

Homily at the Funeral Service of Protopresbyter Thomas Hopko
The Orthodox Monastery of the Transfiguration, March 23, 2015
Offered by Archpriest John Behr, Dean, St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary

How can one find the words, the appropriate words, to speak of one who was such a master of words?

For Fr Thomas could speak – so eloquently and inspiringly,
at length – in homilies and lectures, anecdotes and reminiscences
for he was a master story-teller as well as preacher and teacher
but also briefly – in his maxims
profoundly, but also simply,
always speaking the truth in love,
in books and, more recently, in apparently endless podcasts;
and yet he lies speechless before us.

I only knew Fr Tom from the time he became dean of the seminary,
when he was at the height of his powers;
his heart aflame with the love of God and Christ, Scripture and the Gospel,
and especially the cross, the power of the resurrection;
the number of people he inspired and formed, influenced and touched, both as
priest and teacher, at the school and throughout the world, is incalculable;
he clearly was an extraordinary figure, a man of God, a powerful force;
and yet he now lies powerless, still and silent.

Fr Tom was a protopresbyter – the first among priests and a priest to priests;
forming priests to serve the church,
and ministering to those priests in their own ministry;
always speaking prophetically and urgently, to those in the church about the
challenge of our times, urging us to remain true to our calling, to our first love;
and also speaking prophetically to the church, even critically, especially in
moments of crisis;
as a priest, he showed the face of God and his love to his people,
helping them bring their own sufferings and brokenness as an offering
to the one who was broken by them and for them on Golgotha,
and in so doing transforming that brokenness into occasions of grace and growth
in Christ, moments of thanksgiving;
and often, in return, being crucified by them, struck on all sides like an anvil,
as Polycarp suggests is the lot of the priest;
and yet now he lies before us, his offering finished.

And Fr Tom was also, of course, a kind and loving husband, father, grandfather, and great-grandfather, and those he leaves behind are a testimony to him in so many ways.

The life of a priest's family is not an easy one; they are called, without any choice on their part, to share in the cross that he bears:
knowing him as the head of their own family,
yet a family which is also larger than themselves,
with many other demands, resulting in frequent absence and unintended pain.
And so, here, his departure is the more personal, the more grievous, the more bitter,

In all these ways, and more, we have known our dearly beloved and departed, in blessed memory, father, husband, brother, teacher, guide and comforter;
in all his strength and vitality, and in all his weaknesses as well,
and now we see him in his final frailty and weakness: dead.

All our life upon this earth is spent under a shadow;
it is but a snatched breath which will expire;
for all our strength and powers will fail us in the end:
What is the life of man upon earth but a pale shadow of that to which he is called.

And yet, as Christ reminds the apostle, it is precisely in weakness that the strength of God is perfected;
where there is sin in our lives, there grace abounds;
what appears as weaknesses becomes the very place where God works through his transforming power;
and, now, the final frailty of death is the very moment in which the power of God is most perfectly realized.

In this world, our life is hidden with Christ in God;
and so, paradoxically, as our beloved father departs from us,
his life and identity in Christ, previously only glimpsed through the shadow of the flesh,
becomes more visible than when we knew him in the flesh,
becomes more personal and true than it could ever do in this world,
and becomes more powerfully present, in the eternity of God
not limited by space or time.

Where this departure is most personal and grievous,
it is also, then, most capable of being most powerfully transforming,
when it is realized that the cross of the one imposed upon others, his family,
is in fact the cross of Christ,
leading us to know ourselves as the children of our heavenly father.

His departure from us as a priest is likewise his complete offering—finished, perfected
with the aer soon to cover his face, concealing his identity,
just as it conceals the Eucharistic gifts in the entrance to the holy place,
and making his very identity, in his exodus from us as an entrance into the kingdom,
to be a eucharistic offering
with his body becoming the pure bread of Christ,
just as with the martyrs Polycarp and Ignatius

And the silence of one gifted with words, with great eloquence,
now has greater resonance than any merely humanly offered words.
When St Ignatius was on his way to his own death,
he urged the Christians in Rome not to hold him back from his impending death;
if you try to hold on to me, he said, I will be nothing but a human utterance;
but if you are silent, he adds, and let me go to the Father,
I will become a word of God.

So also now, the one we have known for his eloquence, his words,
himself becomes a word of God,
as we learn to see God at work in his creature;
no longer hearing Fr Tom speaking to us, but hearing God speaking to us through him.

May he rest in peace in the hands of his Lord and our Lord,
the one who takes our clay to fashion living human beings, the glory of God;
and may he rise in that glory and as that glory,
both in the resurrection to come, and even now in our midst, in the body of Christ.

AMEN