

FUNERAL HOMILY FOR JOE MEEHAN

North Battleford, July 18<sup>th</sup>, 2006

\*\*\*\*\*

First of all, greetings and sympathy to Rhena and the family, some of whom I have just met for the first time.

We are gathered around you today to share what you are going through and the feelings that you are experiencing – certainly feelings of sadness, grief and sorrow, yet mixed with joy because of Joe’s life well lived. This is our Christian legacy – we can dare to celebrate a sad event like this with a certain degree of joy.

At a time like this, we always turn to the Word of God for comfort and strength. Have you heard the expression: “You may be the only version of the gospel that some people get to hear?”

The message that I would like to share with us all today is to invite us to make our lives a unique living out of the gospel.

In fact, rather than share a homily today, I want to proclaim a gospel. Allow me to explain. Well known theologian and author, Ron Rolheiser OMI, went with a group of seminarians to the funeral of a Belgium theologian who had lived an exemplary life. On the way back the seminarians were rather critical of the homilist, complaining that he had not referred to the scriptures enough and had talked about the person too much. Ron spoke up and offered another view – that when a person has lived a rather troubled life, one uses the scriptures, but when one has lived the gospels, then one can speak of the person, and that is speaking of the gospel, the lived gospel. And so today, I choose to speak about the person, and proclaim the gospel according to Joe.

Joe’s life has refreshed for me the three cardinal virtues: Faith, Hope and Love.

His life was certainly one of strong faith. A year and a half ago, I had supper with Joe and Rhena after Christmas. It was obvious that his illness was progressing, and I was wondering how to introduce the topic diplomatically when Joe suddenly asked in a matter-of-fact way, “Sylvain, Can you preside at my funeral? It is all planned. You won’t have to preach, just preside, as a deacon from the States will be preaching. There will be a Eucharist in the morning, then cremation and an ecumenical service in the evening.”

I almost dropped my utensils in shock. Then we had a beautiful conversation about life and death, illness, attitude and faith. They were sad that he would die young, yet both were full of peace and acceptance. Joe was resolved to live the time he had left to the full, which is what he did. When I left later that night, I was so moved their faith that I asked them to bless me. And today, that faith is reflected in the words from the Acts of the Apostles: “*With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus.*” I would just substitute his name: “*With great power Joe gave his testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus.*”

The fact that I am here today is also, I believe, a sign of Joe's close relationship of faith with God. After being named bishop, and as Joe's health deteriorated, I wondered if I would be able to keep my promise to preside at his funeral. A few weeks ago, I visited him at the Battleford District Care Center and mentioned that concern to him. He replied that he almost checked out the previous week, and that it wasn't his call. All we could both do is pray that it would work out.

When I got the message that he had died, and that the funeral would be Tuesday or Wednesday, I checked my schedule and lo and behold, I would be a few hours away from North Battleford on Monday, and Tuesday was free. It would work out, and I am convinced that somehow Joe and God arranged it!

In so many ways his strong faith in God was evident: his caring for Catholic education as a teacher at JP II High School, and his long-suffering patience are just two examples. Rhena tells me that even as he lay in bed in pain, he would murmur to himself, "God is good. God is good."

The Psalm today, psalm 23, was chosen because as a couple Joe and Rhena saw the Lord as a shepherd who led them through a valley rich and fertile.

This short poem by Thomas Wolfe captures Joe's faith:

"To lose the earth you know, for greater knowing;  
To lose the life you have, for greater living;  
To leave the friends you loved, for greater loving;  
To find a land more kind than home, more large than earth."

In many ways, that was Joe's faith – larger than life.

He was also a man of hope. His hope was not in a quick miracle that would remove his suffering, but a deep, bedrock hope in the promise of eternal life. His hope connects with the words of today's gospel: "*Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God.*" I mentioned to Rhena as we viewed Joe's body just before the celebration that there was now no suffering for Joe, after all that he had suffered, after all that he had suffered in life. She responded, "Ah, but he lived it well." Truly, by the way he chose to handle his death Joe gave glory to God.

Above all, Joe's life was one of love. This third cardinal virtue leads us into the Great Commandment that Jesus gave his disciples: "Love God with your whole mind, heart and strength, and love your neighbour as yourself. Joe was one who lived that commandment well.

His love for God was evident in his faith, his life of prayer, and his openness to other faith traditions. He was a big-time ecumenist, and loved his Judeo-Christian roots. Friends of his who travelled in Tibet built a small cairn with Joe's name on it, and came back with a picture of a Buddhist monk who offered to pray for Joe.

Joe had a great love for others. The family gathering in Georgia was a gathering in love. He loved his relatives and friends. He had a deep love for the First Nations people and appreciation of their spirituality.

The three years spent as part of a basic Christian community in the States was an attempt to experience the ideal of Christian living expressed in the reading from Acts 4: “*All things held in common, unity, love, and no one was in need.*” Joe also helped us out as a ministry team in the Battlefords. As a Christopher from way back, he gave up a weekend to take an instructor’s seminar in Edmonton and help us get the course started, one night a week for ten weeks, as a generous response to our need.

The third part of that Great Commandment is to love ourselves. That speaks of self – esteem and self worth, and that is where many of us are rather weak. Not Joe – he had a great self esteem and self confidence. Some may use the word eccentric, but in the way Joe lived, biked to work and carried himself, he was Joe. There is a great line that I learned from Sr. Teresita Kambeitz: “God’s unconditional love accepts us as we are, and believe in who we can become.” That line fits Joe well.

Because of who Joe was, I want to add a fourth level to the Great Commandment – love of creation. Joe wrote a series of booklets on the flowers, animals and birds of the Saskatchewan River valley. He taught me how to do French Intensive gardening and following his instructions I started a plot garden in The Pas. I called Rhena before Joe died and asked her to tell Joe that I am calling it the Joe Meehan memorial garden. I think he enjoyed that. Rhena tells me that he wanted to leave his footprint on earth and he has, a big one, 30 feet long and 4 feet wide, in The Pas.

In summary Joe lived the readings, and gospel proclaimed today. For Jesus with Peter, love was the basis for the Church, and ministry the expression of that love. For Pope Benedict, love is also the bedrock for the Church, as expressed in his first encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*.

And so it was for Joe and Rhena. Rhena has a 30 year connection with the gospel, from a time that she was praying for Joe and this gospel touched her and stayed with her. Love was the basis of his life, and all his activity expressed that. In the words of the first reading, *great grace was upon him*.

The love he had for us stays with us; the love we had for him goes with him. Our task now is to live the spirituality of letting go, like Mary Magdalene in the garden, to give him back to the Father, so that we can receive his spirit to be with us in an even better way.

This Eucharist is our last meal with him, but also the first of the eternal banquet when we are all together with him once again – our promise of eternal life. Jesus once again nourishes us with his Words, and then hugs us with the reception of his Body and Blood, and challenges us, missions us, sends us out to make our own lives a unique living out of the gospel, as did Joe.

Let us continue to celebrate his entrance into eternal life with the faith, hope, love, and even the joy that was so much a part of his life, that it may now also be a part of his passing. May God bless us all.