

The Reverend Dr. Robert D. Crouse as Teacher: A Tribute¹

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“*Vox spiritualis aquilae auditum pulsat ecclesiae*”: the voice of the spiritual eagle resounds in the ear of the church.² These are the opening words of John Scotus Eriugena’s *Homily on the Prologue to Saint John’s Gospel*, the work that formed the subject of the first essay I wrote for the Reverend Doctor Robert Crouse. I was a second-year undergraduate at the University of King’s College, taking Father Crouse’s Medieval Philosophy seminar. Midway along the road of writing that paper, I bogged down like Dante in the dark wood. I remember going to Father Crouse’s office in a tremendous lather and asking him if I should write about something else, *anything* else. He listened to me silently for some time, with his characteristic air of quiet compassion, and then finally said, very tenderly, “You know, I think you should just keep going.” He reminded me that Eriugena himself depicts intellectual understanding, symbolized in the Homily by Saint John the Evangelist, as entering the tomb of Christ after faith, symbolized by Saint Peter. So, he suggested, perhaps I should have faith in my love for the master’s text, and the understanding would follow. *Fides quaerens intellectum*, faith seeking understanding, was always one of the touchstone phrases of Father Crouse’s classes. He used to tell despairing undergraduates that Latin and Italian would turn into English in their minds if they only contemplated the texts long enough and with enough attention. (Amazingly, this actually seemed to work when you were writing papers for his classes—although not always for others.) So why not Eriugena? With my faith restored, I returned to the *Homily* and completed the essay. I still have it, with Father Crouse’s comments, and it is still the grade of which I am proudest.

1. This tribute was presented to the Academic Celebration of Professor Robert Darwin Crouse, Dalhousie Department of Classics, 14–15 October 2011.

2. John Scotus Eriugena (Jean Scot), “Omelia Iohannis Scoti Translatoris Ierarchiae Dionisii,” in *Homélie sur le Prologue de Jean: Introduction, Texte Critique, Traduction et Notes*, ed. and trans. Édouard Jeaneau (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1969), 200.

The great mediaeval thinkers taught us that all understanding begins in humility and in the knowledge of our own unknowing. For me to speak of Father Crouse as a teacher—he who taught so many great priests and professors at the very highest level—seems a true exercise in that knowledge. From 1992–1996 I was simply one of his many undergraduate students: a very lowly undergraduate who went on to be a professor of theatre (a profession of which St. Augustine, for one, would likely have disapproved). Yet in the spirit of humility that Father Crouse taught, I can only hope that this brief tribute will resonate, however feebly, with the feelings of the many, many such students whose lives and spirits he touched so deeply, often in just one lecture or one seminar.

Vox spiritualis aquilae: Eriugena’s phrase describes magnificently the voice of Father Crouse, of which Wayne Hankey has said beautifully that no student of his ever ceases to hear it and so to walk in the presence of the Logos. In that gentle, resonant voice that seemed charged not only with his personal decades of patient study, but with those of all the thinkers who came before him, he taught generations of students—great scholars of theology and philosophy and meek undergraduates alike—to love truth and to seek understanding: not for gain or promotion or high grades, but because they were good in themselves. Just the *sound* of his voice could convey with great immediacy the depth of ideas that ought to have taken hours to explain. I remember often hearing him quote the words of Aristotle: “All men by nature desire to know.”³ To hear him say the phrase, calmly, lovingly, fastening his eyes on the figure of Lady Philosophy in the distance, was to feel profoundly the truth of the ancient statement

The day after Father Crouse’s passing, I read again the first notes I took in that Medieval Philosophy seminar. Here are his words, in my stumbling transcription:

The history of medieval philosophy is the story of the development of thought. Aristotle says that “all people seek to know”—if so, we must also be grateful to those who got it wrong. Thomas Aquinas says that the history of thought is like that of the individual, a continual dialectic, dispute, disputatio. *Aporia* must be the beginning of philosophy, as only when mind is shackled by a problem does it gain the impulse to search. Philosophy today is seen as a discipline among other disciplines—for antiquity, it was not a ‘subject’, but a love of wisdom.

So many of the markers of Father Crouse’s teaching are here: that beloved citation from Aristotle, the generosity towards “those who got it wrong” (very comforting for his students), the celebration of the intellectual fruits of *aporia*. Above all, the emphasis on philosophy as love, as opposed to subject, recalls

3. Aristotle, *The Metaphysics* (1933; Harvard: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 2.

his pedagogical voice, for translating the invitation to the love of wisdom from antiquity to the present was a great part of Father Crouse's vocation as a teacher. As usual, in this introductory lecture he summed it up with perfect elegance and lucidity, and in far fewer words than it would have taken most of us to introduce the very first idea.

It is small wonder that Father Crouse's students regarded him as a living link to the great teachers of our collective past, to the Platonic Academy and the mediaeval Schools of Paris. In my year at King's College we used sometimes colloquially to call him "The Good" (a nickname intended not blasphemously, but with reverence both to Father Crouse and to Plato, and above all to the Supreme Good who gave us our teachers). I once shamed myself by loudly telling a friend at a Chapel potluck that she must try "The Good's pudding" (Father Crouse's cooking was, of course, renowned). I was utterly mortified when I realized he was *standing right there* as I spoke, but he appeared (or graciously affected) not to notice my *faux pas*. In a world where many teachers seek out cults of personality, he appeared uninterested in the one he inspired. For him, we felt, it was always the text, always the tradition, always the truth that mattered, and not the teacher. He treated every student, from first-year undergraduate to postdoctoral fellow, with the utmost humility, simplicity and respect. Above all, he taught by example the doctrine of the Communion of Saints: the mystical unity of all believers in (and, I think he would add, all *seekers after*) the divine truth, past and present. For him, Augustine, Anselm, Eriugena and Dante were very much alive and speaking with us—as indeed they are, "upon another shore and in a greater light, that multitude which no man can number, whose faith was in the Word Made Flesh, and with whom we for evermore are one."⁴

I cannot better describe Father Crouse's dedication to his students and to the texts he taught than through a small story, oft-repeated over the years by those of us who were there, and remembered very fondly after his death. On the last morning of his Foundation Year Programme lectures on Dante during my first undergraduate year, there was a substantial snowstorm. Some friends and I had bought white roses for him as a gift for this last day, as I believe students did in every year he gave the Dante lectures. When at 9:30 he had not yet arrived, we were consumed with anxiety, certain that thanks to the ill-timed weather we would lose his much-anticipated final words on Dante's vision of the White Celestial Rose. As we were standing around the doors to the Arts and Administration Building, hoping and praying, our wonderful peer, Paige Davidson (now Dr. Paige E. Hochschild of Mount Saint Mary's University), came down. She was then in the third year of her

4. Eric Milner-White, "Bidding Prayer," *King's College Chapel, Cambridge: A Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols* (Cambridge: Provost and Fellows of King's College, 2011), 10.

studies, and knew Father Crouse so much better than we did. “Oh,” she said, smiling. “Don’t panic. Right now he’s shoveling the snow out from in front of his car on the road from Crousetown and saying, ‘Don’t worry, Beatrice. I’m coming’.” And indeed, just then his car pulled into the quad, and his valiant figure came wading through the snow, and he reduced us all to tears with his sublime lecture. I looked back at my notes from that lecture, too, when he passed away, and saw that I had written: “Father Crouse stresses: Dante’s ‘mind is in love’ with paradise, with Beatrice, with God.” For me, these words perfectly describe Robert Crouse and the source of his unmatched power as a teacher.

The legions of us who were Father Crouse’s students, whether in the classroom, the garden, the organ loft, the kitchen or the church, are unspeakably blessed to have learned not only by his words but by his being itself the essence of that love of wisdom and of truth that gives meaning to our lives. And now that his pilgrimage is fulfilled and he rejoices with us, but upon that other shore and in that greater light, the voice of this great spiritual eagle continues to invite us to follow in the path of the seeker, where he trod before us. After all, if we think of all the words he shared with us as our teacher, we may find that we can best sum them up in the lines of scripture he used as the epigraph for his book *Images of Pilgrimage*: “For they that say such things declare plainly that they seek a country.”⁵

5. Heb. 11:14.