

Vigil and Evening Prayer for the Dead  
for Cardinal William J. Levada

z

Cathedral of St. Mary of the Assumption  
October 23, 2019

z

Homily of Most Rev. Steven J. Lopes

We gather this night to keep holy vigil—to pray, to grieve, and to remember the life and vocation of William Joseph Levada. We knew him as a priest and as our Archbishop, as a Cardinal and as Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, or perhaps more simply to his family as Uncle Bill. Saint Paul reminds us that we do not grieve as those without hope, but rather through our prayer and our remembering we trace the working of grace in the life of this man of the Church. His life becomes not only a sign pointing to what God is doing, but in the relationship we shared with him on this earth, grace reaches us too ... and this grace draws us deeper into the new and abundant life of God in Christ.

To assist us in our holy Vigil, the Liturgy gives us the inspired texts of the Psalms and the beautiful canticle of love taken from Saint Paul's letter to the Philippians. This ancient text we have prayed together is actually a hymn...Saint Paul cites it as something already known to that community of disciples to whom he writes, as an invitation to sing out their faith in the crucified and risen Christ. That is the context for his writing. We have taken onto our own lips, therefore, one of the most ancient expressions of Christian faith, and this faith begins to make sense of our gathering around the body of our dear shepherd.

The hymn sings of God's love poured out:

*Though he was in the form of God,  
Jesus did not regard equality with God something to be  
grasped.  
Rather he emptied himself,  
taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness...  
he humbled himself becoming obedient to death,  
even death on a cross.*

Saint Paul describes divine love—God's own love—as self emptying, pouring itself out for the other. The Blessed Trinity is not content with remaining in the background, nor in only the joys of human existence. The Word is poured forth from the Father and becomes man...so that you and I can know him, experience his love, and ultimately be exalted to the heavens.

As the hymn proclaims, this outpouring begins in the Incarnation. This love is manifest in the pain and sorrow of the Cross, where it crests and overflows. Jesus holds nothing back; nothing is constrained when it comes to us and our salvation. This same love is the heart of our faith: we are immersed in it at our Baptism so that it becomes our very identity. It is, as Saint Paul says, the very measure of Christian love. After all, in his letter to the Philippians he introduces this canticle with a deceptively simple admonition: *Have the same mind among yourselves which was in Christ Jesus.*

Out-poured love is the heart of vocation in the Church and unlocks the mystery of priesthood. It is the standard of love by which Cardinal Levada will be judged. His dear friend, Archbishop Augustine DiNoia, attended the funeral service at

the Vatican just 23 hours after the Cardinal died. It was he who first noted the providential coincidence that his casket lay on the very floor before the very same altar where, 58 years earlier, William Levada was ordained a priest. The love of Christ in which he was formed, and in which he was redeemed, is the same love he lived as a priest. And while we gather to pray for him and for the forgiveness of his sins, we can see in the authenticity of his priesthood the hope of glory dawning [2cor3:18].

Cardinal Levada learned this love first in his family. Losing his father so early, he was deeply devoted to his mother, and to his sister, and brother-in-law. It's a love that flowed naturally to his nieces Julianne and Steph and to their children. By the way and for the record: when he would take them to Legoland and said that it was "because *they* loved going there"... I don't buy it. He loved that stuff.

His priestly ministry was very much a life poured out for the needs of the Church. He was ordained for the Archdiocese of Los Angeles not by happenstance, but because he loved LA. Now, as a pious San Franciscan I may think that odd, but there is no denying it. And so it was a real sacrifice for him to spend so little time there, his assignments in the Church taking him seemingly farther and farther away. The good and needs of the Church came first for this man of the Church. Always.

We can trace this love in Levada's life to the extent that God's grace was deeply at work in him. To the extent that he was human and flawed like the rest of us, we know that this generous love often bumped up against other tendencies as well. Hence our prayer for him in the hour of death.

Those of us who have driven for the Cardinal over the years have had to contend both with his chronic impatience and his near constant tendency to “assist” with directions. I actually feel that I have missed out in my relationship with him in one important way: never did I have the experience—as Msgr. Tom Merton and Bishop John Wester both did—of having him get out of the car and begin directing traffic.

What I *did* have was the map. When I drove him any farther than work, he always had a map in hand. Not a GPS or Google Maps, mind you, but an old fashioned, incorrectly folded, paper map. If it was a journey of an hour or an entire day up to Northern Italy, he wanted to follow along with his finger, plotting every town and intersection along the way, always suggesting shortcuts. And they were NEVER shorter!

I came to find out much later, in a perhaps unguarded personal moment that comes with age, that as a child he used to make his older sister ride in the back seat on family trips so that he could sit in the navigator’s seat with...you guessed it...the map, and help dad drive. Whether at 8 or 80, the journey fascinated him. The places, the people, the experiences: he loved the adventure of it all. And living a life poured out in the Church, William Levada understood his life of discipleship as an adventure.

He loved his hometown of Long Beach, and so it is no surprise that he and Archbishop Niederauer would maintain a residence there. His happiest assignment was teaching at St. John’s Seminary in Camarillo, California. And yet never did he hesitate to give it all over to the Lord when vocation impelled him to leave. He went wherever needed, did whatever was asked of him, and never once lost the sense of wonder at the providential guidance of the Holy Spirit directing that

journey like a finger moving along the map. To us priests and religious, Levada's life is a master class in apostolic availability. To all of us who knew him and who knew his chronic impatience, there's something deeper there than an expression of his personality. There is a desire to know what God has planned for me, to experience fully the adventure of discipleship, because that is precisely how you come to know the Lord better.

On the day after he died in Rome, a squad of servicemen from the Vatican had to carry the Cardinal's casket down five flights of stairs in order to take the body to St. Peter's Basilica for Mass. Beatrice, the woman who did secretarial work for him in Rome, and the Mercy Sisters of the household were waiting downstairs along with what they described as a rather dower Monsignor from the Vatican liturgical office. To break the silence, Beatrice says to the Monsignor, "You know, this was one of the good ones." The Monsignor, who probably worked dozens of these funerals, responded by saying, without much affect, "He was a very nice person."

Now, can I just say that calling someone "a nice person" is a woefully inadequate description *for anyone*? It describes nothing, it commits to nothing, it says nothing. And to describe William J. Levada?! No.

Beatrice pressed on, undaunted, saying: "No, really. I have worked for many prelates. Levada was a gracious man, a generous man, a *just* man—and I can't say that about all of them. He was a real priest." Unmoved, the Monsignor repeated, "Yes, he was a very nice person." Beatrice tells me that at that point she was contemplating giving up and just kicking him, when a homeless woman whom I can tell you is a very particular figure in our neighborhood, began to cry

loudly. She had noticed the hearse and had asked one of the Sisters which of the prelates had died. Upon hearing it was Cardinal Levada, she began immediately to weep. Weeping turned into wailing, and wailing turned into shouting when the body was brought out of the house. “Mio padre! Mio padre!” (My father! My father!)

The Sisters’ first thought was that this was a sweet gesture. But the longer it went on and the louder it became, some embarrassment set in. We don’t grieve this way in America. Maybe we should.

Anyway, the wailing aroused the attention of several of the homeless who lived on our alley. And they gathered around the hearse, caps off and silent, as a kind of honor guard for a man they all knew and, more to the point, for a man that had known each of them. Beatrice saw her moment. She turned to the Monsignor and said: “Ecco, San Tomasso... Look here St. Thomas, see, doubt no longer, but believe.”

A group of Rome’s poor knew what a Churchman could not see. They bore witness to the fact that William Levada’s life was poured out in the Church, for the love of Christ Jesus, and for love of them. They saw in him something authentic, something real. He was more than someone who gave them money...he was someone who knew their names, who knew about them and could carry on a conversation with them. What a thing it would be, what a witness to the world of the truth of our Catholic faith, if each of us, when we die, could inspire that kind of honor guard at our funeral cortège.

The love of Christ impelled him. The ecclesial body of Christ was his passion. And by grace and by faith, “he had

himself the same attitude that was in Christ Jesus"...and even the poor could see it. His was a life poured out.