

Homily/Eulogy for Father Owen Lee, CSB

We've gathered here in St. Basil's Church, where Owen Lee was ordained to the priesthood sixty-two years ago, to pray that he is at peace in the loving embrace of God. All of us share with Owen's family their sense of loss but also their giving thanks to God for the life he lived and so generously expended in his ministries: ministry in the Church, ministry to students in Toronto, Houston, Chicago, and Rome, and – yes – his ministry of sharing his brilliant insights with millions of listeners to his Saturday afternoon Metropolitan Opera radio broadcasts.

A moment ago we listened to the famous passage from the Gospel of Luke in which the angel Gabriel astounds the young virgin Mary by his greeting her and, even more astounding, by asking her to allow God's Holy Spirit to conceive in her womb a child who would be the Son of God and who would work marvelous things for the world. I chose to read that passage because, many years ago, Owen told me that he hoped that a recording of Kathleen Battle singing the *Ave Maria*, the prayer celebrating that encounter of the angel and Mary, could be played at his funeral. I think he wanted us to hear it not simply for its sheer beauty but above all because it encapsulates the central event in all of human history: a young girl, assenting to the will of God, making possible God becoming man in Jesus Christ. With Owen, then, let's meditate for a moment on those momentous words, "Ave Maria" . . .," Hail Mary, . . . blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus."

[Sound Track, 2 min. 20 seconds.]¹

Owen developed his thoughts on that same encounter in a radio talk about his favourite opera, Wagner's *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, First teaching his listeners that early Christians called Mary "the new Eve," he tells them that Wagner, an unbeliever, was consciously using biblical patterns in the work and had that early tradition about Mary and Eve in mind when he named the central heroine of the opera 'Eva' [Eve]. I quote from Owen's book *First Intermissions*:

"In the Middle Ages they loved to sing how the 'Ave' in "Ave Maria" was the reverse of [the name] 'Eva' [Eve], that is to say, how Mary, accepting the message

¹ Kathleen Battle with guitarist Christopher Parkening (Angel Records – CC33-3668).

of the angel, reversed the process begun by [the first] Eve and began the whole process of redemption . . . from the flaw in human nature left by Original Sin.”² [End of quote].

Owen was telling his listeners and us that, just as Mary’s accepting God’s will for her had redemptive implications for us all, so also our accepting God’s will for us can accomplish great things in our lives – and in our world.

A second thing that Owen told me, many years ago, was that people sometimes remarked that the Basilian Fathers made a mistake in appointing him to study classical literature instead of musicology. But, despite his fascination with opera from the early age of eleven, it was Owen himself who decided to major in classical literature. Listen to this passage from his book entitled, *A Book of Hours: Music, Literature, and Life: A Memoir*. [I quote]:

I was nineteen when I fell silent reading Homer [‘s *Iliad*] . . . Nineteen, and at a turning point in my life. After reading a dozen or so lines in Greek, . . . touched with the wonder of the scene but impatient with my poor skills, I . . . hurried to the college library to find and read, in an English translation, the whole of the scene between Hector and his wife. And then I turned to . . . a page close to the end, [where] Hector dies I felt for the first time what it was to acknowledge one’s weakness, to strive nobly, to fail, and yet somehow to triumph. . . . Something of **me** was in this very old poem, and one part of my life was from that day fixed. I wanted after that to read and teach the classics. [End of quote.]³

It was his combining that youthful love for the classics with his still earlier fascination with opera that would let him analyse so masterfully the complicated characters and

² *First Intermissions: Twenty-One Great Operas Explored, Explained, and Brought to Life from the Met* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 118.

³ *A Book of Hours: Music, Literature, and Life. A Memoir* (New York & London: Continuum, 2004), 14-15.

intricate plots in the nearly one thousand different operas that he personally attended – some of them more than a dozen times. Those who had the good fortune to hear any of his talks from the Met can remember that soft, distinctive voice helping **us** understand those characters and learn why Mozart, Verdi, Wagner, Puccini, Strauss and so many others portrayed them as they did.

But one final element that deepened Owen’s insight into human nature and into life itself is missing: the study of theology in preparation for ordination to the priesthood and that was his constant companion for the rest of his life. Owen certainly knew about the advice that Saint Basil, fifteen hundred years earlier, had given to his nephews and other students in writing to them: don’t be afraid to read the pagan authors. Yes, their books contain passages that clash with Christian belief; but in those same books you will find and profit from so many passages that fit perfectly the Christian world view.⁴ Owen stressed the role of theology in interpreting opera when receiving the Christian Culture Award from Assumption University in 1993: [quote] “Great operas are like testaments. They are ways through which God speaks to us” [End of quote]

For Father Owen Lee, then, it was that triple-edged training in the classics, music, and theology that, when blended together in his own inimitable way, prepared him to understand the human spirit and the divine Spirit that strongly wants to engage every human being and that made his life’s work so creative, so fruitful, and so unique.

Requiescat in pace.

— James K. Farge, CSB
10 August 2019

⁴ N.G. Wilson, ed., *Saint Basil on the Value of Greek literature* (London: Duckworth, 1975). (Greek text of the treatise with English Introduction and Annotation.)