

FUNERAL HOMILY FOR AL HUBENIG OMI  
*Living the Gospel of Beauty, Truth and Goodness*  
+ Sylvain Lavoie OMI April 27<sup>th</sup>, 2015  
(Isaiah 61:1-3; Ps 23; Jn 14:1-6)

\*\*\*\*\*

First of all, I want to extend my condolences to Fr. Al's family members, relatives, friends, fellow clergy, religious, and the Oblate family at this great loss we have incurred, including myself as part of that Oblate family.

Certainly, it is with mixed emotions that we gather today – such as sadness, grief and loss. For me personally, that loss is of a friend, a brother Oblate, a lively member of our Gareth Oblate community for many years, a mentor, and an excellent spiritual director. Yet we also gather with feelings of gratitude, solidarity, hope, and even joy, all based on the gift of faith as we celebrate Al's entrance into eternal life.

The Word of God comes to our help at times like this. Usually, at a funeral, we focus on the scriptures, but when someone has lived an exemplary life, as did Al, we can speak about his life, and we are speaking about the Gospel well lived.

It is fitting that Al died during the Easter season, as he lived out the spirit of Easter every day. One of the passages Al lived out was from the gospel of John that we heard on Wednesday after his death: "All who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day." I thought of him as I proclaimed those words during our Eucharist at the Star of North. In his own way, Al saw the Son, certainly believed in him, lived in the hope of the resurrection, and I believe, was already sharing in that eternal life.

On a very basic level, Al lived out that new commandment of Jesus that placed loving others as ourself on a par with loving God, the great Shema of Israel. He was able to love himself in a healthy way – seeing himself as a beloved Son of God and helping others see themselves in that same light. And he was reconciled with everyone, a mellow person in an all too often bitter world.

Al lived the theological virtues of faith, hope and love. He had that infinite horizon of faith into which he placed all that happened in his life, allowing him to live in

hope (nothing seemed to get him down) and love more deeply, truly caring for others and willing to help anyone in any way he could.

I also think of him now as one who truly lived the Beatitudes, that magna carta of Jesus' teachings. With a personality larger than life (one person told me he was unforgettable), and with all his gifts, intelligence and talents, it would have been easy for him to lord it over others, but he was truly humble and poor in spirit. He was like St. Paul, able to relate to the wealthy (such as the president of Mexico when Al was principal of the Colegio in Mexico City) and with the poor, living for years in the dusty, wind-blown desert of southern Mexico with the Huave tribe, even learning their language.

Knowing there are many rooms in our Father's house led him to be very inclusive, non-judgemental, very open to team ministry and with a pastoral approach of accepting people where they were at, and taking them a step further.

Like Jesus, who promised to return to take us with him, Al was an evangelizer, a missionary, drawing people closer to God, especially by crafting powerful homilies that touched people's hearts. He would often mention to me how far ahead of the liturgical calendar he was in preparing those homilies.

Here is a passage from his Easter Sunday homily: "On Easter I renew my baptismal commitment. I confirm my belief not only in the resurrection of Christ, but also in my own share in 'the resurrection of the body and life everlasting.' Because my death is not apart from Christ's, what happens to me after death is not separate from what followed Christ's death—resurrection. I rejoice and sing 'Alleluia!' for Christ and for myself."

In this gospel Jesus calls himself the Way, the Truth and the Life. I like to rephrase that teaching as: the *truth* is the *way* to the *new life* Jesus wants to share with us. Given his profound understanding of our modern society, I think Al had a different way of viewing that teaching of Jesus, using the transcendentals of beauty, goodness and truth. For him, beauty and goodness become the way to arrive at grasping the truth of Jesus and accessing the new life he offers. Even Pilate argued about the truth, but no one can really argue about beauty and goodness.

For the theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar, anything beautiful first arrests us. We are stopped in our tracks by it. Then, the beautiful elects us. We've been chosen. Finally, the beautiful always sends us – we are missioned. That insight applies to Al. He saw the beauty of God in everyone and everything, and delighted in sharing it, like a mission, in many ways – such as photography, collecting recipes, cooking, creating mosaics out of tiles, and designing a church featured on the cover of a magazine on architecture.

One example is the tabernacle Al fashioned while at Battleford, thankfully given to us at the Star, and on display here. It pictures a lamb holding a standard of victory, blood gushing out of its chest, standing over a skeleton swinging a sword. The truth this beautiful work of art silently proclaims to all, is that the crucified Lamb of God is the Risen Lord, victorious over evil, sin and even death itself. Satan, the skeleton, is defeated, though he doesn't know it yet, and is still swinging his sword, doing all kinds of damage in the world, such as the present pandemic. But he is defeated, and in the end, the words of Julien of Norwich ring true – all will be well, and all manner of being will be well.

Al also saw *goodness*, along with *beauty*, in everything and everyone, and in the Church. As Bishop Robert Barron points out, the Church is the spotless Bride of Christ, a thing of great beauty and purity, yet also an earthen vessel, composed of flawed and fragile human beings. Al was able to balance these two tensions in a very healthy way.

According to John Allen Jr, Cardinal Ratzinger, before becoming Pope, stated in an interview: “The only really effective apologia for Christianity comes down to two reasons – namely, the saints the church has produced (*goodness*), and the art that has grown in her womb (*beauty*).” Al is one of our saints, who will continue to make faith in Jesus and belonging to the church attractive to us, showing all of us that faith and its moral teaching isn't intended to hem people in, but to allow them to excel, to flourish and to be great.

In a comment about Jesus washing the feet of his disciples at the Last Supper, John Shea claims Jesus took off the mantle of privilege and transformed it into an apron of service. In many, many ways, Al did just that. How fitting that as Donna Ebert was caring for his feet just before he died, Al asked her if she saw the numbers seven and twelve on his feet. Mystified, she shared this with Lucie Leduc, the

director of the Star. Being very close to Al, Lucie intuited the meaning of that immediately and I think she is right – seven is perfection and twelve is fullness or completion. His feet had travelled the world, and done what they had to do. He was ready to go home.

A Celtic tradition calls some sacred locations “thin places,” where the next world can almost be felt. Al’s long redemptive suffering as a radical disciple of Jesus, made that place for him very thin, and sometime before 3 am on Monday, April 19<sup>th</sup>, he slipped through that “thin place” into eternity.

Jesus taught Mary Magdalene not to cling to him when he appeared to her in the garden, for she could not have him back as he was. The Jesus of history was now the Christ of faith. She had to mourn and grieve his loss, let him ascend to the Father, and she would receive his spirit to be with him in a new way – which happened at Pentecost. Our task now is to grieve, to mourn his loss, to eventually give him back to God, and be open to receive his spirit to be with us in a new way. And that can be an opportunity for us to experience Pentecost before we celebrate it in a few weeks.

The Eucharist was his greatest prayer as a priest, and as an Oblate, one that sustained him throughout his life and ministry. His last reception of communion was his Viaticum, food for that journey through the veil between this life and the next. The anointing he received from Fr. Alfred earlier the evening he died was his spiritual support for that journey. This Eucharist is our last banquet with him – may it sustain us and empower us as it did him.

I close with fitting words from an ancient sage Pericles: *What you leave behind is not what is engraved in stone monuments, but what is woven into the lives of others.* Adapting that wisdom slightly, it strikes me that Al left two iconic legacies: the stones of St. Charles church in Edmonton, and the living stones of the community of Picardville. His love for that community empowered them to grow and blossom, and their love for him gave him meaning, purpose and kept him alive.

So, if imitation is the best form of flattery, let us resolve to imitate him in the way he lived, and died. Al – we love you; we will miss you, but we also look forward to living your legacy, even as we celebrate your entrance into eternal life. Go with God, and may your rest now be eternally sweet.