

**HOMILY FOR THE FUNERAL OF MGR. RALPH BROWN
ARCHBISHOP GEORGE STACK
WESTMINSTER CATHEDRAL
21 JANUARY 2014**

“Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at the close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.”

I sometimes thought that those words of the Welsh poet Dylan Thomas would describe Ralph Brown as he came to terms with old age, struggled with physical infirmity and finally faced death. The fact that he died peacefully, surrounded by his faithful friends, and fortified by the Rites of Holy Mother Church were all reflections of the happiness and fulfillment he found in a home dedicated to the Holy Cross.

He could have raged against the indignity of the amputation of his leg and all that signified in terms of restricted mobility, dependence on others and the physical and psychological challenges which it brought. He may even have prayed the words from the Book of Lamentations we have just heard:

“And now I say ‘My strength is gone,
That hope which came from the Lord’. (3:19)

Rejecting the struggles of a prosthetic leg, and feeling secure with the community at St. Wilfred’s, Ralph announced he was entering a new phase of his life. Self pity was not to be allowed. Life in a wheelchair was to be another challenge. With the precision and noise, the regime of his carers became yet more opportunities for friendship as he drew them into his larger than life view of the world.

Lamentations again:

“This is what I shall tell my heart,

And so recover hope:

The favours of the Lord are not all past,
His kindnesses are not exhausted;
Every morning they are renewed;
Great is his faithfulness".(3:21)

This intelligent and gifted man would have made a success of whichever career he pursued. His army experience in Korea and with his beloved Middlesex Regiment marked him out as a leader of men. His dabbling with a career in the city was cut short when Mgr. Derek Worlock presented him to Cardinal Griffin. His ordination to the priesthood began a love affair with Westminster Cathedral where he lived for most of his priestly life. He liked priests. He was a valued member of Clergy House. His Presidency of the Old Brotherhood of the English Clergy was something very close to his heart. In all this time he was successfully pioneering the work of the Westminster Tribunal and the Canon Law Society of Great Britain. He was instrumental in developing a worldwide, deepening understanding of the healing remedy of the nullity of marriage. He certainly knew every jot of the Canon Law of Marriage. But it was his passion and compassion for justice and truth and the healing of broken lives which were the hallmark of everything he did.

“The life and death of each of us has its influence on others. If we live, we live for the Lord. If we die, we die for the Lord, so that alive or dead we belong to the Lord”. (Romans 14:7)

All of us here today are a testament to the influence of Ralph's life on others. His gift of friendship, his ability to link people together and maintain contact with each other. We call it communion. The birthday cards and anniversary greetings. The letters of congratulation or the words of support in a bereavement. All done with military precision on the one hand, but with a sincere and loving heart on the other. His family and friends were an enormous support to him and were a source of great pride and joy . His coordination of the Pope's visit in 1982 resulted in “The Friends of

the Holy Father”. They, and the Knights of the Holy Sepulchre, testify to the energy, efficiency and enthusiasm he brought to the work of these organizations. The Polish community honoured him, too, with the Order of Merit because of his work for them. Many of us never learned the distinction between the word “pilgrimage” and “holiday” in the journies he led with these organizations and the adventures they shared together!

But now I must obey the request, or was it the order, which he gave me in the instructions attached to his will. I quote: “....it would obviously be appropriate to mention purgatory in the homily. Please read this passage from ‘To be a Pilgrim’ by Cardinal Hume”. Yes, Ralph....

“Judgment is whispering into the ear of a merciful and compassionate God the story of my life which I have never been able to tell. Many of us have a story, or part of one at any rate, about which we have never been able to speak to anyone. Fear of being misunderstood. Inability to understand ourselves. Ignorance of the darker side of our hidden lives, or just shame, make it very difficult for many people. The true story of our life is not told, or only half of it is. What a relief it will be to be able to whisper freely and fully into that merciful and compassionate ear. After all, that is what he has always wanted. He receives us, His prodigal children, now contrite and humble, with an embrace. In that embrace we start to tell him our story and He begins that process of healing and preparation which we call Purgatory”.

(“To be a Pilgrim” by Basil Hume. pp228-229)

Thank you, Ralph, for the gift of yourself. Thank you for sharing so much of the story of your life the journey of your faith. Thank you for your passion for justice, your gift of friendship, your example of priestly life, your embrace of the cross and your sheer joy in living. Bishop John Crowley’s words at the funeral of Cardinal Hume in this Cathedral fifteen years ago are as appropriate today as when they were spoken: “If such is the gift, what must God - the Giver of that gift - be like?”.