

+ Kenneth F. Korby +
Born 5 May 1924
Baptized 8 June 1924
Died in the Lord 11 July 2006

The Rev. Dr. Kenneth F. Korby, pastor, confessor, and doctor of the church, died this week. He was one of the most influential teachers in my pastoral training. My only formal classroom encounter with Kenneth was a graduate seminar on the theology and practice of Holy Absolution in the summer of 1991 at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis. It was one of those summer "intensive" courses that crammed an entire quarter into two weeks. Everything he taught was intensive. I fondly recall the sight of this grandfatherly man in clericals and cowboy boots, striding through the campus courtyard on his way to morning chapel, chanting psalms from his worn little hymnal. "O Lord, open Thou my lips, and my mouth shall declare Thy praise."

Sitting in a Korby class was like sticking your head into a DC-10 jet of Lutheranism. White-hot, 200-proof, 24-karat. Straight up - no ice, no water, and no ginger ale. The pietists wilted, the orthodox trembled, no one was left unscathed. "Don't mess with good and evil," Korby intoned in his gravel voice with eyebrows furrowed in pastoral concentration. "That was Eve's downfall. She wanted to know about good and evil. God's business is death and life."

I felt as though everything I had learned in four years of seminary, two years of graduate study and 35 years of catechesis was being turned upside down and shaken. My tidy little systematic categories could not contain the splendor of a theology centered in Jesus Christ. It was life-changing and liberating. For the first time in my life as a Lutheran, I sought out my pastor for private confession and learned the freedom of sins forgiven personally. My home became a place of prayer and mutual forgiveness, a poor man's humble imitation of the rich devotional life of Kenneth and Jean's household.

Kenneth was known for his aphorisms - pithy, symmetrical, memorable, quotable. We called them "Korbyisms." (Every great teacher has his "isms.") Regarding good works, he said, "People are anxious over the necessity of good works for salvation; God is anxious over the necessity of salvation for good works." On the Nunc Dimittis as a post-communion hymn, he noted, "We go to the Lord's Supper as though going to our death, so that we may go to our death as though going to the Lord's Supper." (I quote that often in my funeral sermons.) Regarding the catechetical crisis in our churches, he observed: "The church is dizzy because she's been standing on her head. We teach the children and bless their parents. Jesus taught the parents and blessed their children."

I was privileged to have Kenneth preach at my ordination on August 2, 1992. It was a hot, muggy afternoon in southern California. This was before our congregation put in air conditioning. The little church was full, and this man of God held forth from Holy Trinity's pulpit for nearly 45 minutes, much to the consternation of those whose lives are run by the tyranny of the clock. Korby was free of such chronological legalisms. His homiletical style was articulate yet earthy, as was his presiding manner. It was genuine, with a language shaped by the Scriptures and the confessions of the church catholic and honed to a fine craft by the Holy Spirit in the school of experience. In the chancel, he had no use for prissy liturgics or rigid rubricism. "God ordained men to preach and preside," he advised us, "Be one." Indeed Korby was a man in chancel and pulpit, demonstrating by word and deed why the office of the holy ministry is an office reserved for men.

He compared the pastor under holy orders to Odysseus tied to the mast to guard him against the seductive songs of the Sirens. "You are nailed to the cross of Jesus. Preach nothing but Jesus Christ and Him crucified, whether the church wants to hear it or not. You look neither to one side or the other, but keep your eyes fixed on Jesus." I've heard those seductive Sirens over the past 14 years, beckoning our little congregation ever closer to the shoals and the shallow waters. I'm thankful to be reminded of the gift given with the laying on of hands. Ever quick to draw an apt analogy, Korby likened the looming clouds of church growth methodism to "a Trojan horse with a belly full of Greeks whose interest in the city is not the same as her free citizens." His words stand prophetically true.

No one held the pastoral office higher, and no one honored the priesthood of the baptized more. Priests bless and teach and pray. They bless others in their vocations, offering their bodies as living sacrifices. They speak to their neighbor about God, and they speak to God on behalf of their neighbor. The divine service led to the home altar, and the home altar led to the divine service. There was never a need to play one against each other. Parents were exhorted to catechize their children. Husbands and wives were taught to forgive one another as they have been forgiven. With Kenneth there was no hand wringing over office and priesthood. They were inextricably bound together.

Kenneth was a preacher of the Word, the Law and the Gospel. These weren't convenient categories but a dynamic, paradoxical tension that made the Word sing like a violin string drawn tight and in tune. God kills, and He makes alive; He brings down to Sheol, and raises up again. Korby preached the Law lawfully, not a moralizing, defanged legalism that gums you, but a Doberman that locks its jaws on you and won't let you wiggle out of its grip. Korby's law preaching was short, swift, and surgical. The wages of sin is death, and no one, including you, dear hearer, ever misses payday. No pious platitudes of rehab and recovery. No bargaining with God, or buttering Him up with greasy religion. The Law's killing accent was always on the penultimate syllable of God's Word, however, the ultimate was always the Gospel. He preached the Gospel evangelically, proclaiming Jesus Christ and His all-reconciling bloody death by which sinners are justified and all things are made new. It was an imperative Gospel that called for faith and created the faith it called for.

Kenneth's personal passion was the restoration of private confession and absolution to a Lutheran church that had long forgotten her Reformation heritage on American soil. Regarding private confession, the Apology to the Augustana declares that it would be wicked to remove it from the churches, to which Dr. Korby added, "and it would be equally wicked not to restore it where it has been

removed.” His abiding legacy is all the Beichtstuhle (confessional chairs) in chancels and remote corners of the nave, where faithful pastors sit to hear the confession of their people and absolve their sins in the stead and by the command of the Lord Jesus Christ.

If confession was Korby’s passion, catechesis was infused into his bones. Ever the consummate catechist, Kenneth always managed to bring the most complex and abstract discussion back to the simple, concrete forms of the catechism, which had to be learned “by heart.” Not memorized by rote, learned by heart, through daily meditation, recitation, and prayer. And woe to the seminarian who did not know the Small Catechism by heart! In the way of Wilhelm Loehe, Kenneth used the catechism as a humble yet profound prayerbook. Whether catechizing the children of the streets of the south side of Chicago, or a class of know-it-all seminarians eager to strut their stuff, he patiently implanted those tried and true words of the Reformation and listened for their echo in the mouths of his catechumens. What does this mean? Where is this written?

Kenneth loved the church as it was, not some romantic or platonic ideal, but the actual body of Christ composed of grubby, sweating sinners justified for Jesus’ sake. There was no place in Korby’s ecclesiology for abstractions and ideals. To eager young men, full of adrenalated zeal for reformation, he spoke out of the deep wisdom of ecclesiastical experience. “Never dishonor the mother that birthed you,” he told the room full of young buck pastors chomping at the bit for a scrap with the church’s institutions.

He was a troubler of a complacent and, at times, faithless Israel, likening the wayward church to Jeremiah’s she-ass in heat sniffing after her suitors. As the prophet of Amos learned, troublemakers of Israel are not always welcome by those whose interests are the institutional status quo. When issues became politicized, Korby could not be co-opted to any party’s agenda. At a conference celebrating the 50th anniversary of Korby’s ordination, someone observed that in the turbulent 70’s liberals smoked cigarettes, moderates smoked pipes, and conservatives smoked cigars. “Which did you smoke,” Korby was asked. He laughed, and with a mischievous twinkle in his eye, said, “All of them.” Korby defied category.

Our paths would cross again in 1998, this time in Novosibirsk, Siberia. We were invited to teach short courses at the fledgling Lutheran seminary there. I had arrived in a blinding late September snowstorm. Korby arrived two weeks later in warm sunshine. We picked him up from the airport on the outskirts of Novosibirsk early on Sunday morning. We were planning to attend divine service later that morning and then go out to lunch with our hosts. We assumed that since Kenneth had been flying more than 14 hours, he would want to get some sleep, but Kenneth would have none of it. “I’m an old man, and I’m in the middle of Siberia. I must receive the Body and Blood of Christ.” So off to the divine service we went and then to lunch, where Kenneth preached the death and resurrection of Jesus to the inquisitive lady behind the coat check counter who took an interest in his pectoral cross. We overlapped for a glorious week in Siberia. During the day, Kenneth would sit quietly in the back of my seminar class and listen with eyes shut and ears open. At night, we would sit around the kitchen table of our apartment until the early hours of the morning discussing the classes and talking theology. Another “intensive” with the good Doctor.

We would see one another face to face one last time this past January, this time in a convalescent hospital in Ft. Wayne. A severe stroke had silenced this mighty trumpet of the Gospel and held him captive in semi-paralysis. I came as the prodigal son to his father, long absent from the family. And like the prodigal, I was embraced by a loving father’s absolution long before I could speak my paltry confession, much less cut a deal. Though muted in speech, his eyes said everything. “I forgive you all of your sins.” This is how free men in Christ deal with one another. We prayed vespers together with Jean. We talked, or more accurately, Jean and I talked, while Kenneth listened, ears attentive, mind alert, occasionally muttering his approval. As I leaned over to bless him, he reached up to trace the sign of the cross on my forehead and muttered some sounds in benediction. Truly, we do not know how to pray, but the Spirit helps us in our weakness, interceding for us with unutterable groanings too deep for words.

Like the craftsmen of the old cathedrals of Europe, we build on the work of those who have gone before us and who have faithfully handed on what they have received. We are indebted to such broad-shouldered workmen like Kenneth who endured the fiery crucible of tentatio and were found tested and worthy. At the close of the day, we are all unworthy servants, simply doing what was given us to do under the umbrella of a grace that surpasses our understanding.

No table at which Kenneth took his place was without this wonderful table hymn:

Feed your children, God most holy,
Comfort sinners poor and lowly.
You our Bread of Life from heaven,
Bless the food you here have given.
As these gifts the body nourish
May our souls in graces flourish
Till with saints in heavenly splendor
At Your feast our thanks we render.
(Lutheran Worship #468)

Kenneth now sings with those saints in heavenly splendor at a Supper which has no end, and for that we render our thanks and praise to crucified and risen Jesus.

William M. Cwirla
13 July 2006