



Robert Blair Kaiser døde Skærtorsdag, 84 år

Selv har jeg aldrig mødt eller hørt den amerikanske journalist Robert Blair Kaiser tale, men jeg kender flere, der har, og alle har været begejstret for, hvad han kunne fortælle dem. Han var den mest fremtrædende journalist i Rom under Det andet Vatikankoncil, og hvad der skete dengang, kom til at præge ham gennem hele livet. I 1965 købte og læste jeg hans bog *Inside the Council*, som udkommet to år tidligere beskrev, hvad der skete bag kulisserne under koncilets første samling.

Fra begyndelsen af 90'erne læste jeg med glæde de artikler, han regelmæssigt havde i *National Catholic Reporter* og i 2015 hans meget kritiske, men også inspirerende bog *A Church in Search of Itself: Benedict XVI and the Battle for the Future* (udkommet 2006).

I efteråret 2012 læste jeg i *The Tablet* hans koncilforedrag i London, og da VEOK netop planlagde at udgive en dansk bog om koncilet, skrev jeg i 2013 til ham for at bede om tilladelse til at medtage det i vor bog. Trods under behandling for cancer sendte han mig straks det mest positive svar. Han var kun glad for, at hans koncilerindringer kunne læses af også danske katolikker. Så vi i VEOK har også meget at takke ham for.



Nu er han altså død, 84 år gammel. En kritisk stemme er blevet tavs, en stemme der lige til det sidste talte for behovet om reformer i kirken - i koncilets ånd.



Nedenfor bringer vi Thomas C. Fox's nekrolog over ham, trykt i *National Catholic Reporter* den 4. april 2015.

Robert Blair Kaiser, journalist and inveterate church lover and critic, died at the age of 84 in a hospice center in Phoenix yesterday, on Holy Thursday, with daughter, sons, and grandchildren at his bedside. Janet Hauter, co-chair of the American Catholic Council, a church reform group, today called Kaiser "a courageous man with the biggest heart of any (church) reformer I ever met; he was dauntless in pushing, prodding and confronting injustice in the church."

Just a year from ordination into the Jesuit order, Kaiser left and returned as a journalist, soon moving to Rome to cover the Second Vatican Council for *Time* magazine. His writing, and passion for church, propelled him forward. For a period he was a staff writer for *The New York Times*. A half dozen of his books were to focus on the post-conciliar church and the council's unfulfilled vision of church.

Throughout the decades that followed he was a highly outspoken critic of those he felt were trying to impede or stop the council's reform agenda, most notably Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI, and the bishops they were appointing. He pressed for reform to the last breaths of his life, a computer on his chest while hooked up to oxygen. In recent months he was finishing a book on Dominican Father Tom Doyle, who for forty years has been one of the church's most outspoken critics of clergy sex abuse. I worked with him, writing an epilogue for that book, *Whistle: Tom Doyle's Steadfast Witness for Victims of Clerical Sexual Abuse*, set to be published in June.

Lecturer and author of 16 books, included two novels, one about Cardinal Roger Mahony called *Roger Mahony*, Kaiser found every vehicle he could to fan the flames of church reform, often focusing on the need for lay men and women to elect their bishops as they once did a millenium or more back.

He was the editor of *Just Good Company*, an online journal of religion and culture, and co-founder of *takebackourchurch.org*, a web community of American Catholics whose stated mission was to seek "ownership and citizenship in the people's church envisioned at Vatican II." The group advocated the election of local bishops and the power to dismiss them. More recently, he co-founded *Catholic Church Reform International* with which *American Catholic Council*, another church reform group, is associated. He was an *Accelerating Catholic Church Reform* (ACCR) Board member and Founding Editor/Publisher of its online quarterly magazine *OMG!*, a Journal of Religion and Culture.



Kaiser's reform activities also included a speaker's bureau he formed in Phoenix. Supported by friends, including current and former Jesuits with whom he had stayed in touch, the bureau for years gave progressive Catholics a forum to share ideas and hopes, allowing Vatican II Catholics to keep these ideas alive in dark times.

It was during the council years in the mid-1960s, a turbulent time in the West and within the church, that Kaiser formed his progressive and eventually radical vision of church: collegiate, even democratic, in nature, open to the world, and endlessly pursuing justice. It was a compelling vision and it stayed with him through his life, passionately shaping his values and writings.

For his supporters, he was a one of a kind energy source, courageously combative and a spokesperson for a church of service and the poor, one that kept the needs of ordinary people foremost in mind, a "peoples' church." For his critics, he was an unyielding and arrogant ideologue. Friends and critics alike recognized his propensity for self-promotion, either accepting it as "simply Kaiser," or viewing it as an off-putting characteristic.

He once wrote: "Clare Booth Luce discovered me when I was a young reporter for the *Arizona Republic* in Phoenix. Soon I was covering the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council in Rome, winning prizes and plaudits for my inside reporting on the progress of Pope John's push to bring the Church up to date. Since then, I've done five books on the post-conciliar Church, and a dozen others on various other obsessions."

Whether one liked Kaiser or did not, there was little question he stayed close to the heat, at the center of church controversy and reform efforts, helping to shape the conversations, probing ideas, organizing efforts aimed at building the Vatican II church he first encountered during the council.

He spent 12 years in the Society of Jesus as a novice and scholastic before leaving to marry. Once in Rome as a young journalist, his Sunday evening dinner parties became a hot ticket item and *the* scene for lively conversations among journalists, priests and prelates.

He published *Pope, Council and World: The Story of Vatican II*, in 1963 (British title: *Inside the Council*),, telling the story of the struggle between progressive clerical forces and old guard-bishops as the council took shape. His writings and those of "Xavier Rynne" (Redemptorist Francis X. Murphy) in *The New Yorker* helped bring to wider audiences the high stakes story, the very struggle for the future of the Catholic church, that was going on at the Vatican.



The council was a high mark in Kaiser's life, shaping it indelibly. It was also one of its darkest chapters. During those years, Kaiser and his wife hosted a friend, Jesuit Father Malachi Martin, who betrayed Kaiser, running off with his wife. That betrayal tortured Kaiser for many years. Four decades after the episode he wrote about it in a personal book called *Clerical Error*.

If Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI were primarily responsible for thwarting the winds of conciliar reform in Kaiser's eyes, Pope Francis, now two years into his pontificate, has been its principle prelate conveyor of fresh hope.

Kaiser was particularly proud of having written, *The Politics of Sex and Religion*, the story of the Pope John XXIII appointed lay commission and how its "Majority report" called for the church to change official teachings on birth control. Instead Pope Paul VI followed the "Minority report," which became the basis for his 1968 encyclical, *Humanae Vitae*. The Kaiser book, originally published in 1985, was republished as an e-book in 2012.

Last year, Kaiser published *Inside the Jesuits: How Pope Francis Is Changing the Church and the World*, a work in which the author argued that Francis' "Jesuit DNA" is central to understanding his vision of church and its place in the wider world. Throughout the book Kaiser emphasized not only that Francis is different from his predecessors, but also that the nature of this difference lies precisely in the fact that he is a Jesuit. The book once again allowed Kaiser to write personally about his own experience as a Jesuit, an experience that shaped his own DNA.

Kaiser was among the last of the journalists to have reported the Second Vatican Council. With his death, a rich and lonely living memory of that epic church event is being silenced, the reforms Kaiser sought still remaining to be fulfilled.