

Homily at the Requiem Mass in Brentwood Cathedral for Hugh van Cutsem on 11th September 2013 by Fr Edward Corbould OSB

‘The life and death of each one of us has its influence on others’ (Romans 14:7)

How true that is, and how relevant in so many ways to Hugh van Cutsem.

So although this is an occasion of great sadness, we must remember that central truth that Jesus died and rose from the dead so that we too should be raised from the dead and be taken home with him when we die. That is the mystery of salvation, that essentially is why we are Christians. So although in our limited human vision this is an occasion of great sadness, in the vision of faith and in the perspective of eternity it is an occasion for thanksgiving, indeed for celebration. It is the fulfilment of life, not the end of it.

For Hugh we can be sure that his death has led to the fulfilment of his life. He was a deeply good man, and I have no doubt has gone straight to heaven. I could end here because that essentially is what matters. But I do want to say a little more precisely because of that sentence from St Paul’s letter to the Romans – ‘The life and death of each one of us has its influence on others’, because Hugh’s goodness had a profound influence on others; it spread far and wide.

He taught us all so much. He taught us all the central importance of the family. He and Emilie created a loving family and that is being passed on to the next generation. The family was the firm foundation on which his life was based: it meant everything to him. He was a person of transparent integrity and possessed natural good manners and courtesy. There was nothing superficial about this, it came from deep inside the man himself. There is that little poem by Hilaire Belloc entitled ‘Courtesy’ which has the line ‘and the grace of God is in courtesy’, which indeed it is. It was most certainly in Hugh. He had time for people, and the giving of time is the giving of oneself. He made everybody feel important because everybody was important.

Then he taught us the importance of place. We live in a society which is restless, always on the move, always wanting to be elsewhere. Hugh was supremely happy to be at Hilborough in the Norfolk countryside or at Mossdale in the Yorkshire Pennines. He had a deep stability. He was a countryman rooted in the natural world to which he was devoted. His love of field sports sprang from this. He saw that they were part of the cement which bound local society together. His passionate concern for conservation was a by-product of it. The estate he created at Hilborough is nothing short of a triumph. St Augustine saw in nature what he called the ‘*vestigia Dei*’, the footprints of God. Hugh would have related to that.

He epitomised so many of those demanding qualities of true love described by St Paul: ‘Love is patient and kind, it is never boastful or conceited.....it is always ready to excuse, to trust, to hope and to endure whatever comes’. It is a demanding list and Hugh measured up remarkably well to it. That great Spanish saint of the sixteenth century, St John of the Cross once wrote: ‘in the evening of life we shall be examined in love’. Hugh will not be found wanting.

He was a man of great gentleness, humility and modesty, those sterling qualities which protect all others and which acknowledge the frailty of human nature. For Hugh knew his dependence on God’s grace. But the measure of the man in so many ways is seen in the way he approached death. Hugh had much time to contemplate this. He suffered from a long and debilitating illness

which saw his many talents diminish. His acceptance of all this was nothing short of heroic. He knew his illness was terminal, but he bore it with quite remarkable courage, calm, patience and dignity, supported by the selfless loving care of Emilie and the family, and of Robbie, Jane and Sheila. It was uplifting to be with him for he never complained and there was no self-pity. Suffering, when accepted, is redemptive; it deepens the soul. One is reminded of Jesus talking to his disciples: 'If anyone wants to be a follower of mine let him take up his cross and follow me'. And that is what Hugh did. What an example for us all.

Hugh was a man at peace. He was at peace with himself, at peace with others and at peace with God. It was only to be expected that when he and Emilie built Hilborough that they should build a chapel, outside which later today he will be buried. Indeed his faith formed the backdrop of his life. But faith only becomes deep when it is tested, and Hugh's faith was most certainly tested, but it was deep, very deep, and his peace was a by-product of it. That peace was based on an inner freedom which begins in the human heart. It is based on a life of wanting what is right, striving for what is good. Notice those words 'wanting', 'striving' – that is what is important. It is based on a life in which peace is found not so much in achievements, although as we know Hugh achieved so much, but on a life in which peace is found in the love and concern for others, and ultimately in the realisation that one is loved unconditionally by God – God who forgives us, protects us, shares his life with us (and that includes our suffering), God who promises us eternal life.

So for Hugh we can do nothing but rejoice. But for us, of course, we feel the pain, we grieve. We are human and the absence of Hugh's physical presence is deeply painful. We find it hard to 'let go', because part of our human condition is to be possessive. We have an aversion to losing anything, let alone someone we love. It matters little that we have had time to prepare for it. And yet we have to remind ourselves that Hugh is with God, totally loved, totally fulfilled. One of the glimpses we have of eternal life is that those we love are never absent from us, even in death.

So, Hugh, we have so much for which to thank you. In your life and in your death you have been our teacher, a teacher in a most profound way. You have given us the witness of a deeply good man, whose life was utterly authentic. So, please God, as we go through life eventually to face death, we too shall be at peace like Hugh.

So we ask God to give Hugh eternal life, eternal love. And now we have to let him go and give him back to God, into God's love. For us that is not easy, but when we do, our new life will be deeper, closer to God and closer to each other.

I would like to finish by quoting that great Dominican mystic of the late fourteenth century, Meister Eckhart, who once said 'If the only prayer I ever make is 'Thank You' it is enough'. So today we say to God 'Thank you for giving us Hugh van Cutsem'.

May he rest in Peace.