

HOMILY 7-9-26 Funeral for Fr. Byron Haaland, SCJ

Is 25.6-9; PS 63; 2 Cor 4.7-12,16-18; John 20.24-29

“Uff-da!”—Byron’s favorite Norwegian comment, meaning something like “Good grief.” I would be wearing his Viking helmet, his favorite headgear, to say this, but it got lost in the shuffle. What’s a celebration of Byron without something outrageous. He was very proud of his Norwegian heritage and time in Trondheim as chaplain of contemplative nuns. He and I used to watch the dark, violent TV series Vikings, which he called “home movies.” He could be very irreverent and earthy to break the ice anywhere.

What can one say about Byron. He was so funny--“crippled with silliness” as my sisters called him--but so talented, spiritual and deep. He learned from his contractor father and could renovate a log cabin, build a chicken coop, or design and build a chapel. He was also deeply artistic, whether firing raku pots, turning a beat-up cabinet into a showpiece, or creating huge batik chapel banners. He loved animals: his exotic chickens, his fun little goats or Yarli, his Kentucky cur dog.

However, his greatest gift was creating relationships with his embracing, comfortable love for all. He included everyone and made them feel at home, with him and with Jesus. He could “jolly” anyone into liking him. Having sprung from severe religious ancestry—he said like in the movie *Babette’s Feast*--he loved to do what she did and what God offers: invite everyone to a feast of rich food, good wine and laughter. As he would say, as for me and my people we will serve margaritas.

He said he was a rebellious teen so he left his church to be Catholic, and like Thomas he came to believe in Jesus, not just his death and resurrection, but his open Heart and deep love for Byron and for all. He joined us Priests of the Sacred Heart, and served well for so many years as a prophet of love. He believed in Jesus who swallowed up death forever and destroyed the shroud over us all. He drew religious women to his retreats, preaching, and direction, and he considered you all sisters in a true sense, especially the Sisters of St Francis. He also loved formation of young religious and seminarians, ever young at heart himself.

Like his pottery, he knew his treasures were in a clay jar as he became more and more afflicted with health problems. He made an amazing recovery from his first heart and stroke crisis—thanks to Mary McCana—but eventually began falling to two cancers. He was afflicted in every way but not crushed. He was carrying in his body the death of Jesus. He did not lose heart as his nature was wasting away. He did not become bitter or full of complaints, but gave it all up for Jesus' sake, his great oblation. As death was taking hold, his love for God grew, and he was preparing for the life of glory beyond. He deeply believed that God's love is finer than life. Finally, his heart, exhausted from loving, gave out, and now he can be supremely happy with Jesus forever.

As we enter Eucharist, we receive Jesus for whom we wait, whose steadfast love is better than life: let us thank God for giving us Byron, let us allow God to wipe away our tears, and let us be glad and rejoice as only Byron knew how to do. When his niece Heather was little, she called him Babu, the best she could make of Byron, which became a favorite nickname. I heard some young Arab men on the radio call each other Habibi Babu, meaning my beloved brother. That's what I called him. So I say farewell my dear Habibi Babu, how we all miss you already.

Father James J. Schroeder, SCJ