

Coming Home

Homily delivered at the funeral Mass for Brother Gilbert Mary Hunter, C.Ss.R.

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By Very Rev. Patrick Woods, C.Ss.R.

Brother Gilbert had a very unusual practice of writing to me. Very often the superior of the community at the St. John Neumann Residence in Saratoga Springs, Father Gildea, Father Sergi, or Father Gerard would write to me about some official business. There were times when Fathers Sergi and Gildea would send money from the budget that had not been spent. (I cannot ever recall getting such a letter from Father Gerard.)

On the back of the unopened envelope would be some hand writing: these were notes from Brother Gilbert. They were always cheerful notes to praise me or thank me for something. He would write, "You're doing a great job," "I loved your last letter," "May the Blessed Mother protect you," or "I am praying for you."

I loved these notes. When I would tease Brother Gilbert about these jottings, he would tell me he didn't want to spend the money on a stamp, and it was the easiest way for him to thank me. In all the years that I visited Gilbert at Saratoga and here at Stella Maris, he would greet me with a smile and offer me kind words of affirmation. He lived his life with deep gratitude and a sense of peace and joy.

I think that after being out of the Congregation for so many years, he was in a state of great happiness because he had come back to the place where he had started his religious life. He was in the situation where he believed God wanted him, and he was so very happy about that. In his late 80s, he lived life with the spirit of a newly professed young man. He returned to us as an older man, but he lived with the youthful spirit. Joy is one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and this man had abundant joy in his life. In spite of some rather serious medical problems that no doubt caused him significant suffering, he rarely complained. The love of God was so very evident in his life.

The man who was supposed to give this homily is with Gilbert in heaven. Brother Gilbert had requested that Father George Keaveney be the homilist for his funeral Mass. George was the provincial when Gilbert asked to return to the Congregation, and he did all that he could to make it easy for the 76-year-old Gilbert to return to us. George wrote this in his petition to the Superior General about Gilbert:

"I have personally known Mr. Hunter when he was Brother Gilbert and was stationed in our parish at Boston. At the time, I was in grammar school and the then Brother Gilbert was instrumental in my entering the Redemptorists. I believe that was the case for several Redemptorists. He left the Congregation in 1956 for personal reasons. Since the time of his departure he has remained in contact with several of the Brothers and frequently attended Redemptorist celebrations. During his time outside the Congregation he worked as a licensed chiropractor. He has never married and maintained a strong spiritual life, especially in the parish where he lives."

We might call this the circle of God's grace. The boy who became a Redemptorist priest through the grace of God and the gentle direction of Brother Gilbert is the man who welcomed Gilbert back to the Congregation. I have no doubt they had a cheerful reunion on Saturday when Gilbert entered eternity.

I chose last Sunday's Gospel, the parable of the prodigal son, for today's Mass. Brother Gilbert became a Redemptorist Brother on March 15, 1941. That was almost 69 years ago. As a Brother, he worked at St. Mary's, Buffalo; St. Cecilia's, Manhattan; St. Philomena's, Pittsburgh; Mount St. Alphonsus, Esopus; Holy Redeemer, Ilchester, Maryland, Washington, D.C., and Mission Church, Boston.

In the file, I found a very humble letter from Brother Gilbert. It was a letter that he wrote to the provincial humbly stating that he felt he was not holy enough to be a Redemptorist and that he should leave the Congregation. I wonder where that would leave the rest of us if he felt he was not holy enough. Gilbert was so very transparent before God and his superiors. Like Peter in the Gospel who fell to his knees and asked Jesus to leave him because he was not worthy to be his disciple, Gilbert did the same. It seemed with a feeling of reluctance, the provincial gave him a dispensation and \$100 in 1956. Unlike the story of the prodigal son, it was not a large sum of money to spend on dissolute living.

Again, Gilbert's choices were far different than those of the prodigal son. Gilbert did not go and live a life of sin and wildness. He studied hard and became a chiropractor. He worked to bring healing to those suffering. Gilbert was also caretaker for his mother. At one point, Gilbert applied to a diocese for the priesthood, but they told him he was too old. In his letter to Father Keaveney when he applied to come back to the Redemptorists, Gilbert wrote: "I never ceased living the Redemptorist way. I went to daily Mass, prayed the liturgy of the hours, and did the other practices of the Congregation."

In the story of the prodigal son, the young boy leaves home and family and goes to a faraway land. That is not the story of our Brother Gilbert. He never stopped being connected with the Congregation. Brother Liguori remained a friend of Gilbert's until he passed away at Saratoga Springs several years ago. Gilbert, when he was living in Pittsfield, MA, would take his mother to hear the seminarians sing at Benediction. Gilbert was a very good friend of Brother Al Schreiber and Father Paul Callahan.

As Gilbert got older, he liked to visit at the St. John Neumann Residence in Saratoga. He loved to spend time at the Residence making an annual retreat or helping with the care of the men. On one of these visits, he ran into an old friend from his early days at St. Philomena's in Pittsburgh — Father Ed Tardiff who was now stationed at the St. John Neumann Residence.

It was one of Gilbert's jobs at St. Philomena's to forward Ed's mail to him when he traveled. Like the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, they quickly fell into talking about everything. They spoke about church history, moral theology, and prayer. In the

course of one of their breakfast conversations, Ed told Gilbert that he should write to the provincial and ask permission to return to the Congregation.

So, Gilbert hand-wrote George a four-page letter. He outlines in the letter his life since he left the Redemptorists. He told George he would accept any decision that was made. He assured him he was not seeking security in his old age and mentioned that he already had a grave with his name on a stone in the Berkshires. He surrendered his will to God and made an act of trust. He closed the letter with this sentence: "Thanking you again. Whatever you decide I believe will be the Divine Will for me."

Soon, Gilbert was back in the Congregation and died as a professed member last Saturday. In the years since he returned, he lived an exemplary life of prayer and fidelity to his beloved Congregation. He brought much joy and happiness to the rest of us.

I have spoken about where Gilbert's story differed from that of the prodigal son. I chose this Gospel because it's a great homecoming scene. Gilbert had two great homecoming moments in his life: the first came when Gilbert was welcomed back into the Congregation. Although there was no fatted calf, there was a great dinner at Longfellows' restaurant. Instead of rings and shoes, the habit was once again placed on him, along with the cross. The Gospel never tells us what happened to the young man who returned to his Father's embrace. We know that the old man, who returned to the order he really never left, brought him joy to the day he died.

In the story of the prodigal son, we know that the Father never stopped loving his lost son. He loved him and longed for him to return. The Father also never stopped loving the older son who was bitter and angry at his lot in life. This Story of the Prodigal Son might be better named the Story of the Loving Father. It is the story of a God who never stops loving his sons and daughters. They are loved from the moment that they are conceived and into all eternity.

When we ponder the story of God and Brother Gilbert, we can be bold enough to call it a love story. God loved Gilbert as a young man growing up in Massachusetts. He loved him as a young Brother in the Congregation. He loved him as a fine chiropractor and a Catholic layman. Finally, he loved him as humble older Brother who sat like Simeon and witnessed and spoke about the love of God.

I spoke about two great homecomings in Gilbert's life. The first was his return to the Congregation, and the second was his entrance into the kingdom of God on Saturday, March 13. He heard the words of Jesus: "Well done, good and faithful friend; enter now into the kingdom of heaven that has been prepared for you from all eternity." St. Alphonsus placed the crown on his head and said, "Let us not lose the beautiful crown which I have prepared for everyone who lives in observance and dies in the Congregation." Our Mother of Perpetual Help smiled and embraced Gilbert into eternity.

Phil Volcker, a close friend of Brother Gilbert was with Gilbert when he was dying at Stella Maris. This is what he wrote about his dear friend:

“I was with him during his death. They called me Thursday to tell me he was dying and I left work and went to him. Thank God! He was lucid and we had our "good-bye." I kissed him and thanked him for our friendship. It was quite a moving experience. My sisters also arrived and we went each day. Friday, he was no longer coherent. We prayed the rosary together for him with his beads in his hand. I do believe he understood what was going on — only he could not communicate with us. His final coherent words, "I never knew my last moments would be this beautiful!" He was truly ready and went in peace. I will dearly miss him, his beautiful sense of humor and his love of the arts. There are few people I know — religious or lay — that I would call a "saint." He was, and is, a Saint!”

With St. Patrick’s Day being yesterday, I’ll end with a few lines from a favorite song of mine called “Going Home:”

Going home, going home
I'm a-going home
Quiet-like, some still day
I'm just going home
It's not far, just close by,
Through an open door;
Work all done, care laid by,
Going to fear no more
Mother's there expecting me
Father's waiting too;
Lots of folk gathered there
All the friends I knew
All the friends I knew

There's no break, there's no end
Just a-living on;
Wide awake, with a smile
Going on and on
Going home, going home
I'm just going home;
It's not far, just close by
Through an open door.
I'm just going home.

Gilbert is now home with God