

Abbot James Wiseman's Homily
at the Funeral Mass for Abbot Aidan Shea (Dec. 15, 2018)

Before I begin my homily, I would like to make a couple announcements and a few acknowledgements. Because of the heavy rain, we will not be able to have the burial after this Mass but will have it done privately early next week. This Mass will therefore be followed directly by a reception in the school commons. We have enough food available that some of you may wish to make it your lunch.

Among the persons whom I wish to thank, I will start with one of our concelebrants, Bishop Michael Fisher, who is one of the three auxiliary bishops of our archdiocese. The abbey and archdiocese have always enjoyed a very cordial relationship. I well remember a photograph of an earlier archbishop, Cardinal James Hickey, wielding a shovel at the ceremonial groundbreaking for one of our buildings several decades ago, and more recently Cardinal Donald Wuerl was the main celebrant at a Mass in our school theatre on the occasion of my election as abbot in 2011. We cherish this relationship and are very pleased to have Bishop Fisher with us this morning.

The various musicians, whose names are in the program, practiced hard for this service. We are grateful for the way in which they will enhance this morning's liturgy. I also want to thank the abbey sacristans and others who helped prepare for this service as well as for yesterday afternoon's service of receiving Abbot Aidan's body in the abbey church.

Turning this gymnasium into a space suitable for a celebration of the Eucharist was a challenging task, mastered by our director of facilities, José Morales, and his assistants Dennis Sisson and William Cupido. José also saw to having the cemetery prepared for the burial service, and because of the forecast of

heavy rain he had the foresight to devise a way of draining water away from the grave on the sloping ground of the cemetery. It is a blessing to have so responsible a person as José on our staff.

Like almost any gymnasium, ours has poor acoustics, so I am very grateful to Peter Collins for all the time-consuming work he did to get the sound system as good as possible in this cavernous space. He was at work here both last night and early this morning.

Over the past seven or eight years, we have been able to give Abbot Aidan around-the-clock care, thanks to the service rendered by our very dedicated and reliable care givers. Some would arrive at 1:00 a.m. and work until mid-morning, when a replacement would take over until late afternoon, while still a third person would be with Abbot Aidan during supper time, see that he was comfortably in bed, and then watch over him until 1:00 a.m. the next morning. Their names are in the program, but I would like to read them out as well: Deitra Artis, Angele Bassong, Gwendolyn Carter, Rowena Corbett, Michael Fomundam, Lawann Hicks, Doris Merino, Harriet Namaganda, and Izha Ngo. I know that some of them are with us this morning, so would they please stand so we can express our deep gratitude for their loving care of Abbot Aidan. (lengthy applause)

To begin my homily itself, I expect most of you have picked up a memorial card at the entrance to the gym. You will have seen that on one side there is a nice photo of Abbot Aidan, and on the other a quotation from a 19th-century English poet named Leigh Hunt. The quotation reads: "I pray thee, then,/Write me as one that loves his fellow men." This was selected by Abbot Aidan for his high-school yearbook entry when he was just eighteen years old and known by his baptismal name, Paul Allen Shea. Our alumnus Jim Crowne, who regularly visited Abbot Aidan during his final illness, did a superb job of detective work in tracking this

down, for the yearbook was definitely not in Abbot Aidan's room here at the abbey. How Jim did it I do not know—maybe he has training as a private detective, or maybe he once worked for the FBI or CIA. Anyway, he not only alerted me to that yearbook entry but also provided the entire poem from which those lines are taken. As the poem is not very long, it will be worth hearing. Its title is “Abou Ben Adhem,” the name of an eighth-century Muslim holy man, a Sufi. Drawing on a legend about him, the English poet wrote as follows:

Abou Ben Adhem (may his tribe increase!)
Awoke one night from a deep dream of peace,
And saw, within the moonlight in his room,
Making it rich, and like a lily in bloom,
An angel writing in a book of gold:—
Exceeding peace had made Ben Adhem bold,
And to the presence in the room he said,
“What writest thou?”—The vision raised its head,
And with a look made of all sweet accord,
Answered, “The names of those who love the Lord.”
“And is mine one?” said Abou. “Nay, not so,”
Replied the angel. Abou spoke more low,
But cheerly still; and said, “I pray thee, then,
Write me as one that loves his fellow men.”

The angel wrote, and vanished. The next night
It came again with a great wakening light,
And showed the names whom love of God had blest,
And lo! Ben Adhem's name led all the rest.

A still greater poet, William Wordsworth, in one of his poems penned the well-known line: “the child is father of the man.” Readers and scholars may debate about just what that paradoxical statement means, but I think most would agree that the poet is recognizing that the traits, qualities, and behaviors that mark our lives when young tend to continue and become even

more evident as we grow older. In the case of Abbot Aidan, we can reasonably conclude that already when he was in high school, and perhaps even earlier when in grade school or before ever attending any school, he recognized the central importance and goodness of loving others. In other words, early in life he already sensed what we heard in 2nd reading from 1 John: “We know that we have passed from death to life because we love our brothers.”

But Aidan also knew that this love must always be deepened and extended, and for him, this meant embracing monastic life. Looking back on his earlier life, he once said in an interview, “Before entering the army, I had no thought of becoming a monk, but now it seemed important to try monastic life and to learn as much about the gospel as I could.” Once at St. Anselm’s, which he entered in 1957, he continued deepening his understanding and practice of those lines we heard from the First Letter of St. John, as well as a later verse from the same letter: “Whoever does not love a brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. This is the commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.”

Some of that deepening came from his life within the abbey itself, some from outside. In 1994, he was the special honoree at our annual school gala, and in his talk that evening, probably held right here in our gym, although in those early years some of our galas were held off of our campus, he referred to several novitiates he had experienced. Now in the narrow, technical sense, novitiate is that one year of special training once one begins wearing the Benedictine habit, but the term can also refer to the lifetime of learning that all of us should be open to, even as one of our basic Benedictine mottoes reads: “Always we begin again,” which could be paraphrased as “Always we keep learning afresh.”

In that gala talk, Aidan said: “I have had the best of two life-long novitiates, the one at the abbey and abbey school, the other at St. Gertrude’s School, the Kennedy School, and Bethlehem House.” St. Gertrude’s School, no longer in existence, was on property adjacent to the monastery and was founded by the man who was the de facto founder of our own community, Thomas Verner Moore. The Kennedy School, nearby over on Buchanan Street, was founded by the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, and Bethlehem House, some of whose residents are with us this morning, was begun by Aidan’s longtime friend Dolores Wilson. For all of these, Aidan served as a chaplain and, at times, as a member of a board of directors.

That gala talk was given nearly a quarter century ago. If he had given a similar talk a couple decades later, he would certainly have enlarged the list of these “life-long novitiates” from which he learned so much even as others learned from him. He would certainly have mentioned our abbey’s oblate community, whose director he was for many years, as well as the members of the Pax Intentional Eucharistic Community over in northern Virginia, for whom he regularly celebrated the Eucharist and occasionally served as the one they called their “confirming bishop” as he conferred the sacrament of Confirmation on their younger members. In addition, he would have mentioned the many monasteries at which he gave retreats. He himself was in monastic vows for nearly sixty years, and another monk, whom I know from another monastery and who has already been in vows for more than sixty years, once told me that of the numerous annual retreats he had attended, the very best retreat master had been Abbot Aidan. Another important facet of his ongoing novitiate training came through the many persons who came to him for spiritual direction, some of them for decades.

How much he gave to others became especially clear to me as I read the many messages that have been sent to us, mostly by email, since the time of his

death. Many of them are from alumni of our school. Even though the Church's *Rite for Funerals* emphasizes that a homily is not to be a eulogy—the eulogies will be given by his care giver Rowena Corbett and his longtime friend Rob Truland after our Post-Communion Prayer—the excerpts I will read may indeed be laudatory, but I offer them not as “eulogies” but as examples that we could make our own.

To continue with that yearbook theme of loving our fellow men, one sign of genuine love is to encourage others to use their talents to the best of their ability, and this was often mentioned by our alumni. One man wrote: “I would be nowhere without Fr Aidan's faith in me. I wish I could have told him more how much he meant to me.” A second one said: “He was a great man and personally did a lot to instill confidence in my abilities. I am grateful to him and the entire monastic faculty.” A third, himself a well-recognized scholar in his particular field, acknowledged that “if there is any creativity to my work, I think it owes more than a little to the encouragement and support I received from Fr. Aidan.”

A second sign of genuine love is to show others how life can be made more beautiful for others. One of the best-crafted messages came from an alumnus who showed that he was perceptive not only of the physical traits of a person but also of that person's more intangible qualities. He wrote: “When I had only seen and not spoken with Abbot Aidan in middle school, his big eyebrows and quiet demeanor had frightened me. That changed in my first week of class with him; despite our youth then, it seemed like we [young boys] were meeting an old friend. He immediately sized us up, with long handshakes, peering into us, knowing there was so much good in us and trying to figure out what particular shape that goodness took in each of us. He was always listening with sincere love. Within only one year of being his students, it became clear to us all that this was a great man—great in wisdom, great in humility, great in generosity,

and great in kindness. Sometimes I wish I could have taken his course year after year, gradually building up notes not on French conjugation but on what and how Abbot Aidan had learned from life that allowed him to make it more beautiful for those around him. Life moves on and nearly two decades on from that French class, I am still so, so grateful for how Abbot Aidan showed me in a year what a human could be. May his soul rest in peace.”

A third and final sign of love of others is to show them that hardships can be accepted with grace and even humor. Abbot Aidan sometimes joked that he would never want Mr. Parkinson as his friend. More seriously, he said clearly in recent weeks that he was ready to “go home,” paraphrasing St. Paul’s saying our true citizenship is in heaven.

You will recall that phrase in our first reading today: “The Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces.” There may indeed be tears today, but even deeper is the peace and joy of knowing that Aidan ran the race and completed it with flying colors after a very long life. One alumnus wrote: “All who’ve known him will be sad about his departure, but all who’ve understood him should be glad about his destination.” Another said: “I remember when I was in First Form and attended the funeral of an elderly monk who had died at that time, Fr. Edmund Henkels explained to me that the passing of a Benedictine was a time for celebration, not melancholy, as the monk was entering into a better existence.”

If we accept this core tenet of Christian faith, we will indeed be able to rejoice that Abbot Aidan Shea has fulfilled the goal that he was seeking all his life, and that the book of gold of which the angelic messenger spoke to Abou Ben Adhem will have Aidan’s named inscribed in it as well.