

Feuerherd family, friends celebrate Mass of Christian burial

Thomas C. Fox | Jun. 2, 2011 NCR Today

Family, colleagues and friends of *NCR* publisher Joe Feuerherd celebrated and were sustained by a Mass of Christian burial June 1 at the Theological College chapel on the campus of The Catholic University of America in Washington.

We came together, sharing a loss, buoyed by our faith and hope. It was at once a sad and joyful celebration. Joe would have asked: "So what's the fuss?" He asked that there be no eulogies at the service. We carried those in our hearts. Catholics can do funerals spectacularly well. This burial Mass was an example.

Chief celebrant Sulpician Fr. Anthony J. Pogorelc took us through a rich liturgy. He is a faculty member at the Theological College and a fellow of the Institute for Policy Research & Catholic Studies at the university. The service was graced by hymns from our Christian heritage, including, among others: "Amazing Grace," "I Know That My Redeemer Liveth," "How Great Thou Art," "Ave Maria," "Panis Angelicus," "Song of Farewell" and "Sing With All the Saints in Glory."

Concelebrating the Mass were Jesuit Frs. Ray Schroth and Charles Currie, and Msgr. Roger McGrath.

Pogorelc's homily touched on the themes of the readings (Isaiah 25:6-8, Romans 12:6-8, and Matthew 13:31-32), It follows:

In a few moments we will pray the words: "The sadness of death gives way to the bright promise of immortality." As we gather this morning, we come in sadness. We miss Joe, husband, father, brother, colleague, friend, in the most painful way. He was in the prime of life. He had so much to give. He was smart, he was creative; he had a sharp wit. He was a hard worker. He embodied so much of what St. Paul, in our passage from Romans, holds up as good.

Like Martha, who cried out to Jesus when her brother Lazarus died, we ask, "Why?" It's not supposed to be this way. Why couldn't he have walked among us for a longer time? We weep at the death of our brother Joe and Jesus weeps with us. When Lazarus died, Jesus told his disciples, "The glory of God will be revealed." Our readings from scripture today point to that glory and help us to remember that it was and will continue to be revealed through Joe's life here and in eternity.

In contrast to many today, Joe used to like to tell people: "I'm religious, not spiritual." The word religious is rooted in *religiare*, which means to bind. For him faith, hope and love were not vaporous, but embodied: something you can hold on to. Joe was bound to his faith and to the Catholic church. He was bound to his family, friends, colleagues and perhaps even a few challengers by the bond of mutual affection. He loved and was loved by real people.

Joe and Becky shared and expressed that love to the end, unimpeded by the medical tubes that enveloped him. A man, whose engagement was financed by a trifecta payoff, with Becky raised the trifecta of

Zachary, Bridget and Benjamin. In his 48 years he loved sincerely, binding himself to what was good and rejecting what is evil. Like his father before him, he was a man of honesty and integrity. His reaching out for good will continue to grow in us through our remembrance of his example.

The Gospel talks of seeds, leaven and parables. Our task is to plant a small seed, but the mission, the establishment of the reign of God, is God's work. We are called to participate in that work. We never know how many hours we will have to labor or the rate or extent to which we will see the seeds grow into that glorious bush. In fact we do not need to -- God knows, that is enough. Joe's life is a seed that has been planted. It has given growth and it will continue to do so, and we will be surprised by the ways it does so in the future.

Arthur [Jones] described Joe as "a combination of journalist, historian and educator." Like a leaven, he raised things up. He raised difficult issues, striving to be prophetic, to exhort and to teach yet embodying a spirit of gentleness and challenge. He displayed an attentive demeanor and a willingness to listen to all sides of an issue. As a journalist and editor of *NCR* he had a critical fidelity. He was fervent in spirit, his zeal did not slacken. His deepest desire was to serve the Lord.

Our Gospel is a parable. One never masters a parable. There is always more to be learned. Joe's life and death are a parable. We will only discover the full meaning of this moment that unites sadness and hope. The glory that God holds in store for Joe and for all of us is always in the process of being revealed.

I remember very clearly the first time I met Joe and the last time I got to speak with him at length. Both occurred as we were standing at a reception enjoying "rich foods and choice wines." Isaiah tells us that's what eternity looks like and I feel in communion with Joe, who now enjoys the banquet that will never end. For us who gather here, the foretaste and promise of that eternal banquet is the Eucharist. In celebrating the Eucharist, God makes it possible for the sadness of death to give way to the bright promise of immortality. Gathered here around the scriptures, the altar and Joe's mortal remains we come to know that we are one body in Christ and individually parts of one another. We are religiously embodied, bound to Christ with Joe and one another. This unity does not end with death for in Christ all are alive.

Following the Mass more than 200 gathered at the college for a reception of drinks and light foods. During the reception, *NCR* former editor, now books editor, Arthur Jones, offered some reflections. Jones once headed the Washington bureau where he took Joe in as an intern in 1984. Jones is godfather of one of Joe's sons, Zachary, and has been close to the Feuerherd family for years. The following is a script of Jones' comments:

NCR's readers probably detected in Joe's writing an undercurrent of his famed dry wit. Here are two samples, with Joe's theological skills well-evidenced in the first.

Early 1980s: Time for some great newspapering -- Reagan was president, Catholic social activism at its peak. Joe and Jones in Washington. We loved the movie "The Front Page": Joe -- Hildy Johnson; Jones -- Walter Burns. As a tempo break we decided to deconstruct "The Front Page" into a Christian morality tale.

Kind-hearted whore, a change-the-world, love-the-outcasts innocent young man condemned to death. The Pharisees: a newsroom filled with cynical Irish Catholics and Chicago Jews. Caiaphas: the sheriff. Pontius Pilate: the mayor.

Hildy Johnson -- Luke, the journalist. Walter Burns was harder, Apostle Paul, alternating between exhortation and self-pity. We needed Catholic-Christian-theological documentary evidence. Joe found it: Walter Burns barks at production manager Duffy about having enough newsboys for the extra press run.

Duffy replying: ?It's all set, we got 300 extra newsboys tomorrow. St. Paul's parochial school is going to be playing hookie.?

Twenty-five years later, Joe was Walter Burns; the rest of us were Hildy Johnsons ...

Twelve days ago, and a tale in two parts. In 1987 Tom Wolfe's *Bonfire of the Vanities* was published. Wall Street trader (Tom Hanks in lousy movie version) gets lost in the Bronx and kills an African-American kid -- the kid something of a hustler. The lamentation chorus builds, the prosecution and the newspapers buff up the kid's resume and describe him as "an honor student."

Thereafter, every time Joe or I saw a newspaper reference to an honor student caught up in the news for worse rather than better, it frequently showed it to be a dubious claim. We traded items.

Part two: On May 19 last, from bed, Joe e-mailed me that he had written his own short formal obituary announcement, had appended a mailing list of zillions for receipt, and had charged his brother Vic with overseeing its distribution.

I emailed Joe:

"I love the arrant shamelessness of it."

Joe shot back by e-mail:

"I was an honor student."

And finally, we say:

Eternal rest grant unto our brother, Joe, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon him. May his soul, and the souls of all the faithful departed, through your mercy, rest in peace. Amen.

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