

Dear Friends and Visitors

Homily at the Funeral Mass for Fr Richard E. Fox, OCSO, Monk of Assumption Abbey, Ava,
January 8, 2005

Lamentations 3: 17 - 26

Romans 8: 14 - 23

Matthew 11: 25 - 30

" I tell myself my future is lost..." (Lamentations 3).

Death certainly puts these words into our minds if not into our mouths. Death is so final. A last breath, with none to follow; a last heartbeat, the pulse and blood pressure zero.



My future is lost? Everything ends, blush becomes ashen, warm cold, and supple stiff. Death, the death of a brother, a friend, makes us wonder, doubt even...The Psalms give us words: "Do you work your wonders for the dead? Do the shades stand up and praise you? Is your love proclaimed in the grave? My only friend is darkness."

As Christians, we want to say, "And yet..." and we are right.

But before the yet can really claim our allegiance, before we can make these other words of Lamentations our own -- "The favors of the Lord are not exhausted...they are renewed each morning, so great is his faithfulness" --; before we can embrace the hope for "the glory to be revealed" that is "beyond comparison with the sufferings of this present time;" before we can say "and yet" to death, we have to admit the fact of death, its finality, its grimness; and we have to allow our dark thoughts, our tears, our sense of disorientation, our sense that normality

has slipped.

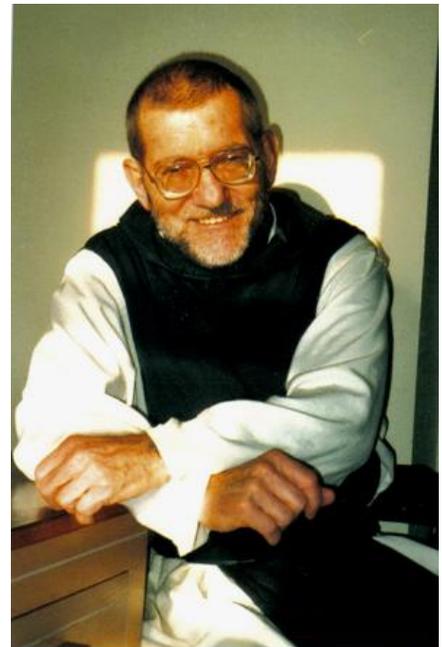
There is death. Here is death. Richard has died, and in Richard we see so many others. We see ourselves, there.

I was at Guadalupe Abbey when Richard died, and returned home immediately the news reached me. On the morning of the day Richard died, one of the monks there shared with me he lectio for that day.



Somehow, it was important to me that he was an older monk. It was a verse from Hebrews, chapter 2: "Since the children share in blood and flesh, he -- Jesus -- likewise shared in them, that through death he might destroy the power of death, that is, the devil, and free those who through fear of death had been subject to slavery all their life."

This text does several important things. First, it pinpoints for us the problem of death, the reason for our profound disturbance in the face of it: fear. Death strikes fear, and holds us captive to fear. This fear, secondly, is really the devil. If the Holy Spirit is the Paraclete, the Comforter, the devil is the opposite. The devil is the great discourager: "You can't do it; you will fail, and death proves it." Fear, then, is the devil's noose and hobble and keeps us small and timid.



Finally, the text from Hebrews tells us where the light comes from to expose the lie and set us free. It is Jesus; Jesus, who is Life and the Source of Life, shared our flesh and blood, becoming like us in every way, but fear. Like a big sister leading a small sibling to her first day of school, Jesus precedes us into death, into the darkness; and through his resurrection, in flesh and blood like ours, gives us reason enough now to say to death, "And yet..." "I am the resurrection and the life," says Jesus to Martha; "whoever believes in me, even if he dies he will live. Do you believe this?"

"Yes, Lord, I have come to believe," said Fr Richard. "He shared in our flesh and blood." The text of Hebrews is talking about Jesus, a man like us in all things but sin. But I can apply it to Fr Richard, too. In the last four years, especially, confined to bed, confined to the mercy and

ministrations of others, mostly strangers, in absolutely everything except thought, dreams, and the silent prayers of his heart, he was like Jesus who humbled himself to assume the form of a slave. In that bed and in that geri-chair, Richard Fox shared in our flesh and blood in a more radical and profound way than most of us ever will or will want to.

In those four years, he sat more in the shadow of death than he did walk in the light of life. Yet in his antecedent participation in death, Fr Richard taught us what true life is; he taught us the power and vigor that destroys the thrall of death. Richard lived in death without fear, without self-pity, without wearing his heart on his sleeve, asking nothing, and accepting everything so graciously that the staff at Mercy Villa loved him and were always blown away that he would help them help him. It was Richard, but not Richard who lived, of course; it was Christ living in him.

Richard was Christ, not dead, but resurrecting before our eyes.

But also in his vigor, as i knew him for only a few years and most of you for decades, Richard Fox shared our flesh and blood. He was more human than many of us let ourselves be. He was a man you felt real comfortable with. He was not self-conscious, not guarded. He spoke his mind, usually before he took time to think much about the words, so it came out honest and unfiltered. People felt that with Richard they could be themselves because he was himself. He was not a carboard man, and not a cardboard monk. He was real, flesh and blood.



Here is a poem:

There's a thread you follow. It goes among
things that change. But it doesn't change.
People wonder about what you are pursuing.
You have to explain about the thread.
But it is hard for others to see.
While you hold it you can't get lost.
Tragedies happen; people get hurt
or die; and you suffer and get old.
Nothing you do can stop time's unfolding.

You don't ever let go of the thread. (William Stafford, d. 1993)

Looking at Richard's life, you might not see the thread of it. He asks us if we can see our own thread.

One strand of Richard's thread was his monastic vocation. In May of 1951, when he was not yet 18 years old and just graduating from high school, Richard Fox sent his application to New Melleray and he entered that July. At times, you might have thought that strand unraveled and fell off. At 33 he took a leave, got exclaustated, and pursued something under the cover of academia, getting degrees from St Thomas University and Notre Dame. At one point, he took a psychology course at St Catherine's College in St Paul, MN. He wrote in a letter, "I am the only male in class. The teacher is Mrs. _____. I figured she would be an old hag, almost ready for retirement, who had a very frustrating life teaching silly college girls. It turns out that Mrs. _____ is better looking than any of the students. I have no problems paying attention in class."



He traveled: Israel, Spain, Ireland, Portugal, the Netherlands, until, nine years later, in 1975, in a greeting card with a picture of a white kitten and a red rose on it he writes to the abbot here, "Dear Robert, I have made a decision about my future. I have decided to return to Ava and should be back there sometime toward the end of November," and he was, on December 8, close enough. His decision "about his future" was really an honoring of his decision of the past, his thread. "I have worked through a number of problems and feel I can return to the Trappists."

He was a generous monk, faithful in all things, even though he discovered -- and this is wisdom -- that in fact he had not worked through all his problems, and was honest enough to admit it and to keep on working.

Another strand of Richard's thread was music. Already at 18 he could tell New Melleray he had a "true voice," with two years of private lessons under his belt. At Ava, under the first abbot, Dom Bruno, Richard learned Gregorian chant so well that it qualified as fulfilling the fine arts requirement for a degree at St Thomas University. Just a few weeks ago at Richard's bedside I was singing the Salve and Richard was silently mouthing the words, when suddenly he voiced one syllable, perfect pitch.

Other strands of Richard's thread were friendship, long and faithful; his lectio divina, his prayer, and his priesthood. All his strands were shown tightly bonded when he returned to his monastery last Friday, and breathed his last breath in relief, satisfaction and peace, among his brothers.

Richard Fox has left a legacy. He ran, as Benedict urged him, while he had the light of life. Even as he sat in the shadow of death, the darkness of death never overtook him. He preached the Gospel from his bed. He was the child to whom the Father revealed his Son, and his whole life was a response to the call of him who shared our flesh and blood, "Come to me, and I will give you rest."

Fr Cyprian, Abbot



