

By Clifford Stevens

The Music Master

Msgr. Francis P. Schmitt of Boys Town

"It was just a year ago last Christmas that we buried Ruben. . . ." Thus began an editorial in Caecilia a few years ago, an odd place for such a piece of memory and yet filled with the heart and love that was Francis P. Schmitt: choirmaster extraordinaire, superb musician, priest of priests, loving mentor and devoted friend of generations of Boys Town boys.

They loved him; that's all that can be said -- deeply and with a devotion that never faltered. They were better human beings because he knew them, and they knew it. And he taught them not only by his person -- what he was and what he stood for -- but superbly. He made miniature musical geniuses out of many of them, he opened doors and windows to music and living that changed the whole direction and quality of their lives, and this remained in them to the end, as in Ruben's case.

The editorial about Ruben continues: "There was one thing the boys never forgot about their father. He used to come home after long and tedious hours at his assigned project -- establishing a jungle survival training area in the woods of Fort Rucker, Alabama -- take out a strange black book, and walk about singing strange melodies. . . . I had given him a Graduale Romanum with his name stamped on the cover -- gold letters -- when he graduated."

No father was more a father to his sons than Frank Schmitt was to the boys who came under his influence. None of them were angels, though some, like Ruben, sang like it. He knew all their tricks and foibles, all their escapades and shenanigans.

He was shocked by nothing they did and by nothing they said -- and some were tough street hoodlums with a vocabulary to match. He did not preach, he did not berate, he did not admonish: although he could be seethingly angry or keenly disappointed in the face of meanness or lack of character.

All those years, he was simply there: unchanging, constant, a friend and confidante who loved them more deeply than they ever knew. I suppose that is something few people knew about Frank Schmitt: how much he loved this place, this Boys Town, not so much the place, as the boys who lived here. He came here in 1941, right out of the seminary, and it was the only parish he ever knew.

"A hot, dusty afternoon in June," he recalled later, "ushered me, bag and baggage, into the Flanagan adventure."

And what an adventure it was!

"Fairly early, I fell heir to something besides nightly confessions. I have never known whether my succession to the duties of master of the Boys Town Choir was accidental or planned or both. It happened that the choirmaster and the organist both went on vacation at the same time. Would I tide things over for a couple of weeks? Well, why not?"

"At the first service, I managed to pull up to something past an adagio. An hour or so later, I was called to the phone, and I heard Flanagan saying: "Schmitt, that was electric!"

Well, that electricity prevailed for 36 years, the choir acclaimed one of the best choirs in the world, and their director respected and revered as a rare musician and choirmaster who could talk turkey with Jean Langlais of Paris, Flor Peeters from the Netherlands, Roger Wagner from Hollywood and every major composer of sacred music in the world.

He was recognized as one of the world authorities on Gregorian Chant and contemporary religious music, and the concerts of the Boys Town Choir and his Liturgical Music Workshops brought music lovers from all over the country to listen, learn and admire.

But this was not important to him. It was good for Boys Town and it was good for the boys to have to reach for that kind of excellence, but it was the personal association with him that made the difference.

His methods were subtle and effective. "How do you think I got you back to BT the time you went AWOL on New Year's Eve, just as the bells were ringing and the cherry bombs exploded?" he wrote one boy years later. "You were afraid I would be angry with you. I wasn't -- I just felt badly for having failed someplace along the line."

He learned much from his mentor, Father Flanagan. "'You can't organize an Irishman,' he used to say. He would say it with a chuckle, but the chuckle betrayed both a certain pride and defiance. . . . I suppose it was from him I learned the difference between an organization and an organism. . . . I soon came to recognize the unobtrusive but powerful character of a kind of cellular chemistry about the place. Goodness attaching itself to a boy, or filtering into a group of them, from seeming episodic instruction and example."

Frank Schmitt was a young priest who reflected much, observed a lot and saw the powerful effect of personal influence on a boy. It was interaction with his character and personality that matured and ripened many a young lad, lads who became for him unforgettable, whose character and stature constantly awed him.

For his boys who were in combat during the World War II, he wrote personally, and through his famous "Newsletter." "Do you remember any of the Schubert lieder Mrs. Plewa used to work through with you?"

"Benny Fisher's little brother fell out of the third floor window last week -- alive, concussion, broken leg, lucky."

"Sharkey came strolling down the hall yesterday wanting to register for piano -- again."

"The 12th gold star has been added to our service flag -- he was a Marine, captured on Wake Island."

"Problems in the kitchen . . . caused by Willy dropping a sack of mothballs in the cocoa. You should have seen Sister Athanasia put it to him."

"It has been some weeks since we laid Pat Gilbertson away. The cancer got him early one morning, and he lay in the chapel in his choir uniform until the Solemn Requiem Mass."

"Herndon and Grabowski came and asked me to pose for a picture. When they got to the door, they shouted: 'This is for Ripley!' and ran like the devil."

"We had another gold star: Porky Burns was killed in the Italian campaign while charging a German pillbox."

"I pray that wherever you are at this hour, there is a ring of Christmas in your hearts. Moe and Blubberlips Paul will spend part of their day sealing, stamping and posting this thing, maybe a New Year will see you get this war over with."

'We Buried Ruben'

And then the editorial: "It was just over a year ago last Christmas that we buried Ruben. . . . A week ago we had another graduation. Other boys received inscribed copies of the Graduale Romanum. They will not likely sing the Gradual versicles in the church, wherever they are. But perhaps in years to come their children will hear them sing, and perhaps they will understand."

These "kids," as he called them, crept into his heart and stayed there, each one of them, for almost 50 years.

He was a man who never seemed to grow old. He was the same Father Schmitt the last time I saw him as he was the first time I saw him in 1942. I had him as an English teacher and he didn't teach us in the usual way about nouns and verbs and dangling participles.

He read to us -- from the classics, literature -- from Huckleberry Finn, The Song of Bernadette, and a host of others. He taught chiefly by what he was, by what was important to him, by what was important and sacred to him. In all of these classes, we remembered him.

I don't think he ever realized the power of his presence, how profoundly he influenced us. He was just there, and that made all the difference in the world.

After God and his priesthood, music was his life. It was through music that he taught those generations of Boys Town kids. He taught them to excel in music, and for many of them, music was the only thing they ever excelled in, the first real achievement they ever knew. And through excelling in music, he taught them their own possibilities.

For many, it salvaged them from a useless and worthless existence and gave them confidence in themselves. It was through music that he taught them to reach for the stars.

Ruben was a good example. On a visit home to put a marker on his mother's grave, he wrote: "I am very disappointed in this town and the people in it. Do you know 90 percent of the kids I used to go around with have quit school . . . some of them are just drunkards. I can hardly wait to get back."

Back to what? To the high horizons and unlimited possibilities that Boys Town held out for him, and to association with a man who personified everything he held dear. What he taught them, or saw in them, he put down in virile prose at the end of a tribute that he wrote for Smokey, whose adult life was filled with what he called "unfathomable sadness," but who painted for him an Ecce Homo that he treasured.

The quotation is from Ecclesiastes:

Rejoice in your youth, you who are young; let your heart give you joy in your young days. Cast away worry from your heart, and shield your flesh from pain. Before the sun and light and moon and stars grow dark, and the clouds return after the rain. When the sound of the mill is faint, when the voice of the bird is silenced and song notes are stilled. Before the silver cord is snapped, or the golden lamp broken, or the pitcher shattered at the spring, or the pulley cracked at the wall . . . and the dust returns to the earth as it came from it, and the breath to God who gave it (Eccl 11:17, 12:14).

It was from such a vision that he worked, and it was this rare sense of the healing power of finding joy in God when you are young that inspired all that he did in music at Boys Town. If he could accomplish this, if in their youth, they could truly sing and give their hearts to this kind of joy, the future would take care of itself.

And it did: for Ruben, for Smokey, for Yves, for Jeannot, for Benny, and for Moe. For all of them, a light went out of the sky and the world was poorer for the passing of the friend and music master, for whom music was a very special gift of God and singing one of the sure ways to find him. TP

FATHER STEVENS, a priest of the Archdiocese of Omaha, graduated from Boys Town in 1944 and was ordained in 1956. In 1961, he became a chaplain in the U.S. Air Force. From 1968-69 he was executive editor of The Priest magazine. And in 1984, he founded Tintern Monastery. In his retirement he writes from Boys Town.