

Homily at the Requiem Mass for Fr. Paul O'Brien, O.Carm.

26th November 1999



Fr. Paul at his simple profession in 1975

After communion Fr. Redemptus will speak about Fr. Paul's years in Rome, Vincent Bilotta on Paul's time at the Sabbath Centre, and Richmond Edwards on his recent visit with his wife Alison to the La Salette Shrine in Attleboro, U. S.A., where Paul's course took place. I like to reflect on the years Paul and I lived in the same communities and reflect on the word of God.

Words can't of course express adequately enough the sorrow and sadness felt at the sudden and tragic death of an only son, a brother, colleague or friend and that at such a young age. Yet, having known Paul, he doesn't want us to be unhappy. Over the years Paul helped many people in their hour of need. I'm sure he is here now to support his mum Molly, and all of us. What Paul wants us to do is to celebrate his life.

In September 1974 Paul came with nine other candidates here to Aylesford to begin their novitiate. I was their director and we got on very well. It was a great group. I can now say that, of all the noviciates I guided, I enjoyed Paul's most of all. Yes, even more than the subsequent group, even though they could boast that they had among their ranks a future Prior General! Fr. Joseph, or as you are known to us, Joe, I'm deeply grateful that you have cancelled other important engagements in order to be with us here today.

Paul's novitiate was a very talented group and, thank God, it was endowed with an enormous amount of humour. They were very creative, especially too musically. Paul was very much part of that too. He set several psalms to music and composed two of the hymns that we will be singing today: "Mary Our Mother" and "Flower of Carmel". From that year came also the T.V. Programme "Look Stranger". Although some called it "Alphie's Half Hour", the novices had a big part in it. It was a great year and Paul loved it. I even managed to get him to go and get his hair cut short – once!

After the novitiate Paul went to Rome and walked through his studies. He was ordained to the priesthood here at Aylesford on 19th July 1981 and then, with some breaks in between, worked for a year in the Carmelite parish in Florence, for two years with our New York Carmelites, and then for 9 years in the Diocese of Galloway, at the end of which Bishop Taylor felt that Paul should return to one of his own Carmelite communities. The then

Provincial, again Fr Joe here, appointed Paul to our community in Aberystwyth, where he joined us on 26th February 1995.

Had Paul changed in those 14 years of being away from the Province? Yes and no. He still had his long hair, his welcoming smile, good humour, doing the daily crossword and he was still very obliging. He told me that what he had missed most was community life. But quite clearly he had also become rather fond of his own company and his own room. In the noviciate he had told me that his hobbies were: philately, records, reading and writing. By the time he arrived in Aberystwyth he could add to those: teaching children, writing on art and watching videos. Recently Mr Angelo James, the Head of St. Padarn's, told me: "It didn't make any difference whether the children were 4 or 11 years old, Fr. Paul had the knack of getting their full attention and, more importantly, of making himself understood. Often he would suddenly produce from his sleeve or from under his habit or alb a teddy bear or a puppet and have the children totally enthralled." Teddy bears were important to Paul, especially "Stumpy". When Paul went to hospital to get his appendix removed, he got his mother to promise that, if he died, Stumpy would be buried with him. That promise has been fulfilled. Paul loved art and his next article on it in the parish magazine, *Cross Ties*, was always something to look forward to. He told me that he used the videos to prepare his homilies and talks. His homilies could be brilliant, but at times also pretty off the mark. In them he loved to tell about his own experiences, which can of course be very apt. At one stage I said to him: "Paul, you remind me of the story of the Exodus: the more often it was told, the more extraordinary the events became!" I said, "I think it would be good idea, Paul, to have a bit less about yourself and a bit more about Jesus!" Paul roared with laughter, but also obliged. In the noviciate he could eat anything and everything. By the time he had reached us in Aberystwyth he pecked at his food, except perhaps when it was either Indian or Chinese!

Of course people's reactions to Paul and the recollections of him were different. Because of his long hair, flamboyant outfits and dark glasses some saw him as an eccentric. As Fr. Joe has it in his new book on Centering Prayer, "We are all human, not angels" and yes also Paul had his faults. But on the positive side people told me they had experienced him as humorous, kind, artistic, amusing, bubbly, intelligent, humble, quiet, devout, pious, spiritual, a good priest, etc. But like most of us, if not like all of us, Paul was also fragile and that made him attractive too to many.

Paul agreed that some updating in human development, theology and spirituality would be good. He left for The States in the middle of September. His sabbatical came to an untimely and tragic end in the early hours of Friday the 5th of November, exactly three weeks ago. Last Thursday Paul celebrated his 44th birthday in heaven, together with his dad, Danny.

We believe that life is a gift from God and Paul's tragic death reminds us of the words of Isaiah, "God's ways are not our ways, and God's thoughts are not our thoughts", or in the words of Job, "God has given, God has taken. Blessed be God!" Of course at the moment it insight be hard, if not impossible, to accept those words.

In this tragedy let us also remember and pray for the La Salette fathers and brothers as also for those who run the Sabbath Centre and for Paul's companions on this year's course. They lost their home and centre. It would be similar to us losing our home here at The Friars. Sr. Patricia from Northern Ireland, who was with Paul the first week he was in Attleboro, wrote:

“It was a dreadful shock to hear about the fire but worse to know that it claimed life. May God bring new life to many through this tragedy”.

Here I wish to thank Richmond and Alison Edwards for visiting the La Salette Shrine recently and for bringing back so many messages of sympathy and support from the people there. I thank Vincent Bilotta, the President of the Sabbath Centre, for being with us. And I thank Fr. Mario Esposito, the Provincial of the New York Province, and his secretary, Joan Fredericks, for making all the arrangements to have Paul’s body returned to us.

What characteristic sums up Paul best of all? In Aberystwyth of all the characteristics mentioned the most frequent one I heard was: Paul was gentle. We heard Jesus say: “Happy the gentle: they shall have the earth for their heritage”. We have come together to pray that Paul may inherit the new earth and the new heaven, the heavenly Jerusalem, promised by the Lord.

And Jesus said “Happy those who mourn, they shall be comforted.” Let us be comforted by the Lord, by one another and especially by our fond memories of Paul.

In our second reading St. Paul told us: “With God on our side who can be against us? When God acquits could anyone condemn? Could Christ Jesus? No! He not only died for us – he rose from the dead, and there at God’s right hand lie stands and pleads for us. Nothing therefore can come between us and the love of Christ”.

And in our first reading we heard: “The virtuous person, though he die before his time, will find rest.” What counts, the author tells us, is not how long we live of days, but how we live. And so he writes, “He sought to please God, so God loved him....and has taken him up”.

In the words of St. John of the Cross, “In the evening of life we shall all of us be examined on love”.

Dear Paul, we thank you for your time with us, short though it was. We thank you for what you gave us – we thank you for your love. Now rest in the eternal peace only your Creator and Redeemer can give you, and from now on, together with your dad, be a tower of strength to us all, but above all to your mum. Farewell. Amen.

Piet Wijngaard, O.Carm.
Prior Provincial