

Br. Richard's Funeral Homily

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BROTHER RICHARD GOLDING, CSsR, 1924- 2009

Dear family and friends:

People say there is a page in the Gospel for each of us. One, in particular, is a source of great hope and consolation. It tells the story of an old man, Simeon, who lives on a promise. He is unusual because his hopes are ahead of him, not behind him. He is not fascinated by the past - he's too interested in what's going on now. This venerable pensioner is alive with conviction, waiting for the one who will be his consolation and the consolation of all peoples. In spite of the arithmetic of his years, he inclines forwards not backwards; he hungers for new signs of God's presence, and waits for the day when he can experience God's presence in the flesh.

His stubborn waiting is rewarded. One day Mary and Joseph bring their child to the Temple. Luke's Gospel paints a wonderful picture: the old man takes the newly born child from the young mother and holds him in his arms. In the person of Simeon old age welcomes into its arms the eternal youth of God. Simeon prays the prayer of happy old age, the *Nunc Dimittis*. You hear poetry through the wrinkles:

Now, Master, you can let your servant depart in peace

according to your word;

for my eyes have seen the salvation

which you have prepared before the face of all peoples,

a light to enlighten the Gentiles

and the glory of your people, Israel.

It was clear to Simeon that no woman or man or child would ever have to face life alone. In all the moments of life, the times when we are hurt and haunted, the times when we feel lucky and graced, Christ would be there. More than this: Christ would be there at the moment of death. And that was why Simeon was not afraid to die. He could depart in peace because he knew that the child he held for a few moments in his arms would one day hold him in an everlasting embrace.

Dear friends, Hawkstone was graced to have its own Simeon in the community, our own ancient prophet, Brother Richard, who held God close to his heart, and the Redemptorists shall always be grateful to him for his unflinching courtesy to the people who journeyed from faraway places to this remote Temple in Shropshire.

I first met Bro Richard when I was 18, freshly arrived at our novitiate house in Kinnoull, Perth. The double-barrelled novice master, Fr Edward Lumley-Holmes, decided that given my Irish name, for manual labour I should obviously be assigned to the farm rather than the house, under the superintendence of Brother Richard. It was a strange but wonderful appointment. All the advice in the novitiate I have long forgotten except Richard's when he said to me one day: "Don't believe; do not believe even half of what you hear!"

Richard was my first Redemptorist teacher - independent, wildly attractive, utterly unpredictable. A bit like another prophet, John the Baptist in the wilderness, with an instinctive suspicion of authority, so that when our chief priests would check what he was doing he would dismiss them in a line as a brood of vipers. Like John the Baptist, Richard had no automatic respect for authority: he was his own man, with a deep sense of self and mission. I can't imagine Richard, or indeed John the Baptist, needing to attend a course on "Developing Your Self-Esteem."

Assigned to Richard, of course I was useless on the farm, testing the reaches of his patience and language, and years later when I read Seamus Heaney's poem, *Follower*, I thought of dear Richard:

I stumbled in his hobnailed wake, Fell sometimes on the polished sod;

I wanted to grow up and plough.

All I ever did was follow

In his broad shadow around the farm.

I was a nuisance, tripping, falling, Yapping always. But today It is he who keeps stumbling Behind me, and he will not go away.

Richard and I lived in the same community for 33 years, and I have never met a pope, or a cardinal, or a bishop, or a priest, that could measure up to this authentic human being. He was an awesome man.

Born in Shruall House, Co. Mayo, in 1924, a more unlikely beginning to Richard's career could hardly be imagined - soon after school, he joined the RAF as a military policeman. Those of you who know him well will find it difficult to imagine Richard arresting people for being insubordinate or unruly, since he had a natural charm for both. His brief career as an authority figure forever behind him, he began the Redemptorist novitiate in 1952 and was appointed to South Africa a few years later, where he joined the community in Modimong to run the farm. It was the beginning of his long love affair with animals, creatures he much preferred to humans. Richard rewrote the book of Genesis and placed cattle and dogs as the summit of God's creation.

He returned to the province after six years and had a brief disastrous spell in Brazil, when he transported three tractors to Bishop Murphy, which were promptly confiscated by the customs on arrival, leaving him empty-handed and desolate. He returned, raging at corruption and greed, disillusioned but not surprised at the low calibre of human beings. Apart from brief excursions to Perth and Erdington Abbey, Richard's true home was here in Hawkstone, running the farm, for some years ably, assisted by his nephews, Paschal, David, Paul, Kevin, Bernard - there was a legion of them. It was a family business. Richard loved Hawkstone with a full heart: this was his soul home. When I came back in 1987, Richard had 72 head of cattle, 23 cats, 18 pigs, and 7 dogs. Richard happily presided over his own zoo.

In time, of course, the farm had to go, the cattle and pigs had to be sold off, the cats put down, except for Blackie, and six of the dogs found a home. Richard's world had diminished. Some years after young Dr Mehta bought the old stable block, which was Richard's cow house, Richard and I went up for the house warming. Richard stepped in to this shining expansive sitting room, now exquisitely decorated, and looking around the reaches of the room he announced to no one in particular: "Just to think how many cows I calved in here!"

So much of what he treasured was now memory. And I thought of Larkin's poem:

Perhaps being old is having lighted rooms Inside your head: everything looms Like a deep loss restored.

..... That is where they live:

Not here and now, but where all happened once.

Not here and now, but where all happened once. Yet Richard was not constrained by nostalgia: he moved on, and during the courses here in Hawkstone, he was generous in welcoming people from all over the world. Richard developed a new life - counsellor, guru, patriarchal figure to rival Abraham. Three times a day, at table, he would hold court and dispense his wisdom, loudly, so that on each course he would assemble his own groupies who are now, after all these years, as numberless as the stars.

He had a wonderful visual use of language - I remember when a sister bought him a pair of trousers, he held the hugely oversized pair up for all to behold. I said, "They're a bit big." Richard replied, "Big? Sure, you could take a lodger in these." When you listened to his summary of the morning news at breakfast, everything seemed hugely

exaggerated; if there was a plane crash where 126 people died, Richard would render it that hundreds upon hundreds had perished. In his imaginative sympathy he knew that the loss was not limited to the arithmetic of people inside the plane: the loss would go on and on and on. Instinctively he knew that.

Richard's large and distinguished family visited regularly, and he would sit in the coffee room, listening and attending. And then at supper he would share the insights always of the little ones, like little Luke or Bobbie, and say with pride: "Aren't they the clever little divils!" Needless to say for Richard, devil was a compliment.

Richard's real companion in old age was Meg, his favourite dog. As Richard got slower and slower, Meg got larger and larger. You would see them out walking every day, Meg adjusting her pace to the faltering stride of her master. Richard would often sit in the summer house, brushing her coat, while she would look up adoringly into his eyes. This wordless relationship was Richard's favourite. When Meg died out of season I thought that Richard would find a new companion, but it wasn't to be: Meg could never be* replaced, he explained; to replace her would be - "unfaithful" was his word. So for the last couple of years of his life, Richard walked haltingly around the grounds alone, with the memory of Meg, in step, beside him.

For the final chapter of his life he was attended by Sister Laurice, who cared for Richard with enormous love and devotion. They were the odd couple at Hawkstone, cajoling one another, accusing one another across tables, laughing. They had antennae fixed on each another, ever alert to the other's presence or absence. As Redemptorists we owe a huge debt of gratitude to Laurice for her abiding care.

Richard's favourite place was the chapel, his Temple, where he was at home with God. He would bend God's ear for hours every day, reminding God in no uncertain terms, who to care for especially and who to smite. Or he would simply snooze, at ease with the God he had served so generously through his long life. He waited for God; he was ready. "Now, Lord, you can let your servant depart in peace."

Richard died on a sunny afternoon in May, out of doors, walking up the lane, in view of his beloved cow-house. He was himself until the end and he died inside his own landscape.

Dear friends, those of us who knew Richard will have our private memories of him.

For me, he leaves behind him the memory of a man of abiding faith,

the memory of graciousness to others,

a dear good-humoured friend who loved life until life was no more.

He has now gone to the place about which Saint Alphonsus wrote:

When we reach heaven, our state is changed. There will be no more toil, but rest; No more fear, but security; No more sadness or weariness; But gladness and joy eternal.

May dear Richard, and all his beloved family who went before him, rest in peace.

Denis McBride, CSsR



