

Homily for Funeral of Fr. Than Vu, V.G. (01-31-15, 11:00 am, St Aloysius Church, BRLA, +RWM)

We are a grieving people, a grieving family, a grieving community, a grieving diocese, a grieving Church. Who among us has not shed tears, real or virtual, over the death of our beloved friend? While acknowledging the human anguish of losing a loved one to death, we follow the instruction of St. Paul that we must “never grieve as those who have no hope” (I Thessalonians 4:13). Jesus’ reaction before the tomb of his friend, Lazarus, has always comforted me. St. John records: “And Jesus wept” and the people’s reaction: “See how he loved him” (John 11:35-36). Jesus validates, identifies and empathizes with our feelings today.

Perhaps Fr. Than left instructions for me to preach this homily so that it might be cathartic for me or because our ministry together brought us very close. Fr. Than’s death has left a vacuum in our lives. We already greatly miss him. To me he was more than a colleague and co-worker, he was trusted advisor and wise counselor, confidante, in many ways mentor (even though younger), friend and brother. He endured me (and that reason alone should have qualified for automatic and direct entrance into heaven), resourcefully sharing insights, support, affirmation and encouragement without ever being a sycophant. Indeed he was a heaven-sent companion along the journey.

Wherever assigned (but especially the pastorates of St. Patrick, Christ the King and St. Aloysius Parishes, and administrative roles at the Catholic Life Center), Father Than Vu, by person, presence and ministry, dramatically touched hearts and immeasurably changed lives. A priest of faith and prayer, he exhibited brilliant intelligence (fluent in six languages, with a phenomenal memory by which he proclaimed the Gospel by heart, including the Passion narratives), a great sense of humor (enlivening his homilies with attention-getting jokes), tremendous creativity (fascinating St. Aloysius students to debate whether he was or was not a Ninja), and outstanding organizational ability (deftly handling even the most complex matters). Like the “soul of charity” Bishop Ott, who ordained him a priest in 1984, he taught us how to live and he taught us how to die.

Born in Vietnam in 1958, just two weeks after this father died, Father Vu did not have an easy life. His mother had to work outside the home to support her four children. His two sisters, brother, grandmothers, aunts and uncles all helped to raise him. As a young teen he entered the seminary. A year later, with his family he courageously boarded a ship for the United States to flee the Communist invasion into South Vietnam. Because his family was one of ten sponsored by our diocese, he came here to live, where, though he knew little English and virtually nothing of American culture, Vocations Director Fr. Jerry Young blessedly got him into the seminary. How quickly he adapted. Years later when he contracted cancer, he remained characteristically serene and unflappable. God and he were inseparable.

The readings Fr. Than chose for this Mass reveal a great deal about him and his relationship with God. He saw God’s Providence in his being and in his life: no matter the circumstances or situations in which he found himself. “There’s a time for everything, but in God’s time, not necessarily ours” he so reasoned. “My ways are not your ways, says the Lord; so far superior are my ways than your ways” (Isaiah 55:8).

Fr. Than wrote: “One of my ‘mystical’ experiences happened on a retreat when I had the profound sense of peace that God was raising me up, carrying me on high, on his wings, during a time of uncertainty in my life. The experience confirmed God’s abiding presence with me.”

He always considered God as his father, claiming him his beloved son. Fr. Than expounded: "My entire spirituality and my vocation flowed out of this fundamental relationship with God. I have truly felt blessed by God and always saw my priestly vocation as one of proclaiming and reminding people that they're God's beloved children. This has been the focus of my priestly vocation, reminding people that they're God's beloved and out of this invite them to respond to the call of Micah: "to act justly, love tenderly and walk with God" (Micah 6:8). In his last days Father Than assured me he was at peace, not afraid and only in slight physical pain. The day of his death was providentially the Memorial of St. Thomas Aquinas, prodigious priest-theologian, with the daily prescribed Responsorial Psalm 110: "You are a priest forever, in the line of Melchizedek," and is being buried on the Memorial of St. John Bosco, priest "Apostle of Youth," with a selection in the Office of Readings about the mystery of death from Vatican II's Constitution on the Church. Parenthetically may I add today also marks the 101st birthday of my late saintly mother.

For those of us privileged to have been at his 25th anniversary Mass at Christ the King Church, Fr. Than regaled us with fascinating anecdotes that kept us spell-bound. Now I have to take credit for that great homily. You see he asked me to preach and I told him to do it. That was indisputably the best homily I never gave. Let us keep his revered memory alive. Let us never tire of sharing favorite memories, experiences, stories or insights from Father.

From 1994-2003 there was a television series entitled: "Touched by an Angel." This coming Friday in the assigned daily Scripture readings we have the somewhat intriguing verse: "Do not neglect hospitality, for some unknowingly have entertained angels" (Hebrews 13:2). Might the inverse be true? Could God send us people so angelic (like Fr. Than) to specially touch and inspire us?

Father Than's call to eternal life was neither a punishment to him nor to us. As Wisdom 4: 13-14 teaches: "Having become perfect in a short while, he reached the fullness of a long career; for his soul was pleasing to the Lord; therefore he sped him out of the midst of wickedness." It was God's reward to him for his fidelity, holiness, virtue, patience, and compassion, for having overcome suffering grace fully and living a life of eminent love and service. He epitomized one of my favorite Scripture quotes: "Whatever you do, do with your whole heart; do it for the Lord" (Colossians 3:23). Where Fr. Than has gone, we, in God's Providence, hope to follow.

Last night at the Vigil Service, the Gospel reading Fr. Than requested for use was the familiar intimate personal encounter between the risen Christ and Peter in which Jesus three times asked: "Do you love me?" In the last three meetings I had with Fr. Than, we exchanged those simple, but majestic, words: "I love you." Even for Jesus himself, those words were magic. Those were the last words in this world he and I shared with one another. They brought me then and will forever bring me immeasurable consolation and comfort.

As we express farewell to Fr. Than, the French proverb comes to mind: "Whenever you say 'goodbye' you die a little." Perhaps I could augment that by saying, "And sometimes when you say: 'goodbye,' you die a lot." But as we also know, the French say 'goodbye' with the tender expression: "Au revoir" - "until the next time we see one another." The English word "goodbye" sounds so harsh. Actually it is an Anglo-Saxon contraction of a longer expression, which we communicate to Father Than: "God be with you."

O God, we thank you for sending Fr. Than Vu to us - this angel of a man who sometimes seemed more spirit than body. He gave us a strong glimpse of your Son, Jesus, enlightened our minds, uplifted our hearts and reassured our feelings. The reason we miss him, Lord, is because he contributed so much to our lives and well-being. Thank you, God, for this remarkable priest, whose ministry to us we will never forget. O God, in your time and in your Providence, lead us also to

your kingdom. And grant our brother and friend, Fr. Than, eternal rest and happiness with you and all the angels and saints. And Fr. Than, we all say to you: "We love you." Thank you for your own love and for mediating God's love to us. Allow me to affectionately close: "Au revoir, mon ami."
Peace in the Risen Christ, everyone.