

HOMILY AT THE SOLEMN PONTIFICAL REQUIEM MASS FOR BISHOP JOSEPH GRECH BENDIGO, 6 JANUARY 2011

At three o'clock on the afternoon of 28 December – the hour of the Lord's own death – Joseph Angelo Grech, sixth Bishop of Sandhurst, breathed his last. This was deep in the Octave of Christmas when we were celebrating birth, even though the shadow of death loomed large on the feast of the Holy Innocents on which Bishop Joe died. His passing was peaceful – in fact it was barely observable. Most of us were standing by the bed, but Fr Karmel Borg, wonderful friend and wise guide to Joe for many years, was sitting a little away, watching the monitor that showed the ebbing of life. It was Karmel who noticed the moment of death, rose to his feet, approached the bed and said in a way I will never forget, "Good-bye, Joe". There was so much in those simple words – words so human, so faith-filled, so loving and grateful: "Good-bye, Joe". They are words that we echo this afternoon, words of farewell and gratitude as only Christians can speak in the face of death.

Walking away from the hospital, I thought of T. S. Eliot's poem, "The Journey of the Magi", imagined words spoken by one of the Magi in old age, not inappropriate on this 6 January: "...were we lead all that way for / Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly, / We had evidence and no doubt. I have seen birth and death, / But had thought they were different". Was it a death or a birth that we witnessed on 28 December? There was a death, certainly; we had evidence and no doubt. There was no way back for Joe. But there was surely a way forward – a great birth into God, foreshadowed long ago in Joe's baptism.

In Bishop Joe's life, there were many little deaths to prepare him for the death that came last week. I first met him forty years ago when he came to begin theological studies at Corpus Christi College in Melbourne. Archbishop Gonzi of Malta had said to his many seminarians that they could go anywhere in the world to finish their training, work for seven years in the diocese of their choice and then decide whether or not to return to Malta. At first Joe wanted to go to America, but eventually he decided on Australia and came to Melbourne. He settled quickly, showed himself a bright student and fine companion, was ordained in Malta in 1974 and came back to Melbourne to work. After the allotted seven years, Joe decided to stay for life. And what a gain that was for us.

A turning-point for Joe came early in his priestly life when he was touched by the charismatic renewal, and how right it is that the readings of this Mass have spoken of the gift of Holy Spirit. Joe's ministry was in many ways the Holy Spirit's work of art. It had about it a touch of Pentecost, the sense of a new beginning, the roots of which however reached deep into the mighty heritage of Maltese faith. In earlier times, the charismatic renewal was regarded as something exotic, even a little suspect. Joe was exotic enough being Maltese, but to be Maltese and charismatic meant that he was exotic to the power of two. Looking back now, I can see that Joe Grech's career reflects the way in which the charismatic renewal has moved from the margin of Church life to the centre. Its influence is now found everywhere.

After some years as Assistant Priest, Joe was made Parish Priest of East Brunswick, which became a centre of vibrant Catholic life under the influence of the charismatic renewal. He was then sent to study in Rome, and this added breadth and depth to the charismatic impulse which was becoming stronger in his life. Upon his return from Rome, Joe was appointed full-time chaplain to the Catholic charismatic renewal in the Archdiocese, and this made him godfather to the many prayer groups, especially Italian-speaking ones, that sprang up all over Melbourne and beyond. He also established schools of evangelisation which stirred energy for mission, turning hearers of the Word into heralds of the Word. All of this was a crucial ministry, without which many would have gone elsewhere. It also helped the rest of us to see that the only way forward for the Church is to become more missionary. Yet in some ways it made Joe seem a marginal presence in the Archdiocese, an increasingly exotic figure who was underestimated by some, as he was at different times throughout his life.

A sign that things were changing in the Church came when Archbishop Pell chose Joe to be spiritual director of the seminary, an appointment which surprised some who either didn't know Joe or who underestimated him. The same reaction came when he stood in as Vicar General for a time and even more when he was appointed Auxiliary Bishop of Melbourne. The seemingly exotic man from Malta had moved decisively to the centre, and that was a sign of what was happening in the Church in this country and around the world. For Joe, it meant leaving behind much that he cherished: was it a death or a birth? His episcopal ordination – which sadly I couldn't attend – was by all accounts an unforgettable occasion. It was a triumph not so much for Joe himself but for all those who had felt themselves on the margin of Church life, especially perhaps those from ethnic communities not belonging to the Anglo-Celtic tribe.

Bishop Joe then moved to the Western region of the Archdiocese for which he seemed so well suited. He clearly thought that there he would spend the rest of his life. He set about planning and building a house in West Footscray – and what a house it was! Known affectionately as Casa Costalot, it was almost finished when Bishop Joe was appointed to the diocese of Sandhurst. He never lived in the house he built, but I did: so thanks, Joe...much appreciated. The appointment to Bendigo was a bombshell he didn't see coming, and to the day he died, I think, he wondered about it. Was it a death or a birth?

Whatever about his wondering, Joe applied himself to the mission with all his gifts. To the diocese, he brought faith, energy, humanity, enthusiasm, encouragement, simplicity – all gifts of the Spirit. He became a bush bishop, and only because Jesus is Lord. Bishop Joe may have been puzzled by the call, but he heard in it the voice of Jesus. "He has sent me to bring good news" (Isa 61:1): that was his response. So out into the bush he went, to Bendigo and far beyond. The boy from Balzan had come a long way.

Through this time, Bishop Joe was becoming more and more an international figure within the charismatic renewal, and he could have been full-time travelling the world as a preacher and teacher. Invitations came thick and fast, and it wasn't easy for Joe to balance these with his growing commitments in the diocese and the Bishops Conference. At times people forget that all bishops are involved on three

levels – local, national and international. Most people see only the local. But some bishops are involved more than others at the national and international level – and Joe Grech was one of those. Here today it's good for us to recall that Bishop Joe's death will be lamented around the world because he was such a servant of the universal Church.

For all his vivacity, there was a darker side to Bishop Joe – especially perhaps after his brush with mortality when his blood condition first emerged. He spoke to me of how that illness had shaken his confidence; he spoke of the burden of loneliness, especially when travelling on his own; he spoke of how stressful he found the conflict that comes to any bishop; he spoke of a lingering weariness – indeed he once went to sleep on me over a meal in Rome. So much for my sparkling conversation. In ways not always obvious, Bishop Joe had to wrestle with the dark angel, alone and at midnight. Yet many of the best things of Joe Grech came from that struggle. He bore a cross, but it was the Lord's Cross because, far from destroying him, it made him what he was. Was it death or was it birth?

We gather in Sacred Heart Cathedral to say, "Good-bye, Joe". But we also say, "Thank you, Joe: *grazzi hafna!*" Thanks for so many beautiful and surprising things through your beautiful and surprising life, cut short in a way neither you nor we expected.

When the tubby little guy from Malta arrived in Melbourne forty years ago on this very day, who would have imagined the path that was opening up before him? Who would have thought that we would be burying him as Bishop of Sandhurst? How strange, how surprising it has all been, but how wonderful and how much a gift. That's why our thanks are not just to Bishop Joe but to God who is the One without whom nothing about Joe Grech can be understood, nothing in life and nothing in death.

As I walked from the deathbed out into the sunlight, I thought of the Holy Innocents. I had a merry vision of the baby boys of Bethlehem, now all smiles, taking Joe by the hand and leading him to God on the far side of death and saying to God, "Look who we found". Joe, I'm sure, would have been in his element with the little ones. There was a nice touch of the child in him, and he was always great with the young. God would recognise Joe immediately and say to him simply, "Thanks for all you've done, good and faithful servant, impassioned and joyful witness". And Joe would reply in that way of his, "Praise God".

Joseph Angelo Grech was born on 10 December and died on 28 December; he was ordained priest on 30 November and bishop on 10 February – all in summer time. He was very much a fruit of summer, very much a child of the sun: how often did people call him warm? We pray now, in the faith of Easter, that, beyond the great birth, Bishop Joe will enter the eternal sabbath of God where the sun never sets and where peace is complete, "the peace of quietness", as St Augustine says, "the peace of the sabbath, a peace with no evening" (*Confessions*). Eternal rest give unto him, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon him. May he rest in peace.

Amen.