Obituary of Brother Thomas Johnston, O.Carm.

Born 6 November 1963  ·  Professed 26 August 1994  ·  Died 27 July 2013

It is with sadness, but trusting in the mercy of God, that the British Province of Carmelites mourns the death of Brother Thomas Johnston, O.Carm.

Tom died unexpectedly of a heart attack on Saturday 27th July 2013 (feast of the Carmelite martyr Blessed Titus Brandsma), aged 49 years, at home in the Carmelite community at Walworth, south London.

Born on 6th November 1963 in Glasgow, Tom grew up in Harrogate in a loving family environment and worshipped in the Methodist tradition. On completing school he became a butcher and never lost his liking for meat, always knowing a good cut! In his early adult years, Tom was drawn to Catholicism and eventually became a Roman Catholic. Some few years later Tom discovered the Carmelite Order, and through participating in a series of retreats at Hazelwood Castle in Yorkshire and at Aylesford Priory in Kent, he followed a prompting he felt to live a life of prayer, community and service as a Carmelite friar.

Tom entered the Carmelite novitiate at Aylesford in September 1993, together with three others. A year later, sharing his life with the community, Tom professed temporary religious vows and went on to live in London, first at Hendon, and then from August 1996 in East Finchley, a new community of which he was a founding member.
Tom's caring and gentle disposition did not go unnoticed. During this period he trained as a carer and worked in two nursing homes; firstly one run by the Daughters of Charity in Essex, and then at Nazareth House in East Finchley.

In April 1998 Tom moved to Aylesford where he shared his caring skills in the local area, in Maidstone Prison, and in the Carmelite community itself, demonstrating considerable concern for others.

On 29th May 2001 Tom professed solemn vows as a Carmelite friar.
In 2005 Tom became the Sacristan and Master of Ceremonies at Aylesford. Working with the Sacristy Team, his responsibilities included catering for the liturgical needs of a wide range of groups, from primary school children to large groups of priests, bishops and archbishops.

On hearing of Tom's untimely death, one of his former sacristy co-workers at Aylesford commented, "Tom was a lovely man and a good friend ... He made every day better."

In August 2008 Tom moved to the Carmelite friar community in Walworth, London, as part of the parish team at English Martyrs' Church. There he ministered to the sick and housebound, in their own homes, at Tower Bridge Nursing Home, and at Guys & Thomas' Hospital. Tom's former experience with bishops prepared
him well for his responsibility for forming the altar servers in the parish. He fulfilled these tasks with gentleness, patience and a wry sense of humour until he died.

Tom's death came as a sad shock to his family and friends, and those to whom he ministered. In the 33 years that the Carmelites have been at Walworth, Tom was the first friar in that community to have died whilst in active ministry. His quiet and humble service of the parish endeared him to many, and there was standing room only in English Martyrs' Church during his funeral Mass on 12th August (feast of Lay Carmelite Blessed Isidore Bakanja) a mark of the deep respect and affection with which Tom was held in Walworth. The presider at Mass, parish priest and prior Fr. Kevin Melody, spoke of the loving influence that Tom had made on his ‘four families’: his birth family, adoptive family, Carmelite family, and parish family. Many of the servers whom Tom trained were present on the sanctuary, and all sections of the parish - which incorporates over 100 nationalities - were present to pay their respects. Parishioners shared their memories of Tom in a book of condolence, and children of the parish wrote their messages of thanks and love.
Tom's body was taken to Aylesford Priory the following day for a funeral Mass and burial in the Province Cemetery. Gathering alongside friars and other members of the Carmelite Family from across Britain were friars of the international Carmelite Order including Fr. Michael Troy (representing the Irish Province of Carmelites) and Fr. Kevin Alban (Carmelite Curia). The presider at Mass was the Prior Provincial, Fr. Wilfrid McGreal, who spoke warmly about Tom's quiet and often unseen contribution to community life. After the Commendation by Fr. Antony Lester, Tom's coffin was carried to the cemetery by members of his family, fellow Carmelite friars, and two men who had been novices with him. The final prayer of Commital was led by Fr. Michael Manning, and a small bouquet of thistles and lavender - symbols of Scotland and Yorkshire where Tom was raised - was laid with him.

Tom's family, friends, and Carmelite brothers and sisters grieve his death, and extend their prayers and consolations to all who were an important part of his life. We also thank God for his life and service among us. Those who knew Tom well know that he was engaged in profound searching. May he rest in peace now, his longing fulfilled and his searching complete. May Our Lady of Mount Carmel, to whose service Tom pledged himself, pray for him, and lead him to the Risen Christ.

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