

AL HUBENIG EULOGY
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Good morning. It's my privilege and honor to tell you something about Fr. Al Hubenig, an amazing Oblate missionary, whose was a 'larger than life' man, in the way he lived his life, in the gifts and talents he shared generously with everyone, and particularly in his heart that overflowed with love and tenderness, with equality and justice and with a deep love for Jesus.

Fr. Al always called me his 'kid sister' and I called him my 'big brother'. These terms of endearment developed over the many years of our relationship. We were work colleagues on the Oblate Parish Mission team for several years; praying together, travelling together, doing workshops and parish missions together and enjoying friendship together—usually over good food and drink! Some of our ancestors came from the same region, the Banat, in the Austria-Hungarian empire. He actually worked for my grandfather in Regina for a short time. Both extroverts, we had no problem keeping conversations going, although I have to say I took a back seat to him in this department. I have a feeling he is smiling down right now saying, "you go sis!". I can hear his voice in those words. He was always so supportive and encouraging of me as a woman and of women in general.

It was the spring of 1999 when I first met Fr. Al. He had just completed six years at St. Charles parish in northeast Edmonton and had joined the Oblate Parish Mission Team. His new home was "The Ranch", the Oblate name for the large ranch-style home, across the street from Annunciation parish. He lived there with Fr. Jacques Johnson, the director of the mission team, Bro Louis Andreas also on the team and a few others Oblates. I joined the mission team about the same time, after coordinating the first Edmonton Oblate Parish Mission at Annunciation Parish. We were both newcomers to this new and spirit-filled initiative. How a lay woman in her forties joined an all-clerical team is a story for another time.

Parish missions were the initial ministry for the young Fr. Eugene de Mazenod, founder of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate. It's not surprising to me that Fr. Al would want to devote himself to this ministry. As a historian, writer and editor, he published a book about the life of this further saint called "Living in

the Spirits Fire”. This well-written book chronicles the historical events both of what was taking place in the life of St. Eugene and of the French revolution that he lived through. It was co-authored with Rene Mott, an Oblate priest that Al truly admired and strove to emulate. This book was a great inspiration for me in my work on the mission team.

With his knowledge of and love for the founder, the Oblate Parish Mission team was a good fit for Fr. Al. In his late sixties at this time, he left parish life for this new ministry in Canada; but not only parish missions – he also loved to give retreats to brother Oblates all over the world. He was a gifted speaker who had a natural talent for languages, of which he spoke at least five fluently– German, French, Spanish, Italian, and English. He also loved to travel and had an open heart to other cultures. This was evident by the various foods that would show up and that he would share at special times of the year after trips to the Italian Center.

Above all Fr. Al loved to tell stories, which was how I got to know him best. I had the unique opportunity to hear them at the Parish Mission Great Assemblies. I remember one story he told about a young child, maybe 3 or 4, who after Mass on the feast of Pentecost pulled on him and said, “I like your new dress”.

Before going further, I want to take you back to his early life, his life as an Oblate Missionary, and his life as a friend and companion on the journey.

Born on May 28, 1931, in Regina Saskatchewan during the Great Depression, he was the youngest of child of Peter and Magdalena Hubenig (Hicke). His oldest brother, Mike, was 20 years his senior. His closest sibling, Rosalie, was nine years older and Carol and Eve older still. His parents lost three sons to leukemia. They also lost their family home during the depression. Yet, there was love in this family and that carried them through it all. Fr. Al loved to refer to himself as “an only child with three mothers”. He was close to Rosalie his whole life.

He always spoke highly of his mother and father. His mother must have been a jovial person, definitely a good cook, which may have contributed to Fr. Al’s love for food and cooking. He wrote a huge cookbook with many family favorite recipes and recipes for other parts of the world. Music was another gift from his mother, who used to sing the song “Edelweiss” to her children. We heard this

playing a little while ago. We are told that this was one of Fr. Al's favorite songs and that it is a family tradition to play this song at family funerals. I imagine Fr. Al singing along with us in his beautiful, booming voice.

His call to priesthood began at Saint Thomas College in North Battleford. At the early age of 13, the young Hubenig boy enthusiastically ventured off by train to this Oblate-run boarding school, which he wrote fondly about. After graduating from high school and attending one year of university, he had, in his words, 'a constant craving' that did not leave him. He entered the Novitiate where he studied and was ordained as an Oblate priest on July 8, 1956.

His first obedience after ordination was what became a ten-year assignment at **Marian Press** in Battleford where he was the priest, editor, and photojournalist of the Our Family magazine—a ministry that took him traveling broadly and led to other opportunities. This ministry really started when he was a student a result of a temporary request to take over from the editor who was ill.

Rome was the next eight-year call for this young priest. He was asked to set up the **Oblate Information service** for the congregation, work that once again took him travelling.

At his request to work with the poor and not just write about them, Fr. Al was given the opportunity to work as pastor at the port city, **Salina Cruz, Mexico** where with another priest, they served a parish of 80,000 parishioners. (makes our parishes seem small).

His many skills were once again needed in Rome and he was called by **the Superior General to return to Rome** to edit the final draft of the Constitutions and Rules in English – a testimony to his outstanding skills as a writer and journalist.

His desire to be with the poor brought him back to **Mexico** to live with the **Huave First Nations people of San Mateo del Mar**, a coastal desert along the Pacific in southern Mexico. This was a very interesting time in his life that he often spoke about as the highpoint in his priesthood. Yet it was here that he nearly got 'lynched' (in his words), had a one-year-old malnourished child die in his arms, and saw how he was "talking about God more than talking to God" after an

accident that ripped off his toenail. I shudder remembering that story. This seems also to be the place where he picked up the many diseases that would affect him later in life, including Malaria. He writes that his Texan doctor referred to him as “his walking textbook on tropical diseases”.

From poverty to riches, the next stop for this missionary was as director of a prestigious school in Mexico City called Colegio Vista Hermosa where he spent four years. He clearly left his mark here as the school was chosen by UNESCO as a model for all of Mexico in education geared to the 21st century.

Health issues meant it was time to leave Mexico and take a one-year sabbatical in Spain. While there, Fr. Al was called by Fr. Ron Rolheiser, the Oblate Provincial in Saskatoon, to come back to Canada as pastor of St. Charles Parish in Edmonton. This turned out to involve a construction project to oversee the building of a new church. It was an incredible feat that drew on his skills and abilities to build the people of God along with the new church. Working closely with parish council, this amazing church, which still has people stand back in awe at its architectural beauty, became a reality.

And this is where we catch up with where we started – in 1999 in Edmonton with Oblate Parish Mission ministry!

As time went on, things changed, as they do. Fr. Jacques left the team due to health reasons and I left to complete a degree. Fr. Al and Bro. Louis continued the impressive and life-giving work of the Oblate Parish Missions with Ed and Natalia Shrader (who are with us today). Several Oblates joined the team over the course of 15 years to help out with various parish missions held in British Columbia, Sask, Alberta and the Northwest Territories. They included: Archbishop Sylvain Lavoie, Fr. Mark Blom, Fr. Ron Meyer, Fr. Jim Dukowski and Fr. Mieteke Burdsdy to name a few.

The last parish mission was like the crème de le crème for Fr. Al. It took place in 2010 at St. Benoit's Parish in Pickardville, Alberta, a small hamlet about an hour northwest of St. Albert. This was to be Fr. Al's final ministry. After the four-year parish mission was over, Fr. Al stayed on to provide much needed Sunday ministry. It was not long before a love affair developed between the parishioners of St. Benoit and Fr. Al! Every Sunday someone from the parish would drive the

hour to pick up Fr. Al for Mass. They started early as first there was coffee and breakfast to enjoy, followed by Sunday Mass, and then a large potluck lunch after Mass. I personally witnessed this amazing happening a few times. Fr. Al's affection for St Benoit can be heard when he wrote: *"I have never worked in a parish that was so spiritually hungry for the Word of God and the abundant life that Jesus brings. Their dedication and eagerness made me frequently question if my own commitment and faithfulness to the Spirit approached anywhere near theirs. Their staunchness humbled me"*. Picardville gave him a reason to get out of bed in the morning. He worked and reworked his homilies for them and had them done months in advance. To all the parishioners at Picardville, I say thank you. You were a real gift to this priest, and I know he was a gift to you.

Finally, I want to say that Fr. Al has been an amazing example to me of what it means to age gracefully. For several years I watched as he divested himself of earthly possessions, giving them away to those he knew would appreciate them most. His little home museum with artifacts from all over the world was mostly gone by the time he moved to his last residence at Foyer Lacombe. At our monthly gatherings he became more pensive, listening more deeply and sharing more from his heart. He reached out to us when he needed help and we responded. Dan and Joanne Friedt, Donna Ebert, Vivianne St. Louis, Luice Leduc and many, many others surrounded him with their love and support, especially this last year. It was beautiful to witness all this. Fr. Al suffered a lot and yet he would never admit this. I knew that the neuropathy in his feet kept him up at night; that the Malaria flared up now and again, that the diabetes caused problems from time to time. Yet he was always grateful and rarely complained. He loved people and people loved him. He was always quick to say, "I love you". And now, it is our turn to say, "we love you too". We will miss you, but we know that deep in our hearts you will always be with us.

It is impossible to really 'tell the whole story' of Fr. Al's life, especially one as large, long and outstanding as his. The title of his memoirs, *The Lives I've Lived* says it all. So, I'll end the way I started by giving thanks for this beautiful 'man of God'; this amazingly gifted Oblate priest, whose heart overflowed with love and tenderness, with equality and justice and with a deep love for Jesus. Well done good and faithful servant!