



## Homily preached at Fr John Milcz's funeral...

### FUNERAL HOMILY FOR FR JAN MILCZ, CSsR

#### BISHOP ETON, WEDNESDAY 11 JULY 2018 at NOON

“As a man lives, so shall he die” is a phrase that will resonate with all Redemptorists of a certain vintage: the vintage mainly represented on the sanctuary today. These were the words at the beginning of one of those classic mission sermons that, as students, we were expected to learn by heart and use to hone our skills as preachers. No doubt Fr Jan himself, as a young man, proclaimed them to the assembled brethren at one of those mission academies in Hawkstone back in the 1960s. Of course, these sermons were all designed to stir the so-called lapsed and wayward to mend their ways, but today I would like you to reflect that those words – *as a man lives so shall he die* – can very aptly be applied in the best possible way to this good and holy man. Jan died a very peaceful death in the Marie Curie Hospice on Tuesday evening last week. When I saw him for the last time on the Sunday morning before I left for Hampshire there was a wonderful serenity about him. In the final weeks of his life, I have rarely met anyone who so continually expressed his gratitude for any little kindness. This natural courtesy was much appreciated by the staff at Marie Curie as well as the carers and nurses who tended to him in the monastery and the staff at Christopher Grange, where he spent a short time a few weeks ago. To them all and to our own wonderful resident team, we, as a Redemptorist family are immensely grateful, as we are to his family and his many friends in this congregation today: he treasured your love and support.

By what seems to me an act of divine providence, a couple of years ago Jan and others among our older confrères had to stay in Hawkstone Hall while the lift was being repaired in Bishop Eton. During that time as the result of a chance conversation with the wonderful Sr Jackie Smith we have a unique record of Jan’s early life. She was so fascinated by what he told her that she spent hours with him during those days and the result of their conversations was published in the *Lent Extra* of 2016. Redemptorist Publications have kindly furnished us with the text so that copies have been made available at the back of the church today. If we have not produced enough, just put in your order and we will duly respond. As many of you know, not long afterwards, Sr Jackie herself was suddenly struck down with a serious cancer and died. Please God, she and Jan are now reunited in that home where Jesus promised he was going ahead to prepare places for us all.

The texts for today’s Mass very much reflect our belief that Jan’s deep devotion to the Eucharist will now be coming to fruition at the great eternal banquet, of which the Eucharist is the foretaste and which even the prophet Isaiah foresaw. But we might well have begun with that powerful reading from the book of Wisdom, often used at funerals, which reminds us that God sometimes puts us to the test so that we might prove worthy to be with him: tested like gold in a furnace. John’s early life was a mighty test. He had lost both his parents by the age of ten and two years later the Second World War broke out. He experienced the

Nazi invasion of Poland and in 1942 he and his sister were seized: he didn't see his sister again for sixteen years. The unfolding story was the stuff of nightmares. He was with a kind family in Austria but then sent to a prison camp. Jan was able to reflect on what he learnt from the experience: speaking about the Christmas of 1944, he said: "I have to say, I am glad I had that experience. I have been a prisoner. I understand how it is, being in a prison. You have no control. You don't know how many days, weeks, months or years you will be there. You wonder if the guards will come in one day and shoot you all. We didn't know." In the event he was freed in the January of 1945 and returned to his kind Austrian family. When the war was finally over, Jan wanted his beloved Poland to be free, so he joined the Polish Army, which in due course led to him joining the British Army. Demobbed in 1953, his boyhood dream of becoming a priest surfaced and, as we so often say, the rest is history. We all know that Jan was a determined character (dare I say even quite stubborn if he really wanted something), and that determination served him well as he strove to complete all the necessary studies both at Osterley and at our Redemptorist seminary at Hawkstone. He was ordained on 1 July 1966 and so at his death had completed 52 years of faithful ministry in the Church.

I anticipate that probably everyone here can speak of their gratitude to God for John and his ministry and his good example. He was utterly faithful to prayer and at our community prayers invariably added an extra bidding prayer for those who were suffering or most in need. He had a deep devotion to our Blessed Lady (he had rosaries around him to the end and we were forever bumping into him at all hours of the day and night telling his beads). His devotion to the Eucharist was profound and reverent: dare I say he did not need a Eucharistic Congress to remind him of its importance. As a community we will treasure the memory of being able to minister to him during these last difficult days and we are especially grateful to Fr Charles, the youngest member of the community, who formed a great bond with Jan. It is a consolation that he and Bro Mike Taylor, one of our students, were with him when he died.

As we celebrate this Requiem Mass today, may our hearts burn within us as we think of how God continues to unfold the Scriptures for us in the lived experience of men like Fr Milcz. As we recognise the Lord in the breaking of the bread, may we realise the wonder of our faith, which teaches us that in this mystery we actually become the one Body of Christ, united with one another and with Mary and saints in heaven. May Jan now be numbered among those whose names are written in the Book of Life.

Eternal rest grant unto him, O Lord...

**Fr Timothy Buckley CSsR, Parish Priest, Bishop Eton, was the preacher**