

Homily at Funeral for Fr Barrie O'Toole RIP

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FUNERAL OF FR BARRIE O'TOOLE, CSSR (82 YRS)...

BISHOP ETON, TUESDAY 21 MAY 2019 at NOON

HOMILY - preached by Fr Timothy Buckley CSSR - Parish Priest

I first met Fr Barrie O'Toole on the evening of Monday, October 18th 1965. Andrew Burns and I were two of the seven newly professed students who had made their way from the novitiate in Perth to Hawkstone Hall, then our Redemptorist seminary. The tradition was that each of



the new students was placed in the tender care of a senior student – his guardian angel. As luck would have it, Barrie had been deputed to look after me. I recall that even at the age of 29 his distinguished mop of hair was more white than grey. I do not recall much about this initiation process beyond the fact that on that first evening, when he had shown me to my room, he looked around and said something along the lines of: “you poor thing – I couldn’t possibly face starting here all over again!”

In fact Barrie was to prove a delightful confrère and life-long friend. He was ordained the following January and went to Rome to study Church History. A few years later he returned to teach at Hawkstone and I worked with him, catechising some of the children on the RAF station at Shawbury, where he was the chaplain. Until the last nine years that was the only time we were ever attached to the same community, but I enjoyed working with him on many occasions, including a memorable mission in Tudhoe and Spennymoor back in the spring of 1977.

Barrie enjoyed a rich and varied life as a Redemptorist priest. He coped with the transition of the students from Hawkstone to Canterbury in 1973 and was the first rector of that new student community. He moved from there to Hawkstone, where he built on the foundations laid by Jim McManus and helped to develop the Pastoral Centre into a place of international renown. During his fifty-three years of priesthood he had spells as a missionary and a retreat giver, two years in Brazil and three in Zimbabwe. He was part of two new experimental

mission communities, one at Kiln Green near Reading and the other in Middlesbrough. His last years were spent here in Liverpool, where his cheerful and compassionate ministry was greatly appreciated.

Today's congregation reflects the great esteem in which he was held. When news of his death broke a couple of weeks ago, the outpouring of sympathy and good will across the two parishes was truly remarkable and it was because everyone recognised that, no matter what, Barrie always wanted the best for each of us. In the event the last public Mass he celebrated was at St Mary's on Easter Sunday last year. Fr Charles Randall concelebrated on that occasion and he tells the story of how the congregation was so consumed by Barrie's proclamation of the joy of Easter that there was a spontaneous and sustained round of applause for him.

Like most Redemptorists, he had his eccentricities. The struggle he had with his memory, particularly for names, was not something that simply befell him in old age. His dear sister, Pat, assures me that even at family baptisms and weddings, he was quite likely to get the names mixed-up. Indeed, in my early days here as parish priest I often wondered whether any of the brides and grooms at Barrie's weddings was correctly matched up! Be that as it may, he carried off his *faux pas* with a laconic shrug of the shoulders and a broad grin, which would disarm us all. We had similar fun and games with the holy oils, which could only be identified by the letters on the tops, until I finally cello-taped the words baptism and chrism to the vessels themselves. Barrie had long since moved beyond worrying about such niceties, convinced that the good Lord could make up for any deficiencies on his part. This expansive view of the Holy Redeemer to whom he had committed his life meant that rather like St John in his Gospel and his letters, all Barrie ever wanted people to know was that God really did love them and would always be compassionate to them in their weakness.

Today's liturgy is designed to embrace that expansive vision of a God who will bring the whole of creation to its fulfilment, ultimately destroying the pain and grief of death and gathering us for a great eternal banquet at the top of the mountain. We recognise the Lord in the power of his word which lights the flame of faith in our hearts and enables us to recognise him in the breaking of the bread: the Eucharist we are about to celebrate for the repose of Barrie's soul and for ourselves.

Our lives, our deaths do indeed have their influence on others. Barrie was a great believer in the value of spiritual direction and he was a wise counsellor to others. I know many of you in the congregation – some of whom have travelled considerable distances – have come because Barrie had been prepared to go the extra mile with you and you want to honour his memory accordingly. Thank you for being here.

We have had some particularly sad funerals here in the past few weeks and in the midst of them we have also celebrated our First Holy Communions. The gift of the Eucharist, uniting both the living and the dead through Christ with the Father, has come home to me with a

power and conviction that I have never previously experienced. As I have tried to allow these experiences to open my eyes like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, there seem to have been a host of remarkable connections. Just yesterday we celebrated the Requiem Mass of a woman whose friendship with Mother Teresa – St Teresa of Calcutta – led to her and her husband, Vincent adopting a little girl, Nitasha, from the orphanage in Calcutta. Nitasha organised the funeral yesterday and some of the Missionaries of Charity attended the funeral as they have done for Barrie today. For a few years Barrie faithfully celebrated Mass for the sisters in Seel Street each Saturday morning until his health deteriorated. Mind you, we knew his memory was really beginning to fail when one Saturday he found himself in Garston in search of Seel Street and thereafter the sisters generously arranged for Anthony to transport him. As we thought about Mother Teresa yesterday, I reflected that sanctity is not a million miles away as maybe we used to think. I too had the privilege of meeting Mother Teresa in Sunderland in the 1970s and in this parish we dine out on the fact that Pope St John Paul II slept in our parish when he stayed with Archbishop Worlock in his visit to England in 1982.

Now Barrie would not thank me for trying to canonise him. None of us is perfect and, like most Redemptorists, he could be as stubborn as a mule if he decided to dig his heels in, but Mother Teresa and John Paul II weren't perfect and as Pope Francis keeps reminding us we are all sinners in the need of the mercy of God. It was a great privilege to be able to cross the Pennines and visit Barrie in Ripon on many occasions, but especially to be able to anoint him and pray with him again the day before he died. I asked him when he meets the Lord face to face to put in a good word for us all. May I add my immense gratitude to Pat and her family for the gracious welcome and hospitality I always received. Your loving care for Barrie was an outstanding example to us all.

For me, Barrie is best summed up by a parishioner who said to me: "whenever you saw him or even heard his name mentioned, it brought a smile to your face." What a wonderful epitaph...

ETERNAL REST GRANT UNTO HIM, O LORD...