

Alumni Remember Marcus R. Berquist (1934 – 2010)

St. Thomas Aquinas had the endearing habit of naming great men by their excellences. In his writings, Aristotle is often “The Philosopher,” and St. Paul “The Apostle.” I like to think that for Mr. Berquist, as for me, Bl. Fra Angelico is “The Artist,” Mozart is “The Composer,” and Jane Austen is “The Novelist.”

What shall we say, then, of Mr. Berquist himself? A man of many excellences, his meekness rivaled that of Moses — if we can speak of a competition of meekness — and his love of wisdom surpassed anything we have otherwise known. And yet, Aristotle is “The Philosopher,” and we dare not replace Moses — let alone Our Lord — as the Man of Meekness.

Time alone can authentically distill the Greats, whether they be books or men. But none of us who had the privilege of knowing Mr. Berquist would hesitate to call him great. I admit it lacks elegance, but until we come up with a less clumsy appellation, I am thinking of him as “The Senior Philosophy Tutor.”

In the 1986-1987 school year, when we were all young — founders, tutors, students, and Thomas Aquinas College herself — Mr. Berquist taught senior philosophy to both sections of our graduating class. Twenty years later, in 2007 my husband and our family returned to the College. We had many of us aged a little — founders, tutors, and our dear alma mater (although the students and Viltis remained young) — but we found Mr. Berquist still teaching two sections of senior philosophy. I am sure his 40 years of tutoring ranged over the full program of studies, but it was a delight to find him just where we had left him, leading students through Aristotle’s *Physics* and *Metaphysics*. With Robert Browning and P.G. Wodehouse we said, “God is in His Heaven, and all is right with the world.”

What are we to say, now that Mr. Berquist is no longer sitting with students, reading Aristotle with them, attending Friday night lectures and keeping us on the edges of our seats in the hope that he will participate in the question and answer period? Certainly God is still in His Heaven, and we pray that Mr. Berquist is with Him. It will take some time, however, for all to seem right again with the world.

Remembering Mr. Berquist, I see the kind smile, the inclination of the head as he listened carefully to whomever addressed him. His love of wisdom was paired with a love of us. How lucky we are to have known him.

— Suzie (Zeiter '87) Andres



He had such an amazing gift for rightly recognizing all the proper distinctions that ultimately made any issue clear. I remember one time in particular when we spoke in depth about act and potency. Understanding that one distinction, with the kind of clarity he led me to have, has helped me in graduate studies, in teaching, in being able to put into words why something wasn’t quite right or why it was true, both in work and in life — and that was just *one* little discussion with him!

Mark remains the smartest man I’ve ever met, and also one of the most humble and wise.

— Karen Walker ('76)



For me he was a truly wise and holy man, humble and very intelligent. I can still remember him in our philosophy tutorial in my senior year at the Calabasas campus. He had an amazing mind for reasoning and developing Aristotle’s and St. Thomas’ thought. He was a “founding father” of the College. May the Lord of mercy receive him into His Kingdom.

— Rev. Hildebrand James Garceau, O. Praem.('78)

I hated Latin. But I enjoyed going to Latin class because Mr. Berquist loved talking about etymology. He took words apart and showed how one could look at something from different angles and come away with different perceptions. Through the mechanics of Latin and other languages he was able to sew together math, science, philosophy, and theology in the most amazing way. I learned much more about the English language and the core curriculum than I did any Latin. Latin was simply the mule to carry us to where we needed to go.

— Paul Raab ('78)

Mr. Berquist struck me as such a kind man! I remember walking past him in the College library as he pored over a book. Instantly, I felt enveloped by a nearly palpable holiness. I have never experienced such a presence as this quiet man had. He did not have to say anything; I just knew that moment in the library that he was there, and God was, too.

— Ellen Fangman ('97)



My wife and I have a very fond recollection of Mark Berquist. We had attended Sunday Mass in Ojai, and afterward children from various families were happily playing while the adults got to visit for a while. One of the Berquist daughters, who was then very young, had pushed her head through the bars of a bike rack set outside the church. Unfortunately, going in was far easier than coming out, and she got stuck and began to panic. We’ll never forget Mark’s quiet laugh when he saw her, and the look on his face as he excused himself and went off, first to persuade his young daughter that everything was going to be just fine, and then carefully to work to free her. It was pleasant to see that our teacher, whose insight into the great texts was one of the focuses of our academic lives, was also a kind and gentle father.

— Dr. Jean Rioux ('82)



I remember having an advanced Latin class with Mr. Berquist my freshman year, which would have been in the fall of 1984. There was no classroom for us, so we met three days a week in the Commons after lunch and huddled around a dining table, translating the Mass. It was an amazing experience. I had known Mr. Berquist all my life, but I had never known how much he knew until I took that class with him.

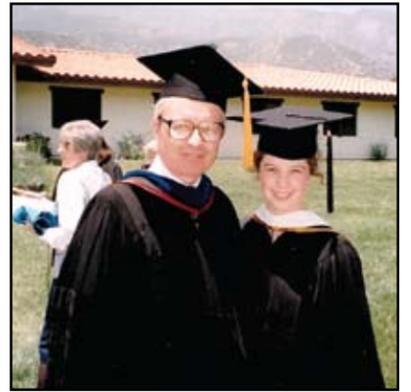
— Cyndi (DeLuca '88) Montanaro

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I have seldom met a man who spoke less than Mark Berquist, yet from the few words he spoke, I learned more than from nearly any other man I have met. He could say so much in so few words. I suppose nearly everyone who remembers Mark will remember him for his wisdom, but I remember him just as much for his humor (like the time he had to introduce himself at a lecture and wondered if it would eventually lead to an infinite regress), his kindness, nobility of soul, and humility. In spite of all his learning, he really thought he could learn something from each of his students. May he rest in peace until we are reunited once again at the resurrection of the just!

— Rev. Sebastian Walshe, O.Praem. ('94)



To me, as to so many of my fellow Thomas Aquinas College alumni, Marcus Berquist was the great example of wisdom founded on deep humility as well as extraordinary intelligence. He was a great teacher, but not in an obvious, superficial sense. He did not bubble over with excitement and energy. He was shy and soft-spoken and had a very careful and methodical mind. It was his great virtue to see the importance of looking carefully at what is most known to us, and then moving carefully from that to what is less known. He was also a great example of prayer, and we should take that example and pray for him now.

— Frater Edmund (Thomas) Waldstein, O.Cist. ('06)

Mark Berquist truly delighted in being asked questions and answering them. He treated every question with respect, as if you were his equal. He listened intently to what you asked. And then, given an internalized mastery of his subject, he gave you an answer. He was so good at this that only years afterward, when you realized how young and ignorant you were, did you think about how patient he was. His response always accomplished more than pointing you directly to the truth of the matter. Inevitably, his answer taught you how to think about it.

— Matthew Peterson ('01)



This was a man of great wonder, of great joy, and a man who — as quiet as he was — was unself-consciously willing to present the truth wherever it shows itself. And he found in St. Thomas and in Aristotle the rich and deep source of that truth, and he showed it to me and so many others.... As a teacher and as a mentor, he showed me that it's alright to devote one's self completely to one thing when that one thing is God's eternal truth.

— Rev. Brendan Kelly ('85)



Marcus Berquist was, quietly and more or less anonymously, one of the best Thomists of the last 30 or so years. His arguments had more clarity, force, simplicity, order, and fidelity to St. Thomas than any contemporary Thomist I have ever known, and I don't say that lightly. I am confident he died well, and I know that he lived a life dedicated to the love of divine things. I have confidence that he is at least on the way. Wherever he is, it's hard for me to imagine him not taking a great deal of joy in being able to simply see what he was stuck having to merely reason to for all those years.

— James Chastek ('00)



Mr. Berquist so loved children. He always had a smile and a kind word for my two small daughters and enjoyed playing with his grandchildren. G. K. Chesterton said, "In childhood, everything is a wonder," and Mr. Berquist enjoyed seeing wonder in children and watching them make new, wonderful discoveries.

My experience of him as a tutor and thesis advisor was the same. He thought what we were studying was wonderful and wanted us to see and appreciate that wonder. He welcomed questions, and if something wasn't understood, he was always ready to explain it a different way, with new examples. His own wonder found expression in this humble, respectful way of guiding students to truth.

— Mary (Herman '01) Hattrup



I had Mr. Berquist as my Euclid tutor freshman year. At one time, I was dared to do a victory dance during class after demonstrating a proposition. To the amusement of my classmates, I completed my prop, sung out "Yes!", and did my two-second dance. Mr. Berquist looked at me with a funny expression on his face, a mixture of surprise with the bare trace of a smile in his eyes, and said, "That was a good prop. However, I'm not quite sure it deserved a dance."

— Moira (Heffernan '07) Lawless



I was not yet a Catholic or a Christian when I came to Thomas Aquinas College, and although I was interested in philosophy, I was not looking forward to the theology program. I thought it would be a waste of my valuable time. I was sure St. Thomas, especially, would be most dry and boring, and was especially dreading the junior and senior theology.

I happened to have Mr. Berquist teaching my section for theology junior year, and I remember reading St. Thomas for the first time and being amazed by what I read, though there was much I didn't understand. When Mr. Berquist sat with us and explained what we had read, it was as though a light I had never seen was shining on these truths I had never been able to consider before. Within a very short time, to my surprise, I looked forward to theology class more than any other, and I was fortunate enough to be able to have Mr. Berquist as a teacher for senior theology as well.

I have many notes to make up for my poor memory of all the things he taught us, but I do particularly remember being struck, whenever he spoke of heaven, what heaven would be like, by his childlike eagerness and how his face would light up with the greatest joy. Just hearing him talk about it was like a little foretaste of heaven. I will always be grateful for how he illuminated St. Thomas and the treasures of the Church's wisdom for me. His goodness and graciousness made those truths all the more compelling.

— Rebecca Mohun ('96)