

## **Funeral homily for Br. Gabriel Kersting, SCJ Given by Fr. John Czyzynski, SCJ, April 11, 2017**



Those of us here who are SCJs know that we can leave instructions about which readings we would like to see used at our funeral Mass. I have always felt that that was a way of passing on a kind of final message to those gathered for our funeral. Br. Gabe did not choose any readings, and that I saw as a message in itself that was consistent with the way he lived his religious life. For the almost 70 years of his being an SCJ, Gabe placed himself at God's disposition through his obedience to his superiors in loving service of his brothers in community and in generous service of God's people. His way of life echoed Mary's words: "Let it be done to me according to your word." He left it in our hands to choose what Scriptures we would want to use to celebrate his life. I chose the readings which I believed carried the message of Gabe's life with us.

Our gospel reading has Jesus thanking God for hiding the mysteries of the Kingdom from the learned and the wise and revealing them to the childlike. Gabe was 95 years old when he died, but he always had the heart of a child. He enjoyed the simple pleasures of being with his brothers in community. Some of us are more vocal members in the group. Gabe was one of the quieter ones, but he was always there and enjoyed being with us. I cannot remember ever hearing Gabe laugh out loud, but his face and eyes would light up as he chuckled to himself about some of the crazy things that happen among us. I at times played golf with Gabe. It was delightful to see the way he reacted when he got off a good shot. He would look up to heaven, smile and say: "Thank you, Lord!" I am not sure what he said when he got off a bad one. Maybe the same thing.

The section from the first letter of Peter which I selected contains words of encouragement to the early Christians who were being confronted with sufferings and persecution. He says that they must always be ready to give the reason for their hope. I used to think that that meant that they should always be ready to give a logical explanation for why they were hopeful even in the midst of the trials they were experiencing in their lives. Then one time I looked up that text in my Greek New Testament and I saw that the word in Greek that is translated as "reason" is LOGOS. That is the word which is used in John's gospel to name Jesus. It hit me that when Peter is exhorting the early Christians to be able to give a reason for their hope, the reason is not a logical argument. It is Jesus. Early Christians could be hopeful in any circumstances of their lives because their lives were anchored in Christ. That is why I wanted us to hear those words proclaimed as we gather to celebrate Br. Gabe's life. Gabe was a happy, holy, hope-filled man because his life was rooted in Jesus.

In Gabe's obituary, which Mary Gorski published for us, we have read about how he felt called to serve in South Africa and how he believed that his greatest achievement was to paint a church in De Aar. For Gabe that was so much more than an arduous task to be accomplished. He poured all his energy and heart into that because as a simple man anchored in Jesus, he felt that he was painting God's house and he wanted to make that as beautiful as his ability would allow him to achieve.

Jesus was his anchor and the reason for his hope and spirit of joy even when he began to experience difficulties with memory in his later years. When I was the novice director, I used to take our novices to visit all our places of ministry so they could get to meet the men whom they were discerning to join by making their vows. Being with men like Gabe was always one of the highlights of our visits. As I said, in his later years Gabe's memory began to slip. I used to schedule individual sessions with each of the men at our place in Pinellas Park. One time when we were there, he walked up to me after lunch and asked when we were going to meet. I said: "Gabe, we already met this morning." Gabe gave me that big smile of his and said: "Did we have fun?" To me that was such a clear instance of his having a beautiful spirit in a difficult situation. As our memories fade and we get caught in those lapses, it is so easy to get angry, because it is painful to accept the limitation we are experiencing. Gabe was hanging onto his rock, Jesus, and could humbly, gracefully and with humor accept that limitation he was experiencing in his life. A great lesson for all of us.

We know that Gabe did a variety of things in his life. He was never assigned to be a formation director or a vocation director (as far as I know), but he shared wise advice when our novices met with him at Pinellas Park and they remember it. James Nguyen recalled Gabe saying: "how can you look into a child's eyes and not see God." We saw Juancho's reflection that highlighted Gabe's words: "I have nothing, but I have everything." Gabe wanted them to know that if this was their vocation and they were anchored in Jesus, as he was, they would have fulfillment in their lives. Nothing they really needed would ever be lacking to them. Jesus was the center of Gabe's life and everything that he did and said flowed from that rock-solid foundation and center of his life.

The reading from the book of Wisdom proclaimed what Gabe and all of us believe about death. We trust that what was proclaimed there holds true for Gabe. We believe that he is greatly blessed, that God has tried him and found him worthy of God's Self. Like gold, that is proved in a furnace, Gabe is found worthy of God's embrace and God's grace, mercy and care are with him.

Jesus says to Gabe: "Come to me, you who have labored and been burdened. I will give you rest."

We thank God for lending us Br. Gabe for the while that he was with us. We are blessed for having known him and having been touched by his life.

Photos from Br. Gabriel's Mass of Christian Burial are at:

<https://scjusa.smugmug.com/Saying-farewell-to-Br-Gabriel-Kersting>