

Homily From Funeral Mass for Br. Robert “Bob” John Mandernach, osc

Homily given by Fr. Kermit Holl, osc, filial prior of the Conventual Priory of the Holy Cross

When I was assigned an “apostolic year” here at Crosier Seminary during my initial formation in the 1980s, one of the jobs I was given was to be the assistant prefect to Br. Bob in the Freshman dorm. Bob was very good with the young students; he was firm but low-key, and he found many of the concerns of the students’ lives to be quite entertaining from an older fellow’s perspective. He particularly liked to try to keep the freshman on their toes, and I can remember one evening when Bob said to a group of students from out of the blue, “Gee, all day today I kept thinking it was Tuesday.” Of course, one of the students immediately said, “But Br. Bob, it IS Tuesday.” “Yeah, I know,” Br. Bob said. “That’s why I kept thinking that.” And the students would glance at him sideways realizing that they had just been had...again.

So with Bob around, you always had to be on your toes, and you can probably imagine that it was certainly “interesting” to live with him. Rather easy, as well, but also always a little bit “interesting” in a unique sort of way.

Specifically what was interesting to me, a younger guy observing this seasoned veteran, was watching Br. Bob striving to live his religious life in a manner fit for his calling—even as this task always seemed to be something of an unconquerable stretch for him. Indeed, though he was one much admired by those who knew him—family, students, friends, parishioners, confreres—I think that he found it personally challenging to see just how valued, appreciated, and admired that he was.

And so it was “interesting” to watch as Bob tried to figure out year-to-year how he was supposed to love the Lord, how he was supposed to “pay the price” in his Christianity, how he was to join in Christ’s suffering so to gain the reward of salvation. He took this very seriously in a very determined way—and sometimes, even, couldn’t comprehend how others were not as perplexed about such things as he was.

And it seems to me that in this quest to *get it right*, quite often Bob worked at his fidelity the hard way because he was uncomfortable with comfort and nervous about too much joy. Instead, he would determine that he needed to bear down and be very serious about his Religious Life so that he would be found “worthy” of the promises of God; he had to submit himself to grueling challenge because that is only how one might hope to gain God’s grace. (Some might say that there was something of a Germanic bent in him!)

To this point, in the Gospel we just heard from Luke, we were presented with some of the most challenging invitations and commands of Jesus. “Love your enemies. Pray for those who maltreat you. When someone slaps you, turn the other cheek. Do not judge and do not condemn.”

My sense was that Bob took all of this very seriously—not that the rest of us don't, of course—but that Bob's core disposition was towards humbling himself and dispossessing himself and disciplining himself so as to be proved worthy of the Lord's abundant goodness. (For example, I'm sure that when Bob said before communion every day, "Lord, I am not worthy to receive you," he meant it a lot more than I do!)

And so Bob often seemed a "glass half full" kind of guy because if you had a "full glass," maybe you wouldn't be so thirsty anymore. He seemed also a "let's be careful about rejoicing too much" kind of guy because if you really "let yourself go," maybe you couldn't come back. Of course, he enjoyed life and enjoyed friendship, but there was always a clear overlay of seriousness at the root of this beloved Brother of ours. While he was truly an expert in the pun, the concept of joy being *also* a gift of God to be freely relished was always a bit distant from his soul being at peace. He knew that life was a test for him and *of* him, and I think that he often thought that he really hadn't done all too well on the exam.

And yet you and I gather to honor him and to pray for him and to thank God for him, for who he was to us, because in our eyes he was a very fine example of the *apostolic charge* St. Paul captured in Second Timothy. As one baptized in Christ and consecrated in Crosier life, Bob was *charged* to "preach the word and to stay with this task whether convenient or not—never losing patience but remaining steady and enduring." And we saw this in Bob; we experienced it. He was a bearer of Christ in the world, an evangelist by nature through his humility, his humor, and his friendship that drove his engagement with people all over—from the farms of Nebraska to the suburbs of Shoreview, from the mission fields of Congo to senior services in Onamia.

Certainly his parents and his family nurtured in him well the calling to think not of oneself but to attend to the other, to be grateful for the kindnesses others were willing to share, and to be determined in faith no matter the mystery or manner by which the outcome was not what you might have hoped for. He was rooted in the Gospel—day in and day out, convenient or not—and thus even over this long last decade of Bob's slowly debilitating illness, "he fought the good fight, he kept the faith, he finished the race." Longing for a *long time* to merit the crown that awaited him, Bob finally received the gift of eternal rest where there will be no more coughing, no more weakness, no more fear. Allowing himself to be "poured out" and choosing to test himself with the harder things, Bob now knows "fullness in God" as the Communion of Saints welcomes him in.

As a Crosier for 62 years, Br. Bob, of course, was inspired by the mystery of the Cross that he bore—even upon his habit—in our Order of the Holy Cross. The Cross stands before us as a sign and a promise that the work and offering of Christ is God's fullest gift come to us in hope and promise and love. Even to those, as we heard from The Book of Numbers, even to those who sinned and complained against the Lord, the Lord offered a remedy as those who looked upon the seraph *lifted up* before them would be saved. So the Cross that was first a place of execution now always stands before us as the sign of our redemption in Christ...because we are beloved. Yet this gift of God is not because we've earned it, not because we have proved ourselves disciplined enough to be granted its grace, not even because we've deliberately put

ourselves through hard paces to be found worthy, but *because* God so loved the world—and us—that Christ was given over that we might have life, and life to the full.

Bob is now finding this all out without any limits of self-doubt or regret or fear. Instead, thanks be to God through our Lord Jesus Christ, every last veil from his eyes and his heart are being lifted and he is seeing his eternal reward “good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over.” His life’s worth of compassion is returned to him. His life of service. His life of love.

And I can just about imagine him saying, in a way that he so often did, “Gee, if I had known it was going to be this easy, I wouldn’t have worked so hard!” And I’d say, “Yeah, Bob, I tried to tell you that, but you were just a bit too skeptical.”

My sisters and brothers, now the Lord who claimed Robert in baptism, the Lord who walked beside him up every hill and through every valley, the Lord who loved him for who he was in goodness and struggle—our Lord reaches out and welcomes him and says, “Come, my good and faithful servant. Now enjoy the banquet of love that I have prepared for you from the beginning.” Thanks be to God.

May Br. Robert John Mandernach rest forever in peace.