

Funeral homily for Abbot Timothy Kelly, OSB

The formation of a people and its sense of self –
how does that identity and purpose crystallize?
For the United States,
it is surely the Declaration of Independence.
For the people of Israel it is story of the flight from Egypt,
the crossing of the Red Sea and the gift of the ten commandments.
As Israel lives with these commandments and reflects on them,
especially in the work of the prophets,
what was external becomes internal.
As Psalm 119 puts it:
“Your word is a lamp for our eyes,
and a light for our path.” (Ps. 119:105)
Or think of the Deuteronomic writer celebrating the gift of the law:
“Has any nation ever been blessed with such a life-giving law?”

Readings:

Ezekiel 2.9-3.4
Romans 8.14-23
John 11.21-27

However, as Israel stumbles through its history,
chasing mindlessly after foreign gods,
convenient alliances, and savage internal disagreements,
the prophets first urge them to put the law on a pendant
in front of their eyes.
But Isaiah and Jeremiah know that this is still too far away –
God will write the law on their hearts.
Ezekiel is standing in this same line of thought.
The only way we have a chance of following the law
is through the power of the word of God to transform us from the inside out.
So the Lord commands Ezekiel to eat the scroll, like breakfast.
For Ezekiel, these words, so sweet at first,
become sour acid in his stomach
and a source of prophetic proclamation against Israel.
But this is not the only outcome.
In the tradition, the word is also a source of courage, conversion,
consolation, joy, resilience, peace, and hope.
This is precisely what made the scriptural word
the heart beat of Abbot Timothy’s spirituality as a monk and as abbot.

Born into a strong Irish Catholic family,
Thomas Kelly always considered both Milwaukee
and Minneapolis as places of origin.
After graduating from Saint Thomas Academy,
where he made life-long, life-giving friendships,
he came to Saint John’s University in 1952 as a pre-divinity student.
Here he began to discover his monastic vocation
and entered the novitiate in 1954, receiving the name of Timothy.
He made his first vows in 1955
and was ordained priest in 1961.

Abbot Timothy's early track record as a monk-priest could give the appearance of somebody who couldn't hold a job: three one-year assignments in a row – the university here, Mexico, Bahamas, and then to the South Bronx of New York for eight years. In fact, he was developing a broad base of pastoral experience that served him well the rest of his monastic life. This tall, lanky young monk with the full head of hair, had great energy and a compassionate spirit in a time of instability and rapid change in the Church.

I believe that the next eight years of Abbot Timothy's life and work are truly a watershed.

As chaplain for the sisters of Mount Saint Benedict in Crookston, Timothy began the daily practice of *lectio divina*. It was here that he had the time and spiritual space to develop a lectio-based spirituality. He read the scriptures in that slow, meditative manner that was part of the great retrieval for monastic life. As part of that practice Abbot Timothy wrote 300-400 words every day – free flowing prose, no brakes, probing, associating, asking of himself the hard, unanswerable questions that pull one deeper into the mystery of Christ, the incarnation, and the Pascal Mystery. Timothy was truly centered in Christ, who was the reference point of everything he did.

While he was at the Mount he also became part of the Catholic charismatic renewal, an experience that profoundly shaped his understanding of how the Holy Spirit works in people and their vocation. It fleshed out his sense and practice of contemplative discernment that is part of the being that he brought to every situation. He then spent two years at Sant' Anselmo in Rome studying a renewed monastic theology and history. Here he benefitted from exploring in depth the monastic sources for the Rule of Benedict, and meeting monastic faculty and students from all over the world.

It is not surprising that Timothy was an extremely gifted spiritual director, who worked with hundreds of individuals over the years. He was a skilled listener aware of the movement of the Spirit, able to help individuals to find their own path, while avoiding the traps of the ego.

Abbot Timothy's own experience of monastic life and practice convinced him that these are the basis for building understanding, for creating unity between Christian churches. There is such a thing as a monastic archetype. Each person has a monk inside – a part of the human being that is searching, that flourishes in solitude, that pushes toward simplicity, that wants things to be what they are – no glitz, glamour, or hype, that wants religion and life in the original stone jars. At this level there are real points of union and communion, points where dialogue and learning are possible.

It was this conviction and energy that motivated Abbot Timothy's leadership for our mission in Japan, the work with the Church in China, the Monastic Interreligious Dialogue, and the ecumenical and monastic work with the Methodist church. He truly tried to follow the insight of Boniface Wimmer, not only caring for monastic life here at Saint John's but across the congregation and across congregations.

He loved the quiet of the early morning, 3:30 or 4:00 AM for rising, doing lectio, and walking the campus, even in the chill of a MN winter. He loved good food of any kind, perhaps especially Italian pasta, gelato, and Maker's Mark. I don't know where he learned to drive but I fantasize that it must have been Chicago. He had a colorful running commentary on the driving skills of those who were either more or less assertive on the road. He loved to move – he had a “fuzz buster” because he never wanted to have an unexpected encounter with a state trooper. He was not a very good passenger.

Denise Ann and Edith you will miss your beloved brother and brother-in-law; Tom, Pat, John, Michael, Timothy, Daniel, Mark, Sean, Ann, Kathy, Sue, Denise, Dana, Pat, Kathy, Carolyn, and a host of grand nieces and nephews -- you will miss your uncle. Many of us here and elsewhere will miss a dear friend – as a community we miss Abbot Timothy in his place anchoring that back aisle seat in the choir stalls . I thank our staff in Raphael Hall, and all of you who shared love and friendship with Timothy –

it made all the difference in the world.

Our God is a God of life
and we are children of God in Jesus Christ.
Timothy was convinced in faith of this God of life
and this surely gave him the strength to accept
all the hardship, frustration and suffering associated with his cancer.
It was difficult for all of us to see the cancer gradually and then rapidly
take over and hijack his strength and energy.
In the midst of all of this, there was peace and confidence
in God's saving care.
He never fought death,
just gracefully let nature and God's will take their course.
In this Eucharist we pray that Abbot Timothy
is being embraced by God in a new life,
a life that eye has not seen and ear has not heard,
that is truly beyond all of our wildest imagining.
We pray for that life for ourselves.

Abbot John Klassen, OSB
October 13, 2010