

FUNERAL HOMILY
ROGER MERCURIO, C.P.
Immaculate Conception Church, Chicago
April 5, 2001
Donald Senior, C.P.

Dear Kay, sister of Fr. Roger, and Glen her husband, who are representing the family members of Fr. Roger, Bishop Conway whose presence on behalf of the Archdiocese we so deeply appreciated, Bishop Paul Boyle, fellow Passionist and long time associate with Roger, Bishop Dan Ryan, more than honorable member of the extended Passionist family, Fr. Roger's many friends, his former parishioners from this great parish, his beloved classmates of the extraordinary class of 1945, and my brother Passionists, there is no doubt that Holy Cross Province has lost one of its greatest members, ever. A consummate priest, a loyal Passionist who served in nearly every type of service our Province can ask of anyone, a scholar all his life, a vital, happy, productive and humane man—that was Roger Mercurio. By every count, a life lived well.

Roger was a man full of intellectual curiosity who fell in love with many things: the liturgy, history, spirituality, pasturing—but, by his own testimony, the one great love of his life was Scripture. He received his assignment to go to Catholic University and begin his formal scripture studies in a letter that arrived from Fr. Malcolm LaVelle, the moderator of studies, right after Easter, April 10, 1945. This was a time of extraordinary excitement in Catholic biblical studies. Just two years before, in 1943, Pope Pius XII had published the magna carta of biblical scholarship in the Catholic church, *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, an encyclical that cleared away decades of suspicion about biblical studies and urged Catholic scholars to school themselves in biblical study. Roger said he read the Pope's message over and over, prayed over it, because, he said, "my task would be to prepare young men to become Passionist missionaries. I must absorb the Sacred Word so that I could share it with my students to be." Absorb the Sacred Word, he did, first at Catholic University in Washington, and then at the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome. And then he would plunge with his characteristic enthusiasm into the ministry of teaching, beginning right here in Chicago at Immaculate Conception monastery.

You know, people say that some married couples who have loved each other a long time and lived together for many years, begin to look like each other, a sort of sacred exchange that buffs away some of the difference and makes two one flesh. I think of Roger and the biblical word in that way: his love for the scripture was not simply intellectual zest or curiosity. He loved the Bible because he understood it as the Word of God and it nourished and shaped his very being. When Carroll Stuhlmueller, another one of our great Passionist biblical scholars died, I found folded in his Bible a letter of encouragement that Roger had written to him in 1951 when he learned that Carroll had been assigned to biblical studies. At Carroll's funeral I mentioned that letter and that was the first time that Roger knew how much it had meant to Carroll, that Carroll had treasured it all his life.

In that letter, Roger wrote, "You will find the studies in preparation for this task of teaching scripture and the actual fulfillment of it most helpful in your own spiritual life. From now on, gradually but firmly your soul will be shaped according to the inspired Words. Your studies and teaching will leave an indelible mark on you and more and more shape your spiritual relations with God. Just enter as deeply into your studies as you can and you will be carried along in this scriptural mode unto perfect union with God."

In homage to Roger I thought of a whole gallery of biblical characters that he seemed to reflect in a life-long ministry of extraordinary variety. A Moses leading his province as head of our seminary in Warrenton, and provincial superior, leading his tribe through the tribulation and tests of the wilderness during a difficult period in the province's history. And a Joshua, first handed the reigns of leadership when another Moses was called to the Promised Land in Rome, but doing so humbly and with great warmth and love. An Isaiah, filled with awe in God's temple and rapturous at the temple liturgy—Roger who never saw an incense boat he didn't love! The chronicler, enthralled with history and lovingly recording the archives of the tribe he loved so well. The Scribe trained for the Kingdom of heaven who delighted in the ministry of teaching and whose one regret, expressed with resignation and great faith, was that he could not have continued his ministry of teaching. His beloved Paul the Apostle, anxious for the care of the churches, and writing voluminously on the mystery of the cross. Like Peter, great pastor of the community, conscious of his own weakness and filled with warmth. And, finally and most deeply, the crucified Jesus, bearing the cross of illness and loss with grace.

In a reflection that he wanted to be the "postlude" to his life's story, Roger Mercurio compares himself to another great biblical personage, the evangelist John. He writes: "I am not sure how to begin. I am getting older. The years are catching up with me. Getting older - perhaps that is my cue! Like John who in his preaching recalled all that Jesus had said and done during those precious moments with Jesus. Again and again he would repeat those memories so that they became part of the "tradition" and eventually part of the gospel itself. That is what I have been doing as I recall my memories of God's working with me and through me. It has been a long story. But all of it is only a prelude. The real thing will soon begin. Yes, it is the postlude that really matters. I feel that all these years are indeed only the prelude to my eternal life in heaven. There may I sing forever of God's everlasting mercy: *Misericordias Domini in aeternum cantabo.*"

I think Roger's instinct was true. His life turned out to be a kind enactment of John's story of Jesus. John's Gospel, so enthralled with the image of Jesus as the living Word, springing forth mysteriously from the life of God, taking flesh—a genuine human life—missioned to preach not condemnation or judgment but to bring a message of hope that God so loved the world that he would not condemn the world but wanted the world to be saved. A message of love communicated in signs of healing and reconciliation, in a life full of vitality and goodness. A life dedicated to service, to laying down one's life for one's friends.

In the gospel today we learn of a great sign that John's Gospel places on the eve of Passover, just as we stand there now in the Jewish calendar. Jesus filled with the spirit of God and love of God, Jesus conscious of his mission, Jesus loving his own community of disciples so intensely and loving them to the end, Jesus performing an act of service toward the brothers and sisters he loved, washing their feet, drying them gently with a towel. A vivid act of service that needs no commentary and speaks across chasms of generations and cultures.

As a Passionist, I think of Roger as a man who gave himself completely to the service of his community. A man without pretense or inflated ego. A man of intelligence and humor. A scholar and a writer. A leader. A man of total loyalty to the church and to his religious community. A man of great virtue and an indelible Passionist spirit. A man of irrepressible enthusiasm. My very first and still very vivid memories of Roger are as a young altar boy at Saint Agnes, serving benediction, kneeling beside him on the red cushions on the steps of the high altar at St. Agnes, the thick fragrance of incense filling the air, and Roger reciting the Divine Praises at the end of Benediction with great fervor and feeling.

But, above all, Roger was one who loved much and was willing to sacrifice his own desires for the sake of others. Throughout his life as a Passionist he was always willing to leave behind a work and a mission he loved doing, whenever he was asked to begin yet another round of service somewhere else.

His heart yearning to teach Scripture and then being asked to be a director of students. A man hoping desperately to continue his work of biblical scholarship and then asked to be the rector of a new seminary in Warrenton. A man who was never happier than when serving as pastor of this great parish of Immaculate Conception, reveling in the goodness of the people and the liturgical life of the parish, and then asked to leave it behind to enter provincial leadership as a consultor and then as provincial. A man who longed to close out his active ministry preaching retreats, but who accepted instead the assignment of begging for money on behalf of the missions.

I think of Roger Mercurio as one who all his life wrapped the towel of love and loyalty and gracious service around his waist and who, like his master, never hesitated to bend over and wash the feet of his brothers.

It would not be fair to the brother Passionist we all loved, to paint him in overly pious tones. He was an authentic human being. He had a hearty laugh that seemed to come from the center of his usually ample belly. No one enjoyed a jubilee celebration with his Passionist brothers or a good meal with family and friends more than Roger. He was known to preach too long at times—well a lot—and had particular difficulty landing at the end of the sermon even after he had made several passes over the runway. He was notorious for now and then coming out with a malapropism, as in the story—perhaps apocryphal—of his beginning a sermon to the assembled women of the Confraternity of the Passion in Louisville (an organization he began there, by the way) that he was impressed with how well they filled the seats in the church.

And his life of service—like that of Jesus himself—was not sentimental or without great anguish. To follow Jesus means also following in the way of his cross. And Roger knew his share of that. His exuberant enthusiasm for the reforms of the second Vatican council only increased his pain and confusion at the losses the province suffered when he was director of students and then rector at our major seminary in Louisville. He called the severe financial problems he had to encounter during his service as provincial a true dark night of the soul for him. It was, he said, like the agony in the garden for him and he finally found the strength to go on during a Holy Week he spent in solitary prayer at our retreat center in Citrus Heights. Particularly painful, was having to take the decision to close the retreat house in Saint Louis, his hometown that he took such pride in, where he had so many relatives and friends. He was courageous and honest and felt compelled to be present for the final farewell ceremony, even though he said it was like drinking from the cup of the passion. And he felt deep loss at the deaths in his family that he loved so intensely and whose history he records with such care and pride: his beloved brother Joe. His dear sister Dorothy. More recently, the painful loss of his brother Jim.

In the last few years, as his health began to weaken, Roger wondered what the future would hold for him. He thought of his unfolding life like the Stations of the Cross. "At the first station," he wrote, "I pause to accept the plan of God for my final journey across the threshold. More accurately I pray for the grace to accept God's plan. With the cross of dying to carry, I entrust this final journey to Mary. I pray someone will help me, A Simon of Cyrene or a Veronica or compassionate women. Even if I fail and fall I pray to continue on for whatever hours, days, weeks or years the Lord might ask of me. I pray to accept being stripped of seeing, of hearing, of speaking, even of knowing! Perhaps nailed and dying alone with Mary with me as I make the final 'last mile' through death and burial to the joy and wonder of eternal life with God. This time of my life may be the time of my final Stations of the Cross. " Those words, written by Roger five years ago, are truly prophetic.

At the end, he did walk those very stations one more time. He was stripped of his power of speaking and knowing. He did quietly alone but never abandoned.

For John's Gospel Jesus' mission was a revelation of God's unconditional, infinitely gracious love. Every commitment of Jesus' life, every act of compassion, every word he spoke proclaimed that message. His final act was the most eloquent. He laid down his life for his friends, the most noble and unimpeachable act of human love. No other sign could speak with such force. Having loved his own in the world he would love them to the end. Having so loved, then Jesus could say on his cross, "It is finished. " His lifelong mission was complete.

I dare to say that if there is a thread that runs through the wonderful and full and good life of Roger Mercurio it is an enduring commitment to love his community and through and with them to love the people he was called to serve. Twice he had to endure a heart attack in his life but it was never because his heart had failed to love. He walked the way of the Johannine Jesus. Stooping without artifice to wash the feet of his brothers. Willing to sacrifice his own life and preferences and plans to serve others in obedience and reverence.

Our brother Roger, faithful Passionist, exemplary priest, authentic Christian. To you belongs the promise of Jesus that John's gospel also gives to us: do not be troubled or be afraid, I go to prepare a place for you that where I am there, too, you shall be. May you rest in the eternal peace and joy of the Christ you served so well.

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Fr. Roger Mercurio was born on February 14, 1918, in St. Louis, Missouri.

He entered the Passionist Seminary and was professed as a Passionist on July 17, 1938; he was ordained to the priesthood on April 26, 1944, in Louisville, Kentucky.

Fr. Roger achieved Licentiate in Theology (S.T.L., Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C.), and in Sacred Scripture (S.S.L., Pontifical Biblical Institute, Rome, Italy).

Fr. Roger taught Scripture to Passionist Seminarians for his Holy Cross Province, he was a Director of Seminarians, and Seminary Rector.

He also served Holy Cross Province in leadership as a Provincial Consultor, and then as Provincial. He also spent four years as Pastor of Immaculate Conception Parish, in Chicago.

His last years were spent as Director of the Mission Office of Holy Cross Province, and then as its Archivist. It was during his time as archivist that he finished writing his history of "The Passionists".