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In Memoriam: Fr. Georges De Schrijver, S.J. (1935-2016)

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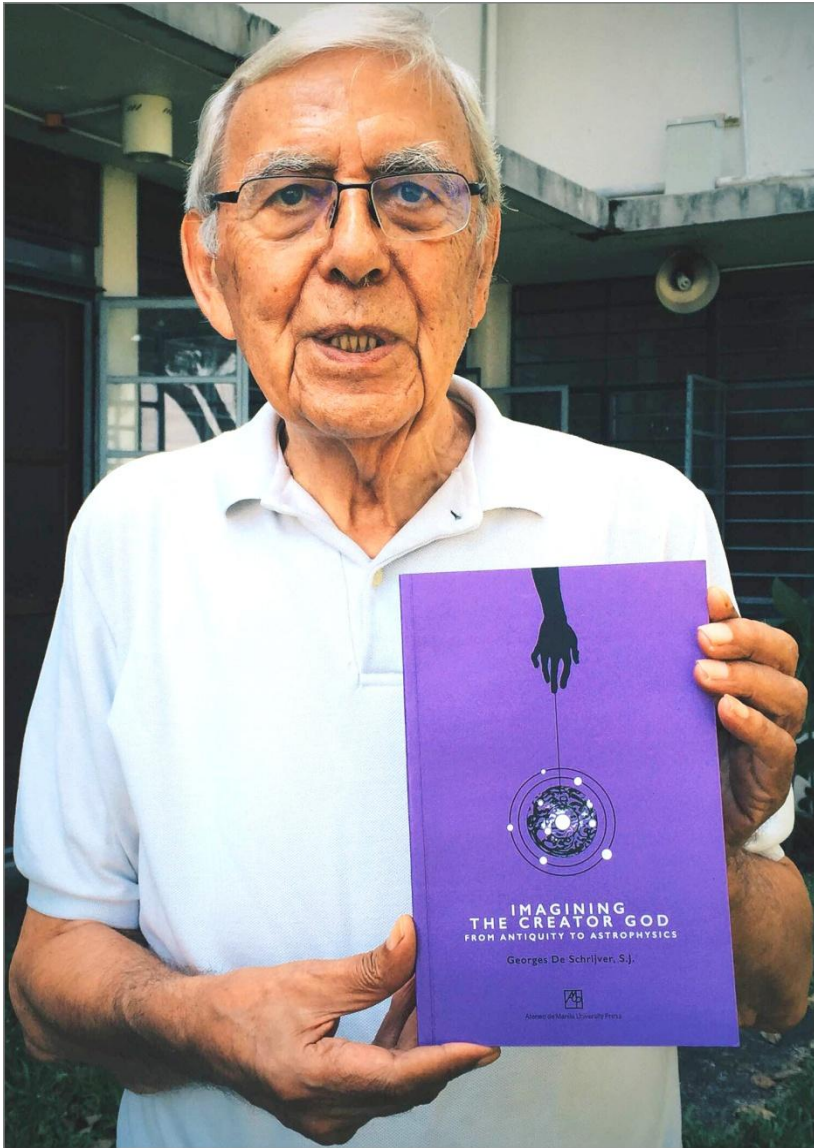
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In Memoriam:
Fr. Georges De Schrijver, S.J.
(1935-2016)

LUIS S. DAVID, S.J.

I wish to thank Fr. Roger Champoux, S.J., Fr. Bill Abbott, S.J., and the other members of the Province Committee that always quite elegantly, and very diligently, coordinates funeral arrangements for their brother Jesuits whenever necessity dictates, for very kindly asking me to preach at Fr. Georges de Schrijver, S.J.'s funeral Mass. Georges, quite unexpectedly recently deceased, was a fellow traveler upon the hyper-illuminated and, arguably illuminating, topography of Philosophy, although I must confess that even as I carry out this task before you this afternoon, the feeling I get is that the four walls of this chapel are beginning to close in on me, considering that, for my close to 40 years living as a Jesuit, I have usually only had to listen, with a degree of interest that often varied, to other Jesuits deliver the final words concerning their departed Jesuit friends, often their contemporaries. With this Mass for Georges, I can no longer duck for cover behind other lives, pondering my own mortality even as I speak about his own.



*Photo courtesy of Dr. Remmon Barbazza,
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So it is fortunate that two biblical passages immediately suggested themselves for this homily when I got the request to give it—for the reason that Father Georges had unexpectedly returned to God on the *Feast of the Most Holy Rosary*, which you can imagine was shocking to me since only the day before he and I had lunch together at the Ateneo Jesuit Residence. Psalm 23 was the first of these two passages, even if its original context may not have been a funeral service. Christians down the ages, in the face of the death of someone they loved, have chosen the Psalm nevertheless to shroud their sorrow because of its comforting conjuration of God as a Shepherd providing for the needs of his sheep, as protecting them from danger and harm, and as leading them to safe places. The Psalmist confidently expresses his hope that in the face even of a quantum of evil—and what could be more hostile to life than death?—God does not withhold his loving presence and protection from those who trust in him.

A memory came back to me of several table conversations I had with Father Georges about a palpable difficulty he experienced as a Jesuit intellectual, which had to do with the steady downturn in Jesuit companions in his home province of the Jesuits, and therefore the absence of critical conversations in the areas of Philosophy and Theology in the context of Jesuit community. Father Georges, as you know, lived for many years without the everyday benefit of a Rector or a Minister to cushion him from the many material cares which the world produces, and without that sense of “corporateness,” or belonging to a clearly defined apostolic body that long ago supplied him with the motive to join the Society of Jesus. Others jumped in to fill the breach, of course, such as his many talented students and brilliant lay colleagues, but at age 65, he had to retire from overtly academic work, which

produced a kind of a distance between himself and his more accustomed former context.

This partly is the reason why for twenty or so odd years Father Georges came to the Ateneo, to be around more Jesuits and more students, something that in his home in Europe was getting very difficult to do. Also he lived in a city that proudly positioned itself at the heart of efforts to unite the multiplicity of European peoples, first among themselves, and then with the rest of the world. His city, however, had recently not been spared the scourge—the nerve-wracking everyday suspense—of a paranoia-producing awareness that it was right in the crosshairs of terrorist havoc. God, apparently, had never promised, either Father Georges or his people, that trouble would never dog their steps. Still, Psalm 23 asserts that God was with Father Georges, and is with his beloved co-patriots, always. This calls to mind the wise words of Julian of Norwich: “God has not promised that you will never be tempted, troubled or distressed; but God has promised that you will never be overcome.” Psalm 23’s final two verses read: “Surely goodness and mercy *shall pursue me* (emphasis added) all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

As I said, Father Georges had, over many years, allowed himself to be driven by grace to travel from his home in distant Europe to our shores and then back again, always a seeker, always under way, always in order to bring to bear new light, new questions and new meanings on the minds of many of you sitting here. In this context most of you would remember that after taking notes in your classes with him, you would present him not only your summations of the material but also your perplexities as you expressed to him your eagerness to change your intellectual histories, even if that would involve preparing for a different

future. Father Georges would then, in so many different ways, tell you that in the great tradition of Martin Heidegger, the giant philosopher on whose shoulders he had himself stood and whom he had actually given lessons on when he was still active in Belgian academic life, that was exactly the trajectory of his own thought; that it was like a path, meandering along, sometimes dangerously, with unexpected bends and turns, but which he persistently traveled along anyway. Although he taught you cosmology, a specialty in philosophy I would not have taught myself, he regularly and unexpectedly borrowed from me books by Michel Foucault and Hannah Arendt, and we would have arguments about the relevance of Jacques Derrida and the authenticity of his latest discovery, his namesake, the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben. In any case, Father Georges's path has now come to an end, and death in its unstoppable materiality has carried him off into the mystery of its unforeseeable fullness.

Here we peer into the face of this mystery, one that ignited lightning—and set off storms—in the life of Father Georges. The gospel story about the many crossings Jesus and his disciples made across the Lake of Galilee comes to mind here, that vast inland lake that even today sparkles like a jewel in the northern part of Israel—in Jesus's time the principal source of a livelihood for those who fished in its waters, and even today serves as a mirror of beauty for those who live around its shores. Jesus had there sounded his call to mission to his first disciples, gave the Sermon on the Mount, and sated the hunger of the thousands of people who, like him, were going up to Jerusalem for the Passover. Cool air often comes down into it from the heights of Mt. Hermon, only to collide with the warmer, moisture-laden air that blows in from the eastern Mediterranean Sea, to produce sometimes violent

storms. The storm described in our gospel story was so violent that not even seasoned fishermen like Peter, James, John, and Andrew knew how to cope with it, so they rudely awakened Jesus who was fast asleep in the stern with those hateful words, “Don’t you care that we’re drowning?” Jesus’s response was to command the lake and sky to be still. This caused the disciples’ jaws to drop to the wooden floor-planks of their boat, for although they had seen Jesus perform innumerable miracles of healing, his command of earth and sky was to them unexpected.

Yet what Jesus did was entirely in keeping with the way he was. When faced with a hungry crowd, and with nothing nearby but the five loaves of bread and two pieces of fish that a little boy had bravely volunteered, he fed them. When giving instruction to his followers as to who their neighbor was, he said it was a despised Samaritan, which he does also with this Sunday’s story about the nine Jewish lepers and the lone Samaritan one. And at that other time when the disciples, again crossing the lake, were faced with another dangerous storm, Jesus had walked to them on the water. In our gospel, Jesus reminds his followers that although he sits in the boat with them as the Sovereign Lord of the universe, he does not guarantee they will never experience storms. Similarly, faithful followers of Jesus are not protected by their loyalty at following from life’s difficulties, or reassured that their children would always be successful, or that sickness would never come, or that their financial ventures would always succeed, or that setbacks would never upset their plans for themselves. Yet a quick look at some of the men and women who knew and served God in the Scripture will reveal the foundationlessness of this belief. Joseph of the O.T. had been thrown into a hole in the ground. Job had lost everything but his life. Jeremiah had experienced being thrown into a prison

as well and so did Saint Paul who suffered from an affliction that had plagued him all his life. All of the disciples that Jesus had called to follow him were martyred for their faith. Jesus does not promise his followers a “rose garden” tour of life.

Look up to the ceiling of this chapel and imagine that it represents a boat upturned protectively over Father Georges’s funeral casket. This is how most of us think of our Church—as an unmoving shelter. Yet the boat of our Church is not meant to be permanently anchored in some kind of a permanent safe-harbor, or mothballed as a museum piece kept in storage. No, this ship—Christ’s One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church—is made to travel in turbulent waters. Expect the ride to be lively from time to time. Father Georges lived such a life. All his life he had devoted his best energies to very fruitful research work and writing in philosophy, in theology, in economics, and in many other fields, collecting scholarly materials in those fields, which he then shared with his students faithfully and carefully. Father Georges, when younger, served as a trustworthy, but at the same time creative, theologian, always crafting the classes he taught with a deft blend of systematic precision and pastoral sensitivity.

But as Father Georges grew older, his attention turned more and more, not to the past that he loved so much, but to the future, to work that could more easily be incorporated into the uncharted territory of the future. If someone had asked you ten or fifteen years ago, “What have you learned from Father Georges?” I am certain you would say, “Cosmology, of course, as well as the implications of science for philosophy.” Today, I myself would respond to that question in a far more nuanced manner, convinced that perhaps Father Georges’s principal legacy to many of us was his orientation to the future, together with his belief that the

Church could move, like a boat turned right-side up, into a future of new things that God would do in our world.

You know, that story about the crossing over by Jesus and the disciples to the other side of the lake, despite storms, contains the detail that as they did so it was with “other boats to accompany them and the people in those boats.” Focusing too much on the disciples’ momentary loss of perspective, and not on the fact that they were in good company, we tend to forget the fact that the disciples were not alone. Help was available, through the instrumentality of the people in the other boats. Father Georges himself could do the many things he did because he looked around and saw that he was not alone, that he had companions on the way. Unlike the disciples who had become so preoccupied with their own danger that no one else, and nothing else, mattered to them, other than their lonely fight for survival, or unlike ourselves who, when we get into trouble and things become extreme think only about how we’re alone in this, and not of other people who we assume wouldn’t be able to help anyway, and not even about God, because we likely will find him asleep, Father Georges knew what our Gospel writer knew: that other boats were close by and that the people in them can come to our help, people who might have more experience surviving storms than ourselves, people who will stand with us in the midst of our troubles, and finally that we can be those people for others too, by being there for them, by reminding them they are loved by God with the power to bring “a great calm” in times of turmoil and chaos, who says to us all, “Peace, be still. Do not be afraid. I AM.” Father Georges knew that God was fully able to help him, and that just as God had calmed the storm that had threatened to overcome the small craft in which the disciples had sought to cross the Lake of Galilee, God

overcomes that which would overcome us. Our overwhelming God can overcome overwhelming odds, through people in the other boats—a marvelously liberating thing to not to have always to feel we have to fix everything on our own.

Let us remember that Father Georges cannot now travel back from here to his home in Belgium, and then, as he had done for so many years, from there back to us again. But from this point on we can do it on his behalf, knowing that even if, going where God sends us and then back again, we might meet storms, we do so knowing that God knows our storms intimately, and he knows the condition of our boats, and that there are companions. So he calls us to go over to the other side, away from “the ways things are,” on a journey that he initiates. Leave your narrow self-interest behind, your need for power or control or stability. Your greatest hope lies in your remaining in the boat. When you are afraid, when you are left wondering “Is this it? Is this the end for us?” the gospel insists it is not the end, to get in the boat, to stay connected to the body of believers, to row across the lake. There will be a storm. There’s always a storm. But Emmanuel is with you. Keep your eyes on him, because in him you will experience inner calm in the midst of the storm.

Homilist

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