

Howard P. Bleichner, PSS

1937-2022

In Memoriam

By

Father Robert F. Leavitt, PSS

Though we were both seminarians at St. Mary's Seminary in Roland Park in the 1960s, I did not really get to know Howard Bleichner until he returned to Baltimore following his doctoral studies at the University of Tubingen in Germany in 1973. That was fifty years ago this fall. A friendship that spanned five decades has set down deep roots. I trust these words will bring back fond memories for his classmates and colleagues. He was a brilliant professor of theology, a strong character, and a complex personality. I pray that these reflections memorializing one of the most accomplished and respected Sulpicians of the post-conciliar period of the United States Province of the Society of St. Sulpice will be a consolation to his family in Pittsburgh. I cannot speak for others, but this is who he was and will remain in my memory.

Father Howard Bleichner, PSS passed away under a physician's care in the early evening of Wednesday, December 14, 2022, at a local hospital where he had been admitted on December 11 with symptoms of coronavirus. He was a month shy of his 86th birthday. A Mass of Christian Burial was celebrated for the repose of his soul on December 20, 2022, at St. Basil's Church with Bishop David Zubik presiding and with Howard's classmate, Father Clem Gardiner preaching. There were many Pittsburgh priests, including those he taught, in attendance. Following the Mass, Howard was buried beside his parents, Howard P. Bleichner and Catherine H. Bleichner, at St. Michael's Cemetery. As the Bible so tenderly puts it, "he was gathered to his fathers." The life that has been gathered in a grave in Pennsylvania I wish to spread out in a few words for the seminary which formed him and where we taught together in the first years of our priesthood.

The final chapter of Howard's life at Brookdale Senior Living was a happy one despite the Parkinson's which sent him there. He had his sister Joan Stanley and his niece and nephews nearby. The Brookdale residents loved and admired this priest who was so funny one minute and so profound the next. Like super-senior seminarians themselves, they automatically deferred to him. His sister, Joan, said Howard went

from being another handicapped resident to being the rector of Brookdale Senior Living. He arrived anywhere he went with an air of authority. It was said of the great German philosopher Immanuel Kant that the walks he took around Königsberg were so regular townspeople set their clocks by him. That was Howard – on time for everything, always timely in what he said. There was a disciplined Prussian spirit in him with constant access to a thesaurus of apt metaphors for any situation. In Sulpician faculty discussions and convocations, he liked to save his remarks for last to render a magisterial summary of what was really at stake. When decisions needed to be made, he cut to the chase. He did not waste or mince words. Howard Bleichner could be Howie in the cocktail hour, *Herr Doktor Bleichner* in table debates.

At Brookdale Senior Living, he played bridge twice a week with his friends to keep the mind sharp. Some evenings, he would join Joan and the family for dinner at a local restaurant. Conversations started with the first Manhattan cocktail before dinner and progressed to a second one when politics came up. There was a healthy rhythm to Howard's confined Brookdale life. He celebrated Mass for the residents on Sundays and major feasts at a small table set up for him in the community room. He moved around smoothly with the help of his walker. He kept up with the news. He read as much as he could.

Towards the end, he began to slow down further. Howard did not clearly see how weak he had become. Earlier that year, he was even toying with the idea of returning to Santa Cruz, California to live again by the ocean in the shadow of the retreat house he loved, Villa Maria del Mar. He dreamt of the warmth of the California sun. We always yearn to return to those places in life which excite warm memories.

Howard Bleichner was born in Pittsburgh on January 11, 1937. With his sister, Joan, he grew up in a large family home a few blocks from St. Basil's Church on Brownsville Road. His grandfather, who spoke fluent German, lived with the family and taught Howard to speak the language as a child, a fluency he never lost. Howard was baptized at St. Basil's Church and attended the church's elementary school and high school. In 1954, he was admitted to Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire where he became a student of the German émigré intellectual Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy. Rosenstock-Huessy's historical classic, entitled *Out of Revolution: Autobiography of Western Man*, with its sweeping interpretation of two millennia of European culture, deeply influenced Howard's thinking about history and faith. After finishing Dartmouth, he traveled to the University of Munster in Germany for a year of language studies and civilizing travel across Europe.

Returning to the United States, and sensing a vocation, Howard enrolled in St. Vincent's Seminary, Latrobe, PA. for two years of philosophy. In 1963, he entered St. Mary's Seminary & University, Roland Park, with the ordination Class of 1967. In those days, the number of seminarians was well over three hundred. Howard soon established himself as a seminarian leader. He was a superior student, popular classmate, had a formidable personality with a gift for humor. The rector appointed him as master of ceremonies for chapel services. He earned an STL degree in theology before returning to the Diocese of Pittsburgh to be ordained a priest on May 17, 1967. Three years later he became a member of the Society of St. Sulpice. Last year, Howard celebrated his fifty-fifth anniversary as a priest. Following priestly ordination, he immediately began studies at Duquesne University for a master's degree in philosophy.

As a Sulpician candidate, Howard taught at Catonsville, Maryland and Mountain View, California. He then returned to Germany to begin research on a doctoral dissertation. The Catholic Theological Faculty of the University of Tübingen awarded him a doctoral degree in theology (Dr. Theol.) in 1973. The title of the thesis he successfully defended was *The Development of the Religious Philosophy of William James*. The American psychologist and pragmatist, William James, was a figure whom Rosenstock-Huessy greatly admired. As one who spent many hours in libraries, Howard liked to quote a line from William James to the effect that man exists in the world like a dog that wandered into a library -- surrounded by undecipherable mysteries. Howard, like William James himself, was interested in the religious experience supporting the conceptual apparatus of systematic theology.

When Howard joined the faculty at Roland Park in 1973, he recounted Tübingen stories of Hans Kung speeding the narrow streets there in a red sports car. In the days of liberation theology in Germany, he delighted talking about his getting Deutschmarks in a Tübingen bank alongside Jürgen Moltmann, author of the *Theology of Hope* and *The Crucified God*, holding checks to cash. As thrilling as Tübingen was intellectually, for Howard the experience demystified the aura of the celebrated European theologians Americans idolized. For Howard himself, the historical wisdom of Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy and the pragmatism of William James held the theologian's feet to the fire.

In the years 1973-1977, Howard and I struck up a close faculty friendship at St. Mary's. The Archbishop of Hartford had assigned me to doctoral studies there in 1968 when I began research on a thesis about the French philosopher, Paul Ricoeur. Howard's rooms and mine on the 2E corridor of Roland Park made us neighbors as well as colleagues. We shared what we were reading, concelebrated Mass together, dined with other faculty and the seminarian community, and occasionally played an amateur

game of tennis on the seminary's courts. We also fell into the weekly Friday routine of dinners out with our Sulpician confreres in scripture, Father John Kselman, PSS and Father Addison Wright, PSS. The cocktail Addison, Howard and I ordered was invariably a Manhattan.

In 1977, Howard packed up his books in Baltimore to leave for St. Patrick's Seminary in Menlo Park, California to prepare himself for his appointment as president-rector a year later. Before leaving he wrote me a letter about the special intellectual friendship we had --an "eros of the mind," he called it. Our joint intellectual interests in religious experience, in Continental philosophical thought, and in Sacred Scripture gave us similar outlooks on understanding faith. In his written farewell, he thanked me for strengthening his vocation as a priest. I felt a sudden emptiness after he left town, as we all do, because conversations with close friends suddenly come to an end. No one I knew then was as natively smart as Howard was or as forceful in his religious convictions or as perceptive about what was going on. When Father Edward Frazer, PSS, the Sulpician Provincial at the time, was looking to fill out a *terna* of possible candidates for the new office of president-rector of St. Mary's in Baltimore, Howard did not hesitate to endorse me as a candidate though I was not then a Sulpician.

Once my appointment came to pass in 1980, Howard and I found ourselves anchoring a major Sulpician theologate on each coast. We began the practice of vacationing together to compare notes on leading seminaries while we stayed at Villa Maria del Mar Retreat House in Santa Cruz. For the two decades that followed, our August schedules did not change at Villa Maria --celebrating daily Masses for the retreatants, reading independently all morning, at lunch calling back to our secretaries to check on enrollments and other housekeeping details, enjoying the sun and heavy Pacific surf in the lazy afternoons, and heading out to a local beach restaurant for dinner. We discussed what needed to be done in priestly formation to repair past mistakes and prepare for the future. We believed that what we thought might come about. Some things did, but for the most part we were, as Howard liked to put it, roosting on porcelain eggs. The power to change seminaries lay elsewhere.

During one of those seaside summers, when I was ploughing my way through a book by the author himself, Howard got us invited to a private luncheon with the great German historian Eric Voegelin in the quiet garden of his Palo Alto home when he was teaching at Stanford University. I sat quietly by as they occasionally lapsed into perfect German. At St. Patrick's Seminary, Howard's carefully crafted inserted into his theology courses startling metaphoric insights about doctrines which fascinated the seminarians.

After a decade at Menlo Park and a sabbatical, Howard returned for a three-year appointment as Executive Director of the Committee on Priestly Formation of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops to edit the 4th edition of the Program of Priestly Formation. That done, he moved next door to become the new president-rector of Theological College at the Catholic University of America. A photo of him posing with his sister Joan and me at a celebration at Theological College is on a shelf of my bookcase. He was, then, easily the most knowledgeable and respected authority on Roman Catholic seminary formation in the United States.

In 1993, Howard spoke at a banquet at St. Mary's Seminary hosted in recognition of my 25th anniversary of priestly ordination. He captured for the guests how in his memory I had once been as a young seminarian, and what I had become thirty-years later as a Sulpician president-rector. He said the love of one and only one seminary had joined Father Leavitt at the hip to Roland Park. The man and the institution had grown into each other. At that moment, and ever since, I consider Howard's characterization of me to be the truest, the most accurate description of my priesthood.

By 2003, Howard had done it all in priestly formation, leaving the imprint of his experience, intelligence, and passion for the priesthood on two major seminaries. He packed up his books at Theological College and retired to teach theology again at St. Patrick's Seminary for the next decade.

In addition to national involvement on the PPF 4th edition, on seminary administration and teaching, Howard published two well-received books by Crossroads Publishing, *A View from the Altar: Reflections on the Rapidly Changing Catholic Priesthood* based on his work on the PPF, and *In the Circle of the Mysteries: The Coherence of Catholic Belief* summarizing his approach to teaching the major doctrines of Roman Catholic systematic theology. After my own study *The Truth Will Make You Free: The New Evangelization for a Secular Age* was published (Liturgical Press, 2020), Howard immediately called from Brookdale Senior Living to say how impressed he was reading it. That phone conversation proved to be our last. Covid-19 silenced so many friendships in these last few years when there was still so much more to say and share. I kept planning a visit to Pittsburgh. It grieves me now that it never happened.

Close as we both were in thinking about seminary leadership, Howard was not entirely sympathetic to the efforts I was continuously making to start a new project at Roland Park and to raise funds in support of it. He thought the Sulpician Province was wealthy enough to bankroll both seminaries. Yet, I came to relish the opportunities and challenges involved in building and developing programs and serious fund raising, and, in the process made close and enduring friendships in the Baltimore Catholic

community which have sustained me over the years and outlasted my seminary work in retirement.

With friends who helped me do that, Howard and I took White Water rafting trips down the Middle Fork of the Salmon River in Idaho, and then played golf with them at Pebble Beach and skied with them at Vail, Colorado. In 1990, he joined with three of those friends to fund an after-school tutoring program for inner city Latino children in Baltimore named Food For Thought. The program wrapped up in 2015 after twenty-five years placing children in private Catholic high schools and colleges in Baltimore.

Howard Bleichner was intuitively quick in sizing up people and human situations. He was not hounded by doubt much, and the self-confidence in him that irritated some individuals actually strengthened the wavering wills of others and enabled him to endure. It could also mean a certain insensitivity to feelings. It was who he was, and he knew it, but he regretted the impression it left. With his sister and his niece and nephews and their children, whom he deeply loved and who mourn his loss, Howard counted me as the priest friend who understood him best. And I mourn him too.

Howard understood the workings of power wherever it is in play. Nothing devious in its exercise took him by surprise. But he was not a cynic as many priests can become, mistaking cynicism for wisdom. Howard invested his money carefully. And he was generous in giving it to others. I asked him once if he was still drawing interest from the First Communion money he received! As a classroom teacher, above all, he excelled in the extraordinary ability to capture intricate theological abstractions in strikingly concrete images which students never forgot.

Howard's sense of history's dialectics gave him a steady perspective on his own life and an appreciation for the post-conciliar travails of the Catholic priesthood. He believed that seminary formation would survive the seesaw situation of a liberal hubris in one decade being succeeded by a conservative arrogance in the next. He thought priestly ministry would grow as an historical institution itself, and that despite the shame that had come upon it, it would in time recover and be the better for it. But it would not happen soon, nor would it be easy.

Howard was a close reader of the politics of groups. Yet inside the public person was a very private man who in his halcyon days looked for no acclaim, and in his weakness no pity. At the altar, there was no drama in him – just an understated fidelity to the rite. His homilies were succinct and to the point. The will to believe that William

James wrote about took root in Howard himself. He had a clear sense of his own mind and knew what was worth believing in and seriously thinking about. That mind was sharp and as uncluttered and spartan as the rooms where he lived.

In the 1980s and 1990s, and the decade that followed, the Sisters of the Holy Names at Villa Maria del Mar were Howard's Santa Cruz female family. The ocean surf breaking below the rocks outside the retreat house brought him peace. After leaving Menlo Park and moving back home to Pittsburgh, he remained in close contact with friends in San Francisco and San Jose.

When I learned that Howard had passed away, I was unable to travel to Pittsburgh for his funeral. It pleased me, though, that Father Bud Stevens, PSS, vice rector of St. Mary's, would be representing the Society of St. Sulpice at the Mass of Christian Burial. The funeral was celebrated at St. Basil's Church where Howard had been baptized, in the very neighborhood where he grew up. Like Howard himself, Father Stevens had also served as president-rector of St. Patrick's Seminary in Menlo Park. Like Howard as well, he has become the new president-rector of Theological College in Washington, D.C. It was fitting that he should be there.

Howard Bleichner's Dartmouth mentor and muse, Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, once advised believers to accept God's invitation to do the "*unum necessarium*" - the one necessary and timely thing at every moment. That is how Howard Bleichner lived his life with God's grace from his schooling at St. Basil's and Dartmouth College to St. Mary's Seminary and Tubingen, and in the academic assignments he received as a Sulpician to teach Catholic theology to future priests in the post-conciliar period. It was also reflected in the competency with which he carried out his Sulpician seminary leadership responsibilities in San Francisco and Washington, D.C. in the final years of the 20th century. And when an unexpected illness arrived, he did the wise and necessary thing by returning home to be with his family in Pittsburgh where he was born.

May the soul of his priest and servant, Howard Bleichner, now have eternal rest in God's peace.