

## ***In Memoriam: L. Brent Bozell***

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L. Brent Bozell, founder and director of the magazine *Triumph* and the Society of the Christian Commonwealth which published it, who died in May, was a unique figure in American Catholic intellectual history. Catholics in America, mostly descendants of immigrants whose church for long seemed particularly alien to the country's earlier settlers, have generally striven to make their church seem more American. L. Brent Bozell strove to make it less American and more Catholic.

In this consistent and persistent endeavor, carried on throughout the ten years of *Triumph's* publication from 1966 to 1976, he startled and often shocked conservatives and scandalized super-patriots—a type more common in those years than since. Often he did so deliberately, to shake them free from deeply ingrained prejudices so as better to face the real issues of our age of apostasy. Sometimes he did so too stridently. More often he did so with a trenchant logic and a passionate commitment to the person and love of Jesus Christ which cut through the convenient pretenses and evasions of his readers with a fiery sword. He could well have said, with William Lloyd Garrison when he launched his campaign for the abolition of slavery: “I am in earnest; I will not equivocate; I will not retreat a single inch; and I WILL BE HEARD!”

Despite his brilliance and his passion, not as many heard L. Brent Bozell as heard William Lloyd Garrison, and not many remember him today. In his last years, when—out of public life—he climbed a Calvary of mental and physical agony such as few men have ever had to endure, his memory faded in the minds of his contemporaries, so that his son and namesake, an active media critic, is now often confused with him. But for those privileged to have known Brent well, among whom I am so fortunate as to count myself, his memory is emblazoned upon our minds, refulgent, ineffaceable, like the cross on the banner of Emperor Constantine: “In this sign, you conquer!”

For three of *Triumph's* ten years I was director of the Christian Commonwealth Institute, the educational program of Brent's Society of the Christian Commonwealth. We conducted classes, lectures and seminars during weekend meetings. The centerpiece of our program was our annual summer program at El Escorial in Spain, literally across the street from the great basilica, monastery and palace built by King Philip II of Spain, the champion of the Catholic Reformation (the only real reformation), the only sovereign in Christendom during that terrible age who remained unswervingly faithful to

the Pope through all the years of his life, forty-one of them as king. We went to Spain to show Americans how the Catholic Faith made Christendom, how it embraced all of life and formed its own culture and could never belong in the convenient Sunday morning pigeonhole where Americans—even good Catholics—tended to put it. The experience left a permanent mark on most of us who participated. The enthusiasm was like nothing I have ever seen anywhere else.

Christendom College was gestated in the womb of *Triumph* magazine and the Society for the Christian Commonwealth, Brent Bozell's creations. All of our original five faculty were long-time subscribers to *Triumph* and three had attended the program in Spain. Our current president and his wife and our executive vice-president had attended the program in Spain. Two of the three original major donors who enabled our College project to be launched financially had attended the program in Spain, and the third had seen his son attend it. Many of the original members of our Board of Directors were *Triumph* readers. In a very fundamental sense Christendom College was a *Triumph* enterprise, and always will be. As long as any of this present generation of College leaders and supporters shall live, I am confident they will always acknowledge our debt to Brent Bozell.

Brent was a prophet; when he founded *Triumph* in 1966 he had already foreseen that the West was headed into a black cavern of apostasy which would spawn the culture of death which our present Pope has so eloquently and repeatedly condemned. Brent Bozell did not have to wait for *Roe v. Wade* to tell us where we were going. His was the only Catholic publication in the United States to *welcome* (rather than condemning or weakly apologizing for) *Humanae Vitae*, the glorious encyclical of Pope Paul VI in 1968 which preserved and enhanced the Catholic rejection of artificial contraception and warned with perfect accuracy of the consequences of its general acceptance. "Great day in the morning!" *Triumph* cried upon the issuance of *Humanae Vitae*, which hurled itself against a tide of history and proved once again, in the unforgettable image of G.K. Chesterton in *The Everlasting Man*, that only live things swim upstream.

In 1970, when abortion was still illegal in most of the United States, Brent Bozell led the first "operation rescue" mission to try by direct action to stop it at a hospital in Washington, D.C. where it was permitted. So when *Roe v. Wade* came down from the U.S. Supreme Court on that black Monday, January 22, 1973, Brent Bozell was not surprised. While others expressed shock and anger then, he had already done so; beyond that, he wanted us to see the illimitable tragedy. The cover of *Triumph* that month was solid black, the color of mourning, except for a small logo at the top and in the lower right-hand corner, a cross in white and the words "for the children."

Brent Bozell loved life, and all souls—and especially children—as he loved the Author of Life. His religious devotion was deep and intense. He had a special devotion to Christ's poor, and a fundamental aversion to that element in American conservatism which glorifies wealth and economic success with-

out counting the human cost. He never ceased to remember how often Christ had blessed the poor, to cry out for “the politics of mercy,” by which the poor would be cared for and helped without enslaving them to any political and economic system. I, who came into the Church in the year of *Humanae Vitae* and had been an economic libertarian, was guided by Brent into a transformation of my thinking about rich and poor.

Brent Bozell himself was a convert, in his adolescent years. He had to the highest degree the convert’s special awareness of how truly different it is to be a Catholic. It was an important part of the reason why he laid so much stress on the necessity of Catholicizing America rather than Americanizing Catholicism. While the true Church does and should bring out the best in the character of a nation as in that of an individual, this can only be accomplished fully in a nation when the true Church is publicly recognized and Christ is proclaimed its heart and its king.

Brent Bozell believed in, and advocated, the confessional state—a nation publicly committed to the Catholic Faith—at a time when it was disappearing from the earth. No such state remains, with the partial exception (fascinatingly) of the Philippines. But if the confessional state remains a Catholic goal where it is possible, Brent Bozell and his close associate, Dr. Frederick Wilhelmsen (recently deceased also) will deserve some of the credit for it.

Brent Bozell loved the Pope, and never ceased defending, upholding, and glorifying him and looking for more and better ways to do that. During *Triumph’s* years of publication the Pope was Paul VI, whom many good Catholics (forgetting or not understanding the mega-historic significance of *Humanae Vitae*) found less than inspirational. Brent always found him inspirational, and understood him, I believe, better than any other American Catholic commentator. He did not agree with all of his decisions, particularly on the liturgy. But he knew that Christ has only one Vicar at a time, whom He requires us to obey on all matters connected with the Church.

As a leader, Brent was inspirational even in his profound pessimism about the future of Western civilization. Because he was ever conscious of Christ’s presence and the strength of the Church even (or especially) under the worst conditions, for him pessimism could never be despair; the Church, if defeated on one battlefield, could always rise up with its Founder and win on another. He saw great promise in the conversion of so many African blacks at the very moment when so many in the West were leaving the Church explicitly or implicitly. He knew that apostasy could never triumph everywhere, that the Church which is the Mystical Body of its Resurrected Lord can never be destroyed.

When Brent launched *Triumph*, he gladly gave up a promising career as a conservative writer and spokesman, who had ghost-written extensively for Senator Barry Goldwater of Arizona and earlier for Senator Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin, and had written under his own name an excellent and highly regarded book on the Supreme Court of the 1950s and early 1960s, *The Warren Revolution*. His new undertaking was never easy, and very far from

secure. *Triumph* trembled on the brink of financial disaster almost from the day it was launched. At one point the decision had already been made to cease publication, when Brent's beloved wife, Patricia ("Trish") Buckley Bozell, unexpectedly revived it by slapping the face, in a Catholic University auditorium, of a woman named Ti-Grace Atkinson when she applied an obscene word to the Blessed Virgin Mary. The favorable response to Trish's action from Catholic readers saved *Triumph*.

I will never forget Brent outside that auditorium when he heard what his wife had done, rising to his full height—he was very tall, with very red hair and a craggy face—with a re-echoing bellow of: "To Hell with Catholic University!" That institution is much improved today, and I doubt Brent could say that now, especially after its removal of Charles Curran. But it was merited then. Incidentally, Ti-Grace Atkinson never gave another public speech.

*Triumph's* last years were darkened by the shadow of the immense cross God called its founder to carry. He developed manic-depressive psychosis, now called by the gentler name of bipolar disorder. The name may be gentler but the thing can never be. It is one of the most cruel illnesses to which mind and flesh are heir. It can be controlled, but not cured by drugs, and the drugs take away a significant part of what the victim is. Because of this, for years Brent would not take them regularly, and he and his family and friends were ravaged by the consequences. Through it all, his faith never wavered.

Eventually he took the medicine, and returned to rationality; but afterwards he—one of the finest speakers and writers of his generation—could no longer speak for more than a few minutes, and could write only with the extensive assistance of an editor. Physical agony was added to mental deprivation; at times the pains in his back were so bad that he could hardly walk. The last time I saw him alive, he could barely climb the stairs at Christendom College's Regina Coeli Hall, doubled over so that his left hand almost touched each step. Never in my 65 years have I known a man who suffered so much. He never complained; he offered it all to Christ. His son, speaking at his funeral, could not hold back his tears when he reviewed Brent's afflictions; and neither can I writing of them. Brent Bozell walked the Via Dolorosa, if ever a Christian did, and surely Christ will reward—has rewarded—him richly for it.

God rest his great soul, and let us thank God for giving such a man to us.