

IN MEMORIAM: BR. JOSEPH KECKEISSEN (1925–2011)

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Defending and promoting freedom requires the best from our character: courage, wisdom and clear goals. On April 3, 2011, one of the best defenders of freedom, Professor Joseph Keckeissen, was called to the presence of God, after leading an intense academic and religious life in Guatemala. He was 86 years old.

Joseph Keckeissen was born to George W. Keckeissen and Rita McNally on January 14, 1925, in Brooklyn, New York. He was a man of wide horizons and broad life experience, as we can appreciate by looking at some extracts from his repertoire: lieutenant colonel of the US Army Reserve, accountant and data processing specialist at Esso Standard Oil company, professed brother of the Salesians of Don Bosco, and professor of economics at Universidad Francisco Marroquín of Guatemala. We have to add to the list his several memberships in international associations, all of them oriented toward studying economics as well as Catholic social doctrine.

He received many awards during his academic life. Among them were: Mises Fellowship in Political Economy (Ludwig von Mises Institute, USA, 1966–1968), Member of the Alpha Kappa Psi Business Fraternity (USA, 1976), Doctorate *Honoris Causa* in Social Sciences (Universidad Francisco Marroquín, Guatemala, 1989), Kent-Aronoff Service Award (Association for Private Enterprise Education, USA, 2007), Professor *emeritus* (Instituto Superior de Economía y Administración de Empresas, El Salvador, 2008), and many more besides.

Joseph was an expert on praxeological method (as proposed by Ludwig von Mises) and the economic theory of the Austrian School of Economics. Furthermore, he attended an economics seminar led personally by Ludwig von Mises at New York University and also wrote his doctoral dissertation on “The Nature of Economic Law” (1976) under Israel Kirzner. However, besides his erudition in economics, there was another intellectual vein that directed him throughout his life: a passionate study of Catholic social doctrine. In this connection, there is no question about the fruitfulness of his years at Don Bosco College in Newton, New Jersey (where he earned a B.A. in philosophy) in complementing his later training in economics from New York University.

As we can appreciate from the highlights of his life, Joseph always had a busy daily agenda and consequently his students and

colleagues are left to question how exactly he found enough time for writing extensively about economic and moral issues. At the website of Universidad Francisco Marroquín, there are complete and detailed references to each of the documents he wrote and prepared during his academic career, all of them published in Guatemala and abroad. Here we can only mention some of his many accomplished works: “Causes of Poverty in the Third World,” “Labor in the Social Encyclicals,” “What Would Mises Say?,” “Why the Crisis Hasn’t Ended,” and of course, his more recent works on connections between free market economics and Catholic social doctrine: “A Critique of Misesian Metaphysics” and “Subsidiarity.”

Joseph had an erudite and extensive knowledge of economics and a very unusual and extremely developed sensitivity for the moral implications of economic theory. Everyone who encountered him was impressed by his energetic, interesting, and clear explanations on the common grounds that could be established between morality and economics. His first argument, in defending that common ground, was based precisely on the high importance of freedom for both systems. Freedom, remembering one of his thoughts, is an indispensable requirement for having a prosperous and righteous society.

More personally, I had the privilege and honor of being his assistant during the last seven years he remained active in academic life. I am adding a few words of mine because I am sure that through them, not only my memories will be expressed, but also the memories and sentiments of many others who had the pleasure of calling Joseph a friend. I hope that through this closer appreciation, I can express the impact that a moral example, as he was for me, can have on others, especially those who are eager for a better world.

The first lesson that I received from him was his modesty, coming from a man with such an impressive curriculum and life! I always had the feeling that I was talking with a friend rather than a professor. He was also extremely polite and patient with everyone, especially when he was explaining what freedom means and why free markets are the most effective and beneficial path for countries, such as Guatemala, that are struggling for a better standard of life. Joseph’s great friendship, modesty, and politeness, transmitted to me and others, created an incredibly pleasant feeling about academic work, and further, an infinite passion for studying more and gaining a deeper understanding of the principles of free society.

The second lesson of my mentor was a non-negotiable attitude regarding his principles. I cannot think of a single person who matched his unshakable commitment to the principles he believed, promoted, and

fought for throughout his entire life. Again, through his daily example we enjoyed at university, he inadvertently taught us the crucial importance of freedom of action, founded on a set of basic rules and values for society, combined with a very unusual flavor of theological wisdom involved every time he talked about economics. Today, I understand that he was preparing us to go beyond the field of pure economics. He was teaching us to be leaders, and helped us become men and women interested in achieving the good, the noble, and the sublime.

The third lesson, and maybe the most significant one for me, was his academic program for exploring the ideas about prosperity and human well-being through a more comprehensive view of human life. It happened that besides academic duties at the university, Joseph traveled extensively for someone at his age, in order to present his program. I was fortunate enough to be a witness of the “golden” period, as I called those years during which Joe delivered lectures and headed panels at several international conferences. His last conferences were mainly focused on exploring clear consistencies between Catholic social doctrine and free market economics. I still remember the title of the piece, “Morality and Economics: Allies Not Enemies,” in which he condensed several quotations from pontifical documents and from Ludwig von Mises’ economics. He brilliantly explained, one by one, the common perspectives of both frameworks, including justice, human dignity, the common good, social cooperation, limiting government, private property, competitive and free market, wages, entrepreneurship and peace. The exploration of such coincidences remains as an open invitation to anyone who wants to continue his legacy.

Joseph intended to be at the 2010 Annual Convention of the Society of Catholic Social Scientists, but God had other plans for him, and his health prevented him from attending. However I can say that, from the chair of a modest assistant whom he inspired, I am one of the many, many fortunate persons he encouraged to discover not only the delight of scientific research in economics, but also inspired a renewed trust in the goodness of people.

The world today urgently needs more people like him. Hopefully, others will follow the pioneering path he opened in Latin America and abroad. Rest in peace, Doctor Joseph Keckeissen.

