Talking Back: Remembering Boston

Grant Kaplan

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I lived in Boston from 1992-96 and 1997-2002, where I studied, first as a graduate student and then as a doctoral student at Boston College.

After I left Boston I moved to Freiburg, Switzerland, for a year before relocating to New Orleans.

After my recently completed first year of full-time teaching at Loyola University, I needed a break. I had signed up for a Memorial Day retreat in New York, but decided to spend the weekend before the retreat visiting old friends in Boston.

The person 1 most looked forward to seeing was Phil King. Phil is a priest of the archdiocese of Boston. Recently his health has deteriorated to the point where it limits what he can do and where he can go. Over his life he has moonlighted as an archaeologist, professor of Hebrew Bible, scholar, linguist, quadri-Rabbi, and spiritual advisor. He has worn many hats. People know him as “Professor King,” “Father Phil,” “that charming old guy,” and “the man who can speak Latin fluently.” But he is first and foremost a priest from Boston.

I come from a Catholic family in Northern California. But my secular high school made me sufficiently skeptical upon entering college. Boston College was the place where, as a history and theology major, I would discover the richness of the Catholic tradition, from its art to its great intellectual tradition, to the beautiful witness of its martyrs. I would have never guessed over a decade ago that I would undergo a series of conversions that would change my career path from the hope of law school to doctoral studies in systematic theology, from a pro-choice Californian to a pro-life Catholic. It was at Boston College that I started to go to daily mass and joined a lay Catholic community. My experiences in Boston College during graduate studies even led me to live in a Swiss house where sung prayer and Eucharistic adoration took place daily.

More than anyone, Phil King symbolizes Boston — both the city and the College — to me. As a confused and depressed junior (somewhere two years worth of
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beer-filled long weekends and hopes for auspicious encounters did not make me happy). I enrolled in his introductory Bible class. He liked me because I knew German. Not everyone in the class was as enamored as I, but we all knew that this oldish man loved the Bible. I began to love it as well. We never liked it when people assumed he was a Jesuit, but many positive, ‘Jesuit’ traits were present in him.

Phil did not brag and did not like titles. His name plate did not even have an academic or ecclesiastical title; it just said “Phil King.” By mid-semester most of us had figured out that he was a priest. I began to visit his office hours regularly and I learned that he was quite an impressive scholar who had garnered his share of academic honors.

Despite his erudition, he claimed that he liked dirt more than ideas. He was not a C.S. Lewis figure who helped me sort out all of my intellectual quandaries about science and religion, the problem of authority, the false lure of secularism, etc. Other professors would aid in this task. Phil and I just talked about life. He was the first professor who asked me whether my housemates and I shared meals together. He remembered the names of my family members. He even noticed when I emerged from a semester-long dreaminess. What Jesuits call cura personalia and the demands of my favorite poet, T.S. Eliot, and my favorite Jesuit philosopher, Bernard Lonergan, namely, to be attentive, were embodied in this man.

He encouraged me to study elsewhere for the doctorate, but after a year in Germany I thought Boston College would be the best place to learn the tradition. During the second year of my doctoral studies he retired from Boston College and moved to Cambridge. We still telephoned

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often and went to dinner regularly. He spent most of the working hours in the bowels of Harvard’s Widener Library, where he toiled on his last major academic project, a book that subsequently won numerous awards.

Around the beginning of 2002 the ‘scandal’ broke. Since that time we have talked more about the scandal than anything else. He was a friend of Cardinal Law. In the fall of 1997 we happened to be eating at a North End restaurant when the Cardinal strolled in. The Cardinal was curious to find a doctoral student beginning at an institution of “questionable” Catholic character. He set up a meeting the next day where he lectured me about what courses to take and which encyclicals to read.

Despite Law’s arrogance, I believed the Cardinal was a good man and a good shepherd. It took several months of news coverage before I realized how monthly numb the Cardinal had been. He was a shepherd who did not care sufficiently for the weakest sheep. Of course as a graduate student at a place like Boston College there were plenty of opportunities for serious and sometimes heated debates about the implications of this failure for theology and ecclesiology.

My faith did not waver, but any remnants of triumphalism were squashed. Good, intelligent friends stopped going to church and I could not blame them. At the same time, it never dawned on me to stop attending mass. The archdiocese of Boston was rotten, but it had produced Fr. King. I felt like the suspected Jews who looked at Jesus and wondered “but from Nazareth!”

When I left Boston for another European tour of duty in August 2002, Cardinal Law had not yet resigned. By the time I returned to defend my dissertation in February 2003, Boston had an interim archbishop. Mass did not sound the same when we no longer prayed for...
”Archbishop Bernard,” Phil had undergone a painful operation and could not attend my defense. The next time I saw him, in the summer of the same year, I was back only briefly. I had to clear out the last boxes from my basement as I prepared to move away from the Hub permanently. Phil King was in the hospital, but still in good spirits.

Before his health began to decline, he had spent many summers digging in the Middle East. Once he told me, “My two worlds are crumbling, the Middle East and the Church in Boston.” Surely he deserved better, I thought, than to spend his last years reading nothing but depressing reports of secrecy, mismanage- ment, and suicide bombings. It made him happy that his former student was “doing well” vs. the initial steps into academe.

By the spring of 2004 Boston seemed to have “gotten over” the scandal, at least to this outsider. By coincidence, I was there when the sixty-five parish closings were announced. The new Archbishop, Fr. Sean O’Malley, had refused to wash women’s feet during the Holy Thursday liturgy. And Phil had recently fallen down a flight of stairs, breaking (somehow only) one bone in his leg. I began to wonder why Joyce never went back to Ireland.

Back to the beginning of my story. On a rainy and dreary day in late May, I met Phil for breakfast. We talked for several hours. He told me of discouraged priests and drastically reduced Church attendance. I began to think, was my faith that was given such a space to grow in this city now somehow marginalized by the city’s failings? More importantly, was the faithful service rendered for over fifty years by this good priest and teacher somehow marginalized? Did it matter that so many of his former students (the archdiocesan seminary) had either been accused of wrongdoing or of aiding and abetting the wrongdoers?

Although I chose the most abstract field — systematic theology — I would like to think I learned something from Phil’s territorial preoccupation. We had helped me to finance a trip to Israel after graduation where I dug at a tel, and I hoped it was not all for naught.

Despite front-page headlines of despairing parishioners and discouraged priests, here in front of me was a living, breathing priest of the archdiocese of Boston. As we sat in a dingy Cambridge diner, memories flooded my head. Phil was still his old self, and of course he was the favorite of the Turkish waiters. He knew their names and their sto- ries. Back at Boston College he never failed to become friendly with the custodians and cafeteria workers at Boston College. He had retained the gift to relate to so many different types of people. Between our political remarks he enthusiastically explained to me what he had been reading in the breviary every day. He especially enjoyed reading the chosen Psalms in Yiddish.

After saying our goodbyes I wracked my brain for the mean- ing of our relationship and my time in Boston. Phil King was a trained linguist and historian. After fifty years of dedicated scholarship he could still read the Psalms (the subject of his doctor- al dissertation) and take delight in their simple intricacy, then surely I could see the beauty in our encounter in this Cambridge dive. “The Hub” at that moment pro- vided the occasion for two to gather in Christ’s name, to share a meal, and to speak lovingly of the Scriptures Christ inspired and the Church Christ founded. None of this would have taken place if it had not been for Boston and its Catholic Church. So I gave thanks for its parishes, its seminary, and its shepherd, and resolved to pray for them all. I was especially thankful that a group of poor Irish Catholics foundered and sus- tained Boston College. Like Jesus on the road to Emmaus, Phil lit my heart on fire when he explained the Scriptures and he made me recognize Christ’s pres- ence over the course of a meal. Surely such a sacramental encounter affirmed my Catholic faith and my time in Boston.

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