

Abbot Raphael's Vigil Reflection

Based on Luke 12: 35-40 --- BE PREPARED

Be Prepared --- Be Prepared ---

We just heard in the introduction from Abbot Michael that one of the tools of good works from the Rule of St. Benedict is to keep death daily before our eyes --- Be prepared ---

I am Fr. John Hagemann OSB and am presently the Prior. It has become our custom in our abbey that the Prior does the vigil when a monk dies. I assure you that I stand before you with not just a little bit of fear and trepidation. I would say a lot of both--- I am shaky right now. A monk --- a priest – a great leader has passed--- his ability to touch people is evidenced by all of you who are here and all who will come tomorrow. For many people who reach the 9th decade of their lives, there are often times not many people who show up for the funeral rites. Most have past already! However, your presence here witnesses to the Ever Ready battery of Abbot Raphael--- going and going. He continued to touch people not only when he was young, but all through his life--- even in old age! Literally, he never stopped!

So we come together tonight I would say to remember--- to remember. We also come together to celebrate longevity of life. We have before us one who just keep going and going and was always prepared.

So I wish to speak of a few of my memories ----

Abbot Raphael first came to Mount Michael in the spring of 1963 --- I came in 1963 as well. Of course there is over 20 years difference in age between us. At that time there was incredible growth for both Mount Michael and Conception Abbey. Abbot Raphael fitted right into that time period of this growth and he was prepared. Already before he was appointed Prior of MM, he had been in administrative roles at Conception Abbey. He rose quickly. The first memory of Abbot Raphael that is very, very strong would be the fall of 1964 – it was in October. It was announced to the monastic community that they would be raised

to the status of an abbey --- no longer dependent on the Mother House of Conception Abbey. I distinctly remember the many tears on that early morning when the announcement was made in chapel. These were tears of great joy! But the memory that will forever stay with me is what happened on January 5, 1965. The temptation for me is to call it an event, but that does not do justice to what this day was. Really it was a spiritual experience. It was the Abbatial Blessing of Abbot Raphael. It certainly marked history in this Archdiocese. It was the first concelebrated mass in this diocese. The music was nothing but awesome –and the congregation participated like no other and because I have always loved to sing, it was a glorious spiritual experience for me. I also distinctly remember Abbot Raphael blessing the entire congregation. He came down the full long aisle of the cathedral, giving his blessing to all on each side of the aisle. Abbot Raphael never really just walked --- he floated. Many at Conception would say that his cassock never touch the floor. So truly he floated down the aisle with grace and fluidity. I will never forget that day.

Another remembrance --- being prepared --- liturgy

I have always been an early riser --- I guess because early in my life I had to get up early to milk cows. This was, of course, before I came to Mount Michael. Sometimes I wish I still had some cows to milk. Anyway--- early morning time in the chapel has always been a part of my monastic life. And so has it been for Abbot Raphael. Over the years I have observed his routine. First he is spent time talking with God in the Blessed Sacrament chapel. Then he comes to the body of the chapel where he has his spiritual books. Ever since Carroll Stuhlmueller wrote his Biblical Mediations on the 3 year cycle of mass readings, Abbot Raphael faithfully enhanced his lectio with these mediations. I am sure that he could tell anyone what the gospel was about on any given day or the other readings for that matter. He was always an inspiration for me to spend time in lectio and private prayer, especially in early morning. Abbot Raphael was always prepared for the Divine Office and the Eucharist. He did NOT celebrate off the cuff. Indeed, he was prepared.

Another remembrance ---

In 1977 Abbot Raphael celebrated his 25th anniversary of priesthood. Most of his family was still living at that time, with the exception of his mother and a brother killed in war. I am thinking that that is really the first time I met his family. They really liked to have a good time. My memory is that it was a really fun celebration. But the part of the celebration that I was struck by most was the speech that Abbot Raphael's father gave at the sit down dinner. WOW! His name was Frank. He roasted Abbot Raphael like I have never heard before. Of course, it was done with love and good will, but it was incredibly funny. Because Abbot Raphael was such a lofty figure by just his stature, let alone his position and titles, I was, indeed, surprised. But I also thought it was a good thing for him--- gave him some humanness. And also around the time when Abbot Raphael celebrated his 90th birthday, he made a comment to me about his family, that I shall always remember. He said: "John, you know something--- I just have too many leaders in my family." By that he meant that there were others in his family who had his same characteristics and qualities --- to lead --- to be in charge, as well as he did. Most of the members of MM abbey would say that Abbot Raphael liked to be in the driver's seat. He really enjoyed being in control and in charge--- and he did not like his sister, Fran, telling him what he needed to do, especially at these celebrations.

One last remembrance---

This one is when I was in theology at St. John's --- Collegeville, Minnesota

Mount Michael was really 'maverick' in those days. We had 5 priesthood candidates there at St. John's--- 5 mind you! In those days, in monastic circles, priesthood was really not in vogue. You know there is a difference between monastic priesthood and diocesan priesthood. Now St. John's at that time was the largest monastery in our country--- perhaps the largest in the world. And they had less priesthood candidates than we did. Indeed, it was very interesting. Furthermore, Abbot Raphael in many ways pushed us. He wanted us to get through theology in 3 years and come home to MM for 4th year of theology and he would be our professor. I think it was a custom at Conception. It was called being ordained simplex. The administration of St. John's really did not like this

sort of thing and preferred that all remained at St. John's for the full four years before ordination. So Abbot Raphael came for a visit to St. John's--- to meet with the administration and with each of his monks studying for the priesthood. (In some ways he was called on the red carpet.) I was the junior monk and so he met with me last. It was in the evening of that day. Abbot Raphael was given the bishop's quarters in the abbey guest quarters. (In most abbeys there is a special room that is provided for the bishop--- Abbot Raphael was offered this room for his visit at St. John's.) Abbot Raphael enjoyed these sorts of things. After we had finished our formal meeting, Abbot Raphael leaned towards me and said: "John, if you really want to be a serious theology student and teacher of literature, (I had just finished my BA in Literature at Creighton the year before) you need to acquire a taste for Scotch!" I had never tasted Scotch before--- and I cannot say that I really liked it. But it was a great time with Abbot Raphael that evening. And in hind sight of that night and what Abbot Raphael was trying to do, I understand his incredible contribution to the larger church. Because of his impetus, MM provided much help (a lot of help) to this Archdiocese of Omaha. He was like a mother hen who wanted her chicks around her--- he wanted us back to MM as soon as possible to not only teach in the school but to be available to take parish assignments on the weekends. And that we did! I myself even with the responsibilities of music at our liturgies, have a record of providing help at St. Patrick's in Gretna for nearly 25 years. I was always assigned on Saturday evenings after Evening Prayer (Vespers) at MM. It was an incredible mission MM provided to the larger church and Abbot Raphael was behind it all!

Abbot Raphael was a true human being. He knew what it means to be human. He loved the driver's seat and he was always --- always prepared. I am certain that he was won his place in paradise. Abbot Raphael --- thank you for all you have taught us. We love you and now give you back to God. May you rest in peace!
Amen --- Alleluia!