

Homily delivered by Abbot Michael Liebl OSB at the funeral of Abbot Raphael Walsh OSB

The face of an institution. Prior at Conception Abbey. Instructor at St John Vianney Seminary. Prior, then first abbot of Mount Michael Abbey. Associate Pastor at St James. President of Mount Michael Benedictine School. For countless individuals, Abbot Raphael Walsh was the face of each of these institutions. When I first came to St John Seminary, Prior Raphael was my instructor in literature class. That didn't last long. He was named abbot of the monastery and served in that role for more than twenty years. After retiring as abbot, he served a short stint in our development office. Then he came here to St James for thirteen years. Then he returned to Mount Michael to serve as the president of the school. And finally back to a role in the development office. He was not a man who liked to have dust settle on his shoes. On the last day of his life, he told Br Jerome that this trip to the hospital had scrambled his plans for the day.

Jesus tells the people in John's gospel today that "the one who looks at me is seeing the one who sent me". St Paul writes in Colossians that "the Son is the image of the invisible God; he is the head of his body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, ²⁰ and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or in heaven, making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. "The Son is the image of the invisible God." The Greek word for image that St Paul uses is eikon. The word eikon means that the image is indistinguishable from that which it mirrors. Jesus Christ is the head of the church, the people of God. When we look at our church, we should see the face of Christ. Chapter 2 of the Rule of St Benedict is titled: What Kind of Man the Abbot Ought To Be. St Benedict writes that the abbot "should show them all that is good and holy by his deeds even more than by his words" To so many people, Abbot Raphael was an eikon of Christ, indistinguishable from that which he mirrored. When people went to him for advice, they heard the wisdom of Christ. I cannot count the number of priests whom I encountered over the years who told me that Abbot Raphael had been their spiritual director. He was a role model with a sympathetic ear. I have no idea how many young vocations were saved because Abbot Raphael would wisely guide them through troubled times. When people went to him in times of distress, they felt the love of Christ. When they went to him for forgiveness, they were touched by the mercy of Christ. When they called on him in their final hours, they felt the certainty of Christ's promise of eternal life.

I have no idea how many parishes in dioceses throughout the Midwest that Abbot Raphael must have served in his decades of being a priest. I do know that he loved celebrating the Eucharist. When someone at the development office would say to him, have a good day, he would respond, I already have. I celebrated the Eucharist this morning. He told the story that after he was first ordained, he was assigned to say mass at an airbase which was not so far from Conception Abbey. Being conscientious, being his first assignment, being eager to make a good impression, he worked very hard on that first homily. And in the middle of his delivery, a siren sounded and every airman bolted out of the chapel. Not a soul left. So much for all the hard work on the homily.

Abbot Raphael was a consummate gentleman. His refinement in taste went beyond being impeccably dressed and appreciating the finest Scotch. This lovely pectoral cross I am wearing was given to him when he was first made abbot. The beautiful crozier was his also. As his friend Fr Don Schoen remarked, he never actually seemed to walk anywhere. Especially in the sanctuary, he appeared to glide fluidly from place to place with elegance and grace. The first time I saw him play baseball, I could not believe how far someone could hit a ball who seemed to swing so effortlessly. He carried that swing onto the fairways where he loved to play golf. His ball traveled far, just not always in the direction he intended. He always said the game was good for the Benedictine virtue of humility. Being from St Louis of course, he was an ardent Cardinals fan. He connected with generations of students who either loved the Cardinals or hated them. When both he and Fr Benedict were rooting for the Cardinals, you felt there was no way they could lose.

When Abbot Raphael served as pastor here at St James, he helped raise the money that built this lovely church in which we bid him farewell. Every seminarian who remembers the cross in the chapel at St John Seminary will know the beautiful corpus on the cross here at St James came from our chapel. Abbot Raphael was a prayerful man. Along with the Eucharist, he was devoted to the Divine Office. He was an avid reader, especially of books on spirituality. He would make presentations to our school board which brilliantly combined the theological with the practical. He loved being the face of Christ to all. He spent many years happily working with young people in the program, Teens Encounter Christ. Whether water skiing at Okoboji, snow skiing in Colorado, or just relaxing in Arizona, he was always welcome because he brought the presence of Christ into the lives of those who were looking for something beyond Nebraska, the good life. He brought the promise of eternal life to those who looked for more.

Thank you to all who came to pay their respects to Abbot Raphael. Thank you to Archbishop Lucas, (Archbishop Curtiss), Bishop Dendinger, to the Benedictines here, especially his former confreres from Conception. Thanks to all the priests, the religious, the Knights and Dames the Holy Sepulcher. A special thanks to his family who journeyed here from St Louis and beyond to pay tribute to him. Feel free to toss down a shot of Scotch in his memory. I am quite sure that Abbot Raphael would appreciate that. Thank you all for honoring him.

With sadness we bid farewell to the man who was indeed a face that meant so much to so many. We pray that God will send his angels – you know he chose as his religious name not just any angel, but an archangel – we pray God will send his angels to bear him swiftly to the company of the saints.