

Campion Baer, Capuchin
“A homily, tribute, a thank you”
from a former student:
Edward Foley, Capuchin

A few minutes before he died, after the ventilator had been removed, our beloved brother, uncle, mentor and friend proved himself the master teacher a final time. His formidable intelligence did not abandon him as he faced death. He understood what was happening to him, and he knew where he was going. Thus, moments before he gave himself back to God, he asked those in his company to sing the *Salve Regina*. While the immediate gathering did not have that in their memory banks, YouTube was the guardian angel drawing near ... and so, Campion’s grand niece pulled up the *Salve* on her tablet and played it for him. He mouthed the words ... so long embedded in mind and heart ... and minutes later, was—I believe—himself greeted by God’s own Mother as he entered his eternal reward.

♪ *Salve Regina, Mater misericordia*

“Hail ... queen mother of Mercy,” this ancient prayer proclaims. When Capuchins, like other religious communities celebrate Compline or Night prayer ... a symbolic anticipation of the funeral rite, death prayer, and ritual yearning for the dawn of Resurrection ... in ordinary time we sing the *Salve*. This repeated vocal exercise inscribes tune and text on our minds, our hearts, our souls. Campion’s mind, heart and soul were in full exercise in those closing moments. He knew exactly what he was asking for ... an exit text, a Compline moment, a closing prayer ... a poignant song of farewell and fitting gesture of hope toward the eternal dawn that awaited him.

For some, the *Salve* may appear as an antiquated piece of popular religiosity ... born of medieval romanticizing of the Mother of God as the distant Lady ... the unattainable love ... the honored Mediatrix, but from my perspective ... it is much more than that, the *Salve* and provides a narrative arc of not only the life of the Palestinian Peasant we call Mary ... but more importantly of her son ... the Christ ... and of her recently received son ... the Campion.

In the first line of this sung theology, Mary is honored as one who births mercy ... a theme deeply resonant with our current shepherd ... Francis of Rome ... a Jesuit smart enough to take a Franciscan name ... a gift we recall on this day, when we say farewell to a Franciscan smart enough to deserve a Jesuit name.

Mercy can be understood in many ways: compassion, forgiveness, pity, forbearance, leniency. Jesus showed us, however, that mercy was something more ... something richer ... something more radical.

In the early 19th century, the Emperor Napoleon was once approached by a mother seeking pardon for her son

The emperor replied that the young man had twice
committed a certain offense
and justice demanded death.

"But I don't ask for justice," the mother explained.

"I plead for mercy."

"But your son does not deserve mercy," Napoleon replied.

"Sir," the woman cried, "it would not be mercy
if he deserved it, and mercy is all I ask for."

"Then," the emperor said, "mercy will be his,"
And the boy's life was spared.

Mercy is indeed the undeserved gift

In a parallel vein we might ask

Whom of us deserved Campion's affection, intelligence, and attentiveness

Yet his nieces and nephews readily recall

How Uncle Bob would lavish them with attention

At home visits when he seemed more like one of the kids
Than the adults

How he made each of them feel special

Each—especially the girls—with their own nickname

Each with their own place in his heart.

Whom of us in this place deserved his inspiration, his intelligence, and his attentiveness

Yet SLS alumni, with hundreds of posts

On Facebook after his death

Recall how he inspired so many in the classroom

And supported so many on the playing field

And whom of us his aging students deserved his affection, his intelligence, and his
merciful attentiveness

As when he sent me off to Europe for doctoral studies

Exhorted me to visit every place that I had read about
And then, with a twinkle in his eye,
Gave me a credit card ... whose bill went back to him
To pay for all those visits.

Mercy, mercy, *miser cordia* ... always undeserved

♪ *Ad te clamamus, exules filii Hevae*
Ad te suspiramus, gemenes et flentes
In hac lacrimarum valle
To you we cry banished children of eve
To you we send up our sighs
Mourning and weeping in this valley of tears.

This ancient hymn to Theotokos recognizes in stark, almost shocking language, not only that Mary's heart was pierced with a sword, but that her heart-ache anticipated and reflected that of her son ... the crucified one ... who suffered in his living, rejected not only by crowds but by his own inner circle ... finally suffering the ultimate indignation as he was publicly executed as a criminal of the state.

What some of us who remember the ebullient Champion—the Uncle Bob who always took the prize for being the oldest at the family's annual Turkey Bowl gathering... the effervescent teacher ... the faithful cheer leader on the side of the soccer field—what we might not know or recall, were the many dark nights of the soul he experienced. Decades after he had left Crown Point, he narrated to me how difficult those years were ... a teacher of clerics when he was barely 30 ... feeling trapped in an education system he knew was flawed ... and wondering "is that all there is?" Unreflective students at Crown Point just thought that being a bear was not only a last name but a personality trait ... never perceiving that he was actually following his own way of the cross, in poverty, chastity and obedience.

And in his last years ... driver's license gone, classroom ministry finished, even mission appeal work evaporating ... he confided to Dave Schwab .. his local minister and devoted care giver, that he was "learning to accept diminishment."

♪ *Eia, ergo, advocata nostra, illos tuos*
miser cordes oculos ad nos converte;

In the closing moments of his life, he called upon Mary ... as advocate ... an honored name that the Church bestows upon the very Spirit of the Christ ... a *paraklētōs* ... one who pleads our case before God, who comforts in times of affliction, who defends, intercedes, and counsels.

While it is not in the Greek ... as I am sure the Campion would know ... *advocata* sounds like an authentic true educator to me ... one who engages in *educendum* ... leading into unknown territories .. into unknown truths ... into unknown faith

It would be interesting to ask this magnificent lead-learner why he chose today's gospel from Mark. In his self-effacing manner, one guess is that it was because he, like Peter the blunderer, was rendering a final profession of faith: you are the Messiah. My parabolic imagination, however, makes me wonder if Uncle Bob's final gospel is really about teaching in Socratic mode. In the New Testament Jesus asks over 300 questions. Over his lifetime Campion questions must have exceeded that by a multiple of 10,000. And so I wonder if this Markan periscope is not only a gospel affirmation of the Socratic method, but maybe also a gospel affirmation of a Socratic life.

How many times did he ask you what you meant, how something was defined, what the consequences of an idea or action might be? And in his personal poverty, his generosity ... like the Jesus he embodied ... he never, in my experience, expected that we would ever define ourselves in his image. Rather, like a thoughtful companion on an Emmaus walk he helped us each find our own path to enlightenment and the Holy One.

Advocata nostra ... our advocate ... not his. Maybe that is why this province, in one of their most apolitical moves, elected him 5 times to the provincial council. Campion never seemed to be about Campion; rather, he was about others. No surprise, therefore, when he was teaching Spanish here at St. Lawrence and his students would call him "*Campeon del Mundo*" [champion of the world], he would retort "*Campeon de Nada*" [champion of nothing].

♪ *Et Jesum, benedictum fructum ventris tui,*

show us the blessed fruit of your womb Jesus ... a paradoxical image of life and of death: a generative place that birthed the messiah and then became a tomb, birthing the Resurrected Christ ... a womb become tomb that we now both hope and believe has birthed our brother, uncle, teacher and friend into eternal life.

The writer Mark Doty writes about the death of a friend, which captures something of

this salvific hope and belief. Doty writes,

“I believe with all my heart that when the chariot came for him, green and gold and rose, a band of angels swung wide out over the great flanks of the sea, bearing him up over the path of light [that] the sun makes on the face of the waters.”

He continues, “I believe my love is in the Jordan, which is deep and wide and welcoming, though it scours us oh so deeply. And when he gets to the other side, I know he will be dressed in robes of comfort and gladness, his forehead will be anointed with spices, and he will sing -- joyfully -- into the future, and back toward the darkness of this world.”¹

 *nobis post hoc exsilium ostende*

At the end of his introduction to his 2005 publication *Lady Poverty Revisited: A history of the Province of St. Joseph of the Capuchin Order*, Uncle Bob ... Fr. Campion .. the Rev. Dr. Baer as I sometimes called him wrote: “When I entered the Capuchin Order, our assistant novice master, Ambrose DeGroot, addressed our class. He asked us what we wanted to be. We gave the usual answers: a missionary, a teacher, a parish priest, a mission band preacher, etc. He then challenged us that the one thing that the province needed was that we “strive to become saints.”²

Ironically, in his own way, Campion was all of those, mission secretary, parish priest, teacher, preacher ... and probably the most intelligent holy man that has crossed my ... and maybe your ... path ... Now singing back to us and the darkness of our world from a place of abiding and eternal peace.

 *O clemens, O pia, O dulcis*

Dulcis ... dulcis ... Mary as the very sweetness of God, reflected in the sweetness of a true son of Francis,

¹Mark Doty, “Sweet Chariot,” *Wrestling with the Angel*, ed. Brian Bouldrey (New York: Riverhead Books, 1995), 9-10.

² Campion R. Baer, *Lady Poverty Revisited: A History of the Province of St. Joseph of the Capuchin Order* (Detroit: Province of St. Joseph, 2005), 6.

 *Virgo Maria.*

Eternal rest grant unto him, O Lord!

And let perpetual light shine upon him.

May his soul, and all the souls of the faithful departed, through the mercy of God rest in peace!

Amen.