

Homily at the funeral of Brother Thomas Johnston, O.Carm.

The following homily was preached by the Prior Provincial, Fr. Wilfrid McGreal, O.Carm., during the funeral Mass at Aylesford Priory on Tuesday 13th August 2013.

Carmel means 'Garden of the Lord', a place of beauty and peace where God can be encountered. At Walworth Tom created, in an unexpected spot, a garden that was worthy of a prize at the Chelsea Flower Show. That unexpected, lovely creation says so much about Tom, giving insight into his personality.

Tom began life in Glasgow where he was adopted by Jean and Albert Johnston. The family moved to Harrogate while Tom was still young. The Johnstons are Methodists so Tom grew up in a Christian community. His secondary education was at St. Aidan's, an Anglican school. It was Tom's love of the Eucharist that drew him to Catholicism, and as a Catholic the Eucharist was at the core of his faith.

Tom came to know the Carmelites through Hazlewood and became a novice in 1993, just 20 years ago. Tom wanted to be a friar and was happy to express his vocation in caring for others. From the start he had his own little way, in many ways unobtrusive but not at ease with big groups. From the beginning Tom was ready to help those of the brethren who were feeling the effects of age.

Encouraged and helped by Sylvia Lucas, who had special skills in nurturing students, Tom was enabled to embark on an NVQ course that enabled him to gain a Level 3 Certificate as a carer. While he was in Aylesford he worked with the Leonard Cheshire Foundation and cared for a number of clients. This was no easy task as it meant early starts and infinite patience.

It was about this time that Tom began to search for his birth family, and he was able to make contact with Mick his brother, and his cousins in Glasgow. This was a great blessing, but sadly his birth-mother had died. Tom loved the Johnstons; he was fond of his sisters and especially Mary who lives with serious disabilities.

I was Tom's prior for a time at Aylesford and I was always aware of how tentative he could be. He also had short-term memory problems, but we found strategies to cope. What mattered was his kindness to Brother John and his thoughtfulness. Sometimes Tom could be misunderstood because his shyness could cause him to withdraw from gatherings, and yet he could at times feel utterly at ease.

At Walworth Tom was especially gifted at organising the altar servers, who could be very feisty; however, they respected his quiet, firm presence. Tom also was good with the housebound. Besides his pastoral work, Tom cared for the community,

shopping and cooking. He had a sweet-tooth, so, like Brother John at Aylesford, he liked his cake and chocolate.

Tom could discern well and he had no patience with empty rhetoric. I think he suffered misunderstanding as the depths of his integrity was not always grasped. He looked deeply at the realities of life and valued nature. He lived in his own quiet way so much of the Little Way of Thérèse. He was a good friend, and valued friendships especially with Jackie and Ian. His love of the natural world was important, and I can see him at Aylesford feeding the swans and welcoming the cat.

God called Tom to himself in our eyes so soon, but I believe that Tom made such a space for God in his heart that he stood ready to welcome the passing-over into the Risen Life. I believe Tom is in the communion of saints, caring for us and asking us to keep faith, so that in our mourning we find the path of joy and hope.