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## **MASS OF CHRISTIAN BURIAL**

**REVEREND EDWIN BENEDICT JOHNSON, S.M.**

**Friday, 4 May 2007**

“Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven.”

It is in this spirit of rejoicing that we gather this evening. A Funeral Director recently made the comment that dealing with plans for funerals is so much easier when the family brings to the planning a deep spirit of FAITH. And a Director of the Office of Word and Worship commented that there is one thing we Catholics know how to do with class, style, and profound meaning: send our loved ones off to heaven.

We gather tonight as a believing community; and we are a hope filled community as we continue to celebrate the Resurrection of the Lord and our own promise of eternal life. We are a Resurrection people.

BUT it is still very difficult to say goodbye to the people we LOVE, no matter how beautiful, creative and masterful the ceremonial send-off; no matter how deep and strong our faith and hope.

But our difficulty rises not from concern about Father Edwin. If we loved him here in this world, we know the Lord has loved him all the more and will take good care of him. It is ourselves who mourn, because there is a great loss for us. As one of Edwin's good friends said, “I sense a deep VOID in my life.” And so if we mourn tonight, we mourn for OURSELVES, not for Edwin.

Edwin spent nearly fifty years as a Marianist. In the Rule of Life of the Society of Mary we read: “ God asks us to follow in a special way Jesus Christ, Son of God, become Son of Mary for the salvation of all. Our goal is to be transformed into his likeness and work for the coming of his kingdom.” Jesus' kingdom is one of communion with God, His Father. His message was one of LIFE and LOVE. How often do we read in the Gospels Jesus making reference to LIFE. “I have come here for one reason only: that you may have life and have it to the fullest possible extent.”

So Edwin spent those years living God's life, sharing God's life with others, bringing LIFE and LOVE to everyone he met. One person, upon hearing of Edwin's death, commented simply: "he saved my life."

In thinking of Edwin one word comes to mind: PEOPLE. A young Marianist who had not known Edwin very long was asked what he would remember of Edwin. He said he would always remember him for having shown personal interest in him, for having supported him and affirmed him. Edwin was interested in people, gave life to people, and drew life from people.

A few years ago there was a popular song entitled: People: "people, people who need people, are the luckiest people in the world." :Luckiest, yes. But also happiest, even holiest, and indeed the most Christ-like people in the world!

Edwin was interested in EVERYONE: his family, his fellow religious, many communities of women religious, parishioners, students and former students. And everyone remembered HIM. His attention and paternal care went out especially to young people, his students. For example, at Chaminade College Prep Middle School in Los Angeles where he was chaplain, he often told the students in homilies and talks: you people are awesome, a word their principal used often to affirm and encourage them.

Edwin told them they were awesome; and they thought Fr. Ed was awesome, too.

He wanted to be known and remembered by everyone and wanted to remember everyone too. And he became IRRITATED [and you thought he was always sweet!!] if someone did not remember him or his name. He felt that he had failed in relating successfully to that person in a loving and life-giving way, if he had not impacted that person enough to be remembered by him!

How many telephones did he have? [He was always complaining about dropped calls and in exasperation sometimes called his phone "my ghetto phone."] He was surely the phone company's stellar customer. He would call people just to see how they were doing and to remain part of their lives. He wanted to know everything, and – especially important - he wanted to know it FIRST. He had friendly (and at times not so friendly) running contests with close friends to know something of interest or a piece of news, and to know it BEFORE the other person did! We called him "INFORMATION CENTRAL."

To be a follower of Christ, then, is to live and share life. It is to make a GIFT of self to others. Often it was noticed that even when he didn't feel all that great himself, he had only to come onto the Middle School campus, see the young people there gather around him with affection, and then he would immediately brighten up and find the energy to beam, smile, and shower them all with his affection. There is an old philosophical/theological principle which says [I am sure your education enables all to follow the Latin!!] bonum diffusivum sibi: goodness, by its very nature, diffuses and spreads itself outward and is shared with others. Doesn't that sound like Edwin?

Yet, our Edwin was very HUMAN. And because of that human-ness, he was able to relate so well with others with sensitivity and understanding. Although he strove all his life to be more and more like Christ, he was still human and had his shortcomings and faults. And although we LOVED him, we could not help but be at times exasperated by him! Maybe we loved him all the more because of it!! Certainly he could exasperate his doctors!! Certainly he could exasperate his fellow brothers and close friends. He suffered much and long from the disease of diabetes. And so, of course, he craved sweets. You could arrive to visit him and immediately (almost without even greeting or welcoming you) he would say in a little child's voice: "What did you bring for Edwin?" What he wanted, of course, was candy. Preferably a two- or better a three-pound box of See's nuts and chews. If you imprudently brought some to him, he would thank you, but then feeling a bit guilty he would say, "You better keep the box in your room so I am not constantly tempted." But come back to your room later, open the box, and you would find a whole collection of empty wrappers!! Now I wonder who....? If you were going shopping he would ask for some candy, one of the first choices being a BabyRuth. Now of course, the king size, not the ordinary size. That way he could claim to have eaten only one bar!

[You may have heard that at the Middle School, after the prayer service in Edwin's honor, each of the students – some six hundred of them – was given a BabyRuth bar as a remembrance. And the bar put into his coffin just a few minutes ago better be the jumbo or king size, or we're in for trouble!!]

Visiting him in ICU after he suffered another heart attack we were faced with a very serious and unhappy man saying to us: I am giving you a MANDATE! I am giving you a MANDATE (as he shook his finger at us!): I -- WANT – SOME – CHOCOLATE!!!

When we refused, he found some rather unkind words to lay on us!! When asked at a board meeting later that day just how Fr. Edwin was doing, I reported

that he had cussed at me, so that was a sign of recovery! [Some of the board members couldn't believe that he used such language! I could believe it!!

When he was discouraged or very tired after a day of ministry he would tell us: I am going to the kitchen and have a big bowl of ice cream – as compensation for the bad day. When things went well and he was happy at some outcome of another day, he would say he was going to the kitchen and have a big bowl of ice cream!! And none of that sugar free or no sugar added junk, either. Only the real thing!

We might laugh, but it was tough on him and not much fun! Yet there were other more profound sufferings in his life. Especially when he was a young man he suffered from the deep prejudice of ignorant and bigoted people because of his race. Some of his stories would relate events that would almost go beyond belief. And these events happened not only in another part of our country or only decades ago. He did not often talk about these events, but he related an experience right here in Silicon Valley among our supposedly broadminded and Christian people. While ministering in a parish he went one evening to the funeral home for a wake/rosary service. After he arrived the Funeral Director came to him –totally embarrassed – to tell him that the family would not accept him and wanted the mortuary to find a white priest to lead the prayers!! Fortunately, the white priest who was pastor, when informed of the situation, refused to go if Fr. Edwin was not acceptable!! But because he was hurt and wounded himself, deeply at times, he was all the better able to be so attuned to the sufferings of others and be so compassionate and pastoral in ministering to them. Again, people were his focus and principal interest. The relationship between our humanness and our ability to love is so beautifully related in the Gospel. You remember the woman who used expensive oil to anoint Jesus' feet. She was criticized and Jesus was criticized for allowing it to happen. Jesus said that it was precisely because of her own experience and sense of being forgiven much and healed of her spiritual wounds, that it was possible for her to love so profoundly and minister so lovingly to him. Fr. Edwin 's own hurts and sense of humanness and even sinfulness gave him a large capacity to LOVE other very human persons.

And so we come to say thank you to this man of LIFE and LOVE, this follower of Jesus and of His Beloved Mother Mary, to commend him to the loving mercy and compassion of our God, to remind the Lord just how much Edwin strove to be like his Son, Jesus, in this life, and to thank our God for the GIFT which was and continues to be in our hearts and lives: Fr. Edwin.

Rest in peace, Edwin. GOD LOVE YOU!!! WE LOVE YOU!!!

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