

A Breath of Life from the Wilderness - 106 - Fr. Joseph A. E. Sullivan Funeral

Father Joseph Albert Earl Sullivan is dead. He lived among us for a quarter of a century; then was ordained, and with great enthusiasm – if not always in pleasant circumstances – Fr. Joe served his God and his Church as a priest of Jesus Christ for over 36 years, and now, he is gone.

Cathie Macaulay recently visited with Fr. Joe who found consolation meditating on St. Joseph and Joseph of Arimathea who cared for Jesus at the beginning and end of his life. How do we cope with our trials, which can leave us feeling bruised, hurt, perplexed, and even revolted? Our heart goes into emotional shock when the full intensity of our feelings could very well kill us. I am grateful today for the gift of being able to pray for Fr. Joe on July 26th, the annual Memorial of Saints Joachim and Anne, Mary's parents and the grandparents of Jesus.

We are here to pray for Joe, Fr. Joe, yes, but also to pray for ourselves and our loved ones. The apostles and disciples of Jesus became a close knit family that loved and supported one another. Fr. Joe found much comfort and consolation with many people of faith, but especially with his family. He cared about his siblings and their children and took to heart their concerns, troubles, and joys, and was grateful for their love now that he was no longer able to go out to them.

Father Joe firmly believed that Jesus rose from the dead on the 3rd day and that extraordinary signs marked the days of Jesus' passion and death, the days of shock, fear, and waiting, and the amazing days of Jesus' appearances. Fr. Joe must be delighted that he died July 20th, 50 years to the day after human beings first stepped onto the dust of the moon. Unlike those who see no evidence of God in space, Fr. Joe saw evidence of God's presence and action among the stars, yes, but more simply in the ordinary events of life, as the early followers of Jesus did.

In 1983, shortly before our respective ordinations to the priesthood, I got caught up by Joe and his buddies in their enthusiasm over "Star Wars" and went with them to see "The Return of the Jedi". I remember Joe telling us how he had counted over 3 dozen religious signs, symbols, or allusions in the Star Wars films. To put it in those terms – considering all that he went through in his life – we could say that all along the way, "**the Force has been with Fr. Joe**" and he waged a valiant battle against the "**dark side**". So have many of us in our local Church.

Our Church's troubles were a deep shock for Fr. Joe because of his great sensitivity and love for people in general, parishioners, the Church, God, and also those most affected. The "dark side" ever seeks to exploit human weakness and to destroy all that is true, good, and beautiful. For the sake of the innocent we must all remain ever vigilant to resist all manifestations of evil. The "dark side" attacked him in his body, but Fr. Joe remained steadfast in his resistance. Many of us felt frustrated with Fr. Joe's lack of progress in his physical therapy and thought he should try harder. I cannot count the number of times that I felt angry or incensed at the troubles, obstacles, and delays this man had to suffer. Fr. Joe had reason to feel betrayed, hurt, angry, or depressed, but he resisted being pulled in by trusting in his Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

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Joe also remembered *Yoda*: “**Anger... fear... aggression. The dark side are they. Easily they flow, quick to join you in a fight. If once you start down the dark path, forever will it dominate your destiny, consume you it will, as it did Obi-Wan's apprentice.**” No. Joe walked the way of grace and in prayer he tried to bring his emotions to the Holy Trinity with trust.

Joe took interest in what was going on in the world. He felt the trouble, suffering, confusion and ill will, the expansion of the dark side, but with trust in Jesus he kept turning his attention to the Father in prayer. It is daunting to feel the world’s pain. It costs us to be shocked as people of all ages, especially the young, put a premature end to their lives. It takes our breath away; we may be loath to slow down and pray because it hurts too much to look directly at all that pain.

It is a challenge for us to relax with trust and let God fashion our lives through events that come our way. We hesitate to open up completely to anyone. This is why no one knows the complete Joe Sullivan except God. Each person in Joe’s life touched different depths in him and brought out different expressions of his person. That is true for every human being. One person brings out my tenderness, another brings out my enthusiasm, yet another stimulates my interest or teaches me something new, while yet another triggers my irritation or activates my love, and a seventh unlocks my sense of humour. No one knows all of me, or all of you, except God.

God wants us to have the peace and joy to know and love our whole self. Then we may be freer and more willing to love others better and to love God back for all the love He gives us. I give thanks to God for using Fr. Joe to bring me to face parts of myself that I had been avoiding. I believe that we who are here today all have reason to thank God for the gift of Fr. Joe.

Joe struggled more valiantly than Old Testament Job this past decade. It becomes evident how little control we have over any aspect of our lives. It is quite literally true that from day to day and from moment to moment we are constantly waiting on God, waiting on divine providence to manifest itself, waiting for the Father to show us his will; so that, like Jesus, we may give thanks and let the Holy Spirit empower us to accept to live fully all that life brings our way.

John in his Gospel describes Jesus’ passion and death on the Cross as his **glory**. This was the shocking way the mercy of God became fully visible as He freely surrendered his life in a most terrible death in order to demonstrate how **serious** God is in his love for us. God loves us **so much** and He respects our freedom **so much** that He will even allow us to put him to death.

As Jesus visibly disappeared at his Ascension; so now Fr. Joe too is gone from our sight. Now Fr. Joe enters into the communion of saints. We will continue to be one in mind and heart with Fr. Joe through prayer and in all the good that we daily choose to do with him and with Jesus. Jesus won the victory over evil and death and He offers all of humanity to share in his victory.

Fr. Joe wants us to continue to share fully even now in this new life introduced by Jesus.
“O my Jesus, I trust in You. O my Jesus, I.... Where You have gone we hope to follow.”