the godfather of a grandiose project or a new theological current, but to humbly assist God's endless coming into the world he wanted to make his kingdom. Théodore Koehler had never fallen victim to the pursuit of easy success, treacherous brilliance, or the short-lived moment of glory. He most certainly would approve of Luther's advice: "If you feel or imagine that you are right and suppose that your book, teaching, or writing is a great achievement ... then, my dear man, feel your ears. If you are doing so properly, you will find that you have a splendid pair of big, long, shaggy ass ears." Karl Barth put this quotation in his own copy of the second edition of *Romans*; it could be written in big letters all over Koehler's work – a stern warning for those who are tempted to value scholarly ethos too lightly and who weigh instead their own name and reputation too generously.

IV

Fr. Koehler was a spiritual theologian; more important still, he was a spiritual person, a man of prayer. He fell and fractured his pelvis while praying the Stations. The Stations of the Cross, which he cherished and frequently prayed, are like a symbol and summary of his personal spirituality. It could be summed up with the first stanza of this modern liturgical hymn:

There is a wideness in God's mercy like the wideness of the sea.
There is a kindness of God's justice which is more than liberty.
For the love of God is broader than the measures of our mind.

God's love is indeed broader than the measures of our mind. And this loving God comes to us to become our way of mercy. Commenting on Dom Marmion's concept of spirituality, Koehler wrote: "There is only one way to become a truly spiritual person. You have to understand God's love as *mercy*. God is the God of pardon, the God of Calvary." For Koehler, the spirit of God is the spirit of mercy, and Mary is the mother of compassion. The hearts of Jesus and Mary are powerful symbols of God's suffering love for us. But he rejected dolorism, listless piety, and

fearful passivity. For him, the God of mercy is a God of liberation and freedom, because he is essentially a God of self-giving. To discover his mercy for us means to experience our own liberation and freedom. This is why we need, according to Koehler, "a theology of presence to understand better the presence of God in our lives, the presence of Mary, immaculate in her conception and exemplar of our destiny." Koehler's spiritual life was a road traveled in filial piety toward Mary and with active participation in her apostolic mission.

There was a second key concept in Koehler's theological and spiritual reflection and life. Based on mercy it articulates regeneration, our regeneration in Christ. Sin may have destroyed the power of Adam and Eve to generate children of God, but God's plan was not destroyed. In his motherly love, God the Father prepared a new creation in Christ, and so the generation of the children of God became a regeneration. It is against this backdrop that Koehler developed his most recent reflections on Mary's spiritual motherhood: "Motherhood in the new creation is no longer the motherhood of one mother. Our earthly mothers, the Mother of Jesus, the Church are associated, complementing one another in this regeneration. There is no opposition between these mothers." Our earthly mothers prepare the family of God, but they are not able to transmit God's own life. "Their children are saved by God, regenerated through Mary and through the Church."

In sum, the profile of Koehler's personality presents a high degree of integration, not least thanks to the solid spiritual foundation of his whole being. There was no opposition in him between the so-called habits of the heart and the habits of the mind. His mind and heart were united and fashioned by God's mercifully freeing love and many-splendored presence. Thus, what at first glance seemed like a complex and somewhat forbidding personality, in fact and in depth, turns out to be a man of limpid humanity and burning charity.

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This evening's gospel of the story of Emmaus reminds me of a color etching by Georges Rouault. In this picture, the solidarity between Christ and his disciples is presented in a plunging perspective, drawing the spectator into a pact with the Risen Lord. However, the road seems endless and bare, and, the artist suggests, new suffering is lying ahead for all of us. Indeed, the wheel of anguish, at all times, is in constant motion. Will the master stay? Will we be able to recognize him? Is there an end to this endless road?

When assailed by these questions – aren't we all! – we may be looking for someone close by who traveled this road before us. Théodore Koehler was one of them. His person and work breathed the wonderful freedom of the children of

God, because he delighted in passing on to others what he himself so intimately experienced. He was like Saint Bernard in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, a loving contemplative in whom Mary brought to the fore some of her own beauty. As Dante turned to Bernard for instruction about Mary, so we too will benefit from Fr. Koehler's Marian wisdom, from the depth of his science, and from his experience as loving contemplative. Again with Dante, we may then say about Koehler and for our own sake:

He turned his own eyes to her with such love that
He made mine turn even more to look again.

