

The UnChristian Brothers

Surprisingly short, and stocky of build, especially in the upper shoulders, Leo Kiley was a competitive high school sprinter from Los Angeles. His specialty was the 100-yard dash. He never lost his stride; if you wanted to keep up, it required a step and a half to his one. Motion forward, never backward, and despite the fact that his eyesight needed to be corrected with extra-thick lenses, he was always the first to arrive at the destination.

Leo was a gate crasher without equal. We would arrive at the performance venue or the tourist attraction only to find a long line snaked around the block, waiting for entry. You wait here, Leo would say, and off he strode. Within ten minutes he would reappear with a big smile on his face and, with his infectious chuckle, announce at my expense that I was in the wrong line, the line we wanted was up front, and there was no waiting. Or he might say, I met the manager, who said we don't have to wait in line, come on, let's go to the front so we can get in. Leo had a knack of making his way forward, meeting and greeting people, disarming any human obstacles with his easy smile and good-natured chuckle. If he knew the meaning of shyness, he never let on.

Touring a museum or exhibit or a World's Fair with Leo was a forced march; he needed to see everything. He might have felt, I come this way only once, this is my time to capture it all. Striding fast, making chuckling comments, pointing here and there, asking questions of total strangers, all the while consulting the guide map, he dragged us along in his wake. He was a tourist possessed.

Leo and I were members of a monastic religious teaching order, the Christian Brothers; for a time, we both lived in the same community and taught at the same high school, and several of our college religious training years at St. Mary's had been spent together. He was a good friend. Only a year or two older than me, he was decades ahead in maturity, self-confidence, and the understanding and practice of basic social graces, especially with the opposite sex. A partial explanation might simply be that he entered religious life after his high school years and had experienced a normal adolescent period, while I had forgone – or suppressed – that experience almost entirely, because I entered shortly after my 15th birthday. But it was more than that; Leo

understood the ways of the world, felt comfortable about his place in it, and operated accordingly.

Make no mistake, despite any personal saltiness and high-spirited worldly sophistication, Leo Kiley was an intensely devout and pious person. Always a member of a private prayer group, serious about his meditation time and spiritual reading, a devotee of the prayer of the holy rosary, and a faithful attendee of the order's prescribed religious exercises – all this marked his commitment to the life of the spiritual.

Brother Leo Kiley's life in the Christian Brothers turned out to be a 40-year-long world-class sprint – assignments in Bakersfield, Paris, Rome, Manila, Hong Kong, Bethlehem, San Francisco, and Moscow. If there was a country or continent Leo had not visited, it wasn't for lack of interest or because he hadn't tried. How he managed to secure these unusual, even exotic assignments, compared to those made available to his confreres, is a matter of speculation. Given my own experience with Leo, it was more or less the same process he used when he found himself at the end of a very long line of people; he looked around until he found another, much shorter line that might not have existed previously, but it did now. Leo Kiley created opportunities for being of service to others, and if those were located on the other side of the globe, so much the better. His appetite for travel and his independent and freelance ministry branded him a maverick and certainly must have been the cause of some institutional tension.

Along the way of Brother Leo's intense, headlong rush through life, he finally discovered his acute alcoholism. He converted to sobriety and, as sometimes happens with converts, he became a preacher obsessed with proclaiming the true way – the only road – to recovery. With like-minded missionaries, he worked tirelessly for many years in the San Francisco Bay Area, preaching his own spiritual version of the correct path to successful recovery. But Leo was a leader, not a follower, and it wasn't long before he branched out on his own.

Go where the need is greatest! Brother Leo felt called to Russia, a country that suffered the highest per capita rate of alcoholism in the world. Years later, this former Los Angeles area beachcomber would tell me how much he suffered from the harsh Moscow winters and how poorly he had to live in order to survive. He never had enough money for suitable accommodations and he

lived in what otherwise would have been called a large closet. He labored on, preaching his spiritual message of recovery, and worked with local people and groups to assist them in organizing recovery programs. It was tough sledding and discouraging, but when NBC's Tom Brokaw visited Russia to air a special feature on the prevalence of alcoholism, who was at his right hand, serving as his consultant? None other than the local resident American expert, Brother Leo Kiley.

I am unclear about the denouement of Leo's work in Russia, or exactly what transpired, but Leo made the decision to leave the Christian Brothers – or was he asked to leave? – and married one of his co-workers, a young nurse, perhaps as much as 40 years his junior. By all accounts, she was a beautiful woman; some would prefer to characterize her as a “knockout.” Knowing Leo as well as I did, I would hardly expect him to have fallen for less.

Back to the United States they came, new husband with wife in tow, or was it the reverse? I cannot say. They began a new life in Connecticut. Leo was working as a kind of social worker with resident seniors, and she worked as a manicurist. They purchased a condominium and seemed to be doing well together, but I believe the marriage required from Leo a personal adjustment for which, at the very least, he was unprepared, and after so many years of striding off ahead by himself, he was incapable of making it. Much later, shortly before he died, he told me he had loved his wife, that he did not believe she had punched his ticket to relocate to the U.S., but he had finally decided to grant her the freedom she needed because she wanted to have children. I was too old, he said, too unprepared to have children or, at my age, to act like a father.

If one could rewind history, I would say that after the dissolution of Leo's marriage, he would have wanted to return to the Christian Brothers, the religious life he had known for more than 40 years, but he believed his marriage had precluded that possibility. A long-term bond with the religious order, as fragile as it sometimes must have been, had been forever broken. As recounted to me years later, Leo said he had been deeply hurt when he called his California religious superior from Moscow to discuss his personal situation, was put off and ignored, and when the telephone call was suddenly disconnected he was not even given the courtesy of a call back. He felt as if he had been tossed overboard. What judgment, if any, had been rendered on the

California side of the telephone call – or what the circumstances might have been – I do not pretend to know. Whatever the case, Leo Kiley did not believe a return to the Christian Brothers was possible after he left the marriage state.

Of all possible choices that could have been made at his age in life, Leo chose the most unlikely. He would begin religious life anew. He would become a novice in an ascetic and contemplative order in the center of Paris. He would live out his life in prayer, penance, menial work, self-denial, and speaking a foreign language. And so he did, but not quite.

For two full years, well into his 60's, he lived the life of a French-speaking novice in urban Paris, but he had not reckoned with the cold. The monastery facilities had no heat, and as Leo confided to me shortly before his death, "I could not bear it, especially at night. LeRoy, I was so cold I thought it might kill me." After a meeting with his French religious superior, who offered no encouragement about his future vocation with the order, Brother Leo realized that his religious trial period was finished; he needed to withdraw. He fled to the warmth of Florida.

Now officially retired, slowed by age and declining health, Leo carved out a simple life of daily religious observance, prayer, and service to seniors. He appointed himself the altar server for the early morning daily Mass at the parish church; followed this by the recitation of the 15 decades of the holy rosary as he walked along the beachfront enjoying the early morning Florida sunshine; and the balance of his day was spent helping the elderly. His sojourn in Florida came to an abrupt end when he realized that death was near. The hepatitis he had contracted decades earlier in Hong Kong would soon kill him.

Alone, unmarried, and without children, his own personal family consisting of two older and retired brothers living in Los Angeles, Leo Kiley made a decision similar to that of the scriptural prodigal son – humbled, ashamed, at his wits' end, and without any alternative, he would return to his father's house. In Leo's case, the only house of the father he knew was the one that belonged to the Christian Brothers. He did not expect to be welcomed back, nor did he expect forgiveness or understanding about to his flaming exit years

earlier, but he would park on their doorstep, get as close as he could manage, and live out his final weeks or months. He knew it would not be long.

His friend Brother Harry Morgan, also in recovery, many years earlier had founded a residential recovery program in the Excelsior district of San Francisco. Purchasing two Victorians side by side, he connected them via a second-story enclosed bridge, and voila! a halfway house to assist alcoholics. Leo came home to the Christian Brothers because Brother Harry invited him to live his hospice in the recovery home.

The last time I had talked with Leo – it had been many years since I had seen or talked with him – was the day Cesar Chavez died in April 1993. He called from Connecticut. He had admired Cesar and his work, appreciated my own involvement in the 60's and 70's, and knew I would want to talk about this sad event. Of course I did. Now, almost six years later, Brother Harry called, advised me of Leo's status and suggested I come to visit him – he would appreciate it, he said.

It was a long visit, several hours at least. Fully dressed, Leo was lying on his bed. Pleased that I was there, he was subdued but cheerful, and because of our long-ago shared experiences, he did not have to explain himself, he could talk freely, and he did so. Some of the happiest times of his life, he told me, had come because of his married life – his shared intimacy with a person whom he deeply loved. He complained of the shoddy telephone treatment received at the hands of a religious superior during a personal crisis while in Russia. He expressed gratitude about being taken in by Harry during this hospice period, and as tears welled up in his eyes, he told me that the religious superior of the Christian Brothers, a man whom we both knew, had visited him the previous day to tell him that all funeral expenses would be furnished by the Brothers, and not to worry about them. Then, in a soft, quivering voice, Leo recounted that the superior asked if he wished to be buried in the Christian Brothers cemetery at Mont La Salle. Leo looked at me, wiped away his tears, and said, “LeRoy, I couldn't believe he offered this, I was so grateful.”

Weeks later, Leo died. Brother Harry called to tell me that he had been sitting by Leo's bedside chatting about this and that, and then, looking at Leo, he realized that for the past few minutes he had been talking to himself. Leo had

passed away. The open-casket funeral was held in the chapel at Brother Harry's halfway house, and various remnants of Leo Kiley's previous lives were present. Some of his former Christian Brother classmates, some current Brothers, including a former superior who had known and worked with Leo, some of the leadership from the era of his spiritual recovery program, some former students from his Bakersfield years, his two brothers from Los Angeles, and I were in attendance. At the conclusion of the service, the presiding priest, also a former Christian Brother, invited public comment, and several people spoke about Leo, including several of the Brothers in attendance. For my part, I alluded to Leo's hurt feelings about how he felt unsupported and cut loose by the order, and that Leo had confided to me that his happiest times were those of shared intimacy with his wife.

Yes, indeed, the Christian Brothers paid for the funeral, but they would not permit him to be buried in the cemetery – he was not a Christian Brother, the district council voted. Whether anyone pointed out that several donors, also not Christian Brothers, were buried in the cemetery, I do not know, but I doubt it would have made any difference in the outcome. No, the Brother Leo Kiley they remembered was outspoken, even brash in his critical comments about some of the policies – or lack thereof – relating to the order's commitment to social justice and the poor, but the insurmountable hurdle – the unforgivable act – I believe was his marriage. He had cut himself off, so let him suffer the consequences; he had made his own bed, let him lie in it.

By now you know Brother Leo Kiley well enough to surmise that yes indeed, he is buried in the final consecrated resting place of the Christian Brothers, the Mont La Salle cemetery. A lifetime of gate crashing and finding entrance without waiting in line was no match for the negative and punitive votes of district council members. True, Leo has no headstone to call his own, but he is safely housed under the one dedicated to Brother Harry Morgan.

Leo Kiley was all of the above, but first and foremost, he saw himself as a Christian Brother; so much so, he returned to die on their doorstep. The vote of the district council to deny him burial space does not diminish his 40 years of service to the order, but instead, this unchristian act demonstrates just how difficult it must have been for a man of his integrity to survive in that religious environment.

God bless Harry, God bless Leo, and may they rest in peace, safe from those who strain over the jot and tittle at the expense of observing the spirit of the law, which is charity.