

marist⁺s all

Eulogy for Brother Leonard Alphonse Voegtle

(May 22, 1933 - March 31, 2001)

Eulogy given by Brother Philip Robert at the Mass of Resurrection at St. Vincent's Church, Bayonne, NJ Wednesday, April 4th, 2001

Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could have a group eulogy to share "Leonard's story"? - so many insights into Len's life, so many stories, so many experiences shared that have touched and shaped our lives. However, since that is not practical, I would encourage us all to continue sharing that story in the days and weeks ahead so that we may never forget the GIFT that Leonard was to us. And Leonard was truly a gift of God to us in this time and in this place in the history of our country and the history of our Congregation.

I would like to dwell for some moments on Leonard as Gift --- God's Gift. First, Leonard was a gift to his parents or should I say Kenneth was a gift to Lillian and Henry Voegtle when he was born in 1933. He was an only child who did his parents proud in his early years through his academic achievements, his keen mind and inquisitive spirit. In time Henry and Lillian were asked to hand over this young man to God and they did so willingly and joyfully. In fact, they were extremely proud of Len becoming a Marist Brother. Through the years they, in turn, became more and more involved in the lives of the Marist Brothers. And Leonard made a point of inviting them to many of our Marist functions. How pleased and proud they were of his achievements and how they enjoyed sharing the limelight with him.

And so it was that in 1947 Kenneth Voegtle entered the Juniorate in Esopus where he became a GIFT to all the young men who would share his years of formation in the Juniorate, Novitiate and Scholasticate. We know he never made the first team in sports -- in fact he probably spent most of his playing time on the 3rd Camp -- he wasn't on the work crews, clearing trees and working the farm land -- he never competed with Solano as house decorator, but he did excel in his own sphere. His dry wit and sense of humor made him popular with his classmates. He had a tremendous command of facts, statistics, stories that helped make any presentation interesting -- a gift he developed and utilized well in his later years. He was a gifted writer and speaker and represented the group well at community functions. He had a brilliant mind which helped him achieve excellence in the academic field. We remember only too well how qualified he was in every respect for a "summa cum laude" when he graduated from Marist College in 1954 but because of an unfortunate decision, he never received the honor. Yet, in his modesty he never harbored any resentment.

Leonard was truly a GIFT to the Province. After only a few years of teaching and four years of advanced studies, he was called upon in 1968 to lead the Esopus province as Provincial - a time when many Brothers were avoiding leadership responsibilities. The winds of Vatican II were blowing, the times were changing and so was Religious Life. In the midst of this turbulent sea, Leonard remained calm (or so it appeared on the outside) and he tried to keep the ship on course and steer it the best he could. Many of the Brothers who were questioning Religious Life for themselves found in Len a patient listener and a supportive guide.

Throughout all this uncertainty, Leonard placed his trust in God and depended on the Holy Spirit to lead and to guide.

While living with him at St. Helena's and working out of the Roslyn office, I discovered Leonard to be a man of deep prayer, a confrere with a strong spirit of faith and extremely serious about developing and deepening his relationship with God. Through his monthly newsletters and the various prayer weekends he helped organize, he urged us all to take seriously the development of our life of prayer. Some years ago when asked what quality he would look for if he were thinking of moving to a new community, he listed in first place, "prayerfulness" I'm quite certain that the Brothers who have been close to him and who have lived with him these past two years and more specifically the last several months have come to experience and appreciate his deep faith, his closeness to God and his willingness to live out God's will.

These past few years have also been an occasion for Leonard to continue contributing to the province. His dream was to organize an archives for the two American provinces and write a history of the Marist Brothers in the United States. The office finally has a home in Esopus and the first volume of Marist history was published a few years ago thanks to his perseverance and enthusiasm.

Leonard was a GIFT to the Congregation. At a time when we American Marists were not very warm to pursuing the cause of canonization of Father Champagnat - at a time when our knowledge of our Founder was superficial and even erroneous, Leonard began, ever so slowly to change our attitudes and opinions. He made it a point to study in depth the life and legacy of Marcellin and to offer some glimpses of the Saint on retreats, on contact weekends, on workshops and through conferences. His style and the warmth of his presentations helped change in us the image of a cold, jansenistic French priest to a warm, zealous, and fun loving father who cherished his small band of disciples. Thanks to Leonard we have grown to admire, respect and love our Founder and to be proud of his being recently declared a saint. Over the last several years, Leonard continued to spread devotion to Champagnat by leading all the English speaking pilgrimages to the Hermitage and by translating several French publications into English, the most recent being "Avis, Lecons, Sentences" which again reveals a very different Champagnat than the one presented by Brother Jean Baptiste.

In 1967 Leonard was elected to the General Chapter by his American confreres and while there was elected Postulator General. Besides serving as one of Bro Basilio's Councillors, he also undertook to pursue and advance the various Marist causes of beatification and canonization. Not being Italian and not having some necessary connections with the Congregation for the Causes, this became a discouraging and thankless task. Nevertheless, he personally came to a deeper knowledge of Father Champagnat and the early Brothers and he left to his successor, a well organized office. However, during his years on the Council, what pleased him most were the opportunities to leave Rome and to go on province visitations. Thanks to his knowledge of a few languages and his wonderful memory, these visits were a source of relief for him while providing the opportunity to better understand the width and depth of the Congregation's involvement in the Church's mission.

Leonard was a GIFT to the Church When Len was not involved in Marist ministry he found himself working directly for the Church --in 1982 in the Archdiocesan Tribunal of New York, - from 1983 - 1987 in the Diocesan Tribunal in Wheeling

West Virginia and from 1992 - 1997 in the Metropolitan Tribunal of Newark. Thus it was that his degree in Canon Law was put to good use.

Leonard was a GIFT to his friends. And the way he showed it best was through his ministry of letter writing and more recently of e-mailing. Len would win the prize for being number one correspondent. How enjoyable and uplifting it was to be on his mailing list and to receive regular updates on life back home when one was stationed overseas. His letters were long, newsy, humorous and energizing. Len was not hesitant to take long trips to visit friends and he maintained contact with so many Brothers who had left the Congregation. For Leonard, separation did not mean abandonment. For that reason he remained in close contact with the Greater Marist Family and often attended their reunions.

Does this not all sound so perfect -- and yet, for all the magnificent things we can say about Leonard, to complete the picture, we must admit that in his life there was suffering. One would sense at times that Leonard could never live up to the ideal he had set for himself or that others might have set for him. At the heart of his insecurity was the fact that he was so gifted, so talented it was hard for him to be ordinary. Len was brilliant, a great writer and speaker who was loved and appreciated by many but still he remained in constant search for intimacy and acceptance. There were those awkward moments of aloofness and silence when in a group. At times he found it difficult to relate at social gatherings. Yet he longed for more affective support, not certain how to deal with it. And so Leonard suffered from his insecurity and vulnerability. And that was the road that led him to God. With the help of his Spiritual Directors and friends, Leonard was able to take his sufferings and turn them into moments of grace. His weakness became his triumph.

Leonard's final GIFT to us was the inspiring manner in which he embraced the cross of his illness with great courage, good humor and in a spirit of Christian faith. As we know, his sickness lingered for several years and he was in and out of the hospital many times, experiencing numerous blood transfusions and experimental therapies. He once wrote about it in his usual up-beat style "The infusions can leave me feeling a bit nauseous and groggy (Got a pill for that)--- or give me hives (got a pill for that) ----and spending three full mornings a week in Castle Dracula and the afternoons getting back to normal have slowed my work pace a bit, which I of course find frustrating (got to pray for that!). But I bring my briefcase each time, with books to read 'n paperwork to do and apart from being hooked up to the IV I can move around freely; the view over the hills is lovely, the food is good, the nurses are caring - and I'm a lot better off than the oncology in-patients!. Thought to myself the other day, - 'Tis as Jesus said to Peter - when you get older, someone ties your hands (to an IV stand) and you can no longer go where you'd like.... so I gotta like where I can go."

Most of us have probably read Cardinal Bernardin's "The Gift of Peace", his beautiful personal reflections on his struggle with cancer. Leonard said that he found this book very inspiring and reread it several times in his last few weeks as a support in his own sickness. He took solace in such quotes as: "Our understanding of suffering - not merely its inevitability but also its purpose and redemptive value - greatly impacts our ministry of presence. We must let the mystery, the tranquility and the purposefulness of Jesus' suffering become part of our own life before we can become effective instruments in the hands of the Lord for the sake of others." Taking a cue from this, when his doctor told him that he had to learn to move very slowly and give up his active lifestyle, Leonard wrote: "So, I'm learning that illness

is a ministry in its own right, which offers many opportunities to witness to others our inner peace and acceptance and good humor in the face of the frustrating inability to do many things we would like to do, and which we believe we "had" to do." And what a wonderful witness of faith, courage and good humor he gave to all those caretakers at the hospital as well as to the Brothers and friends who visited him or corresponded with him. Leonard truly lived the exhortation that Father Champagnat gave to his Brothers in his Last Will and Testament: "My dear brothers, be faithful to your vocation, love it and persevere courageously"..... and no doubt he took great comfort and support in realizing how "consoling it is, when one has to appear before God, to know that one has lived under the protection of Mary and in her Society!"

How appropriate that Leonard's birth into eternal life took place on a Saturday - Mary's day---- and that we are now paying fitting tribute to his Marist life and ministry at this special time of the liturgical year when we are about to celebrate the Paschal Mystery of Christ's dying and rising a pledge of our own Resurrected life which Leonard is now enjoying, a reward for his dedicated Marist life and ministry. With Cardinal Bernardin, Leonard could certainly say to us today.... "What I would like to leave behind is a simple prayer that each of you may find what I have found - God's special gift to us all: the gift of peace. When we are at peace, we find the freedom to be most fully who we are, even in the worst of times. We let go of what is nonessential and embrace what is essential. We empty ourselves so that God may more fully work within us." I think that Leonard's final correspondence with us would be similar to the Founder's last words to his Brothers ---- "May the grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit be always with you. I leave you all with confidence in the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary until we be all united again in a happy eternity."