

Aloysious Mowe SJ: Memories shared by Steve Sinn SJ at his Memorial Mass, St. Canice's Church, Elizabeth Bay on Monday, March 4th, 2014

This evening, I want to speak about Aloysious rather than offer a reflection on the readings. The readings do, however, reflect a truth Aloysious came to experience in his work with refugees. He confronted us with the truth that God's blessing comes to the stranger, the outsider who is not 'one of us,' Naaman the Syrian and the widow from Zarapath in Sidon.

One of the happiest times of my life as a Jesuit was the years I spent at St. Canice's with Phil Crotty and Aloysious. I remember clearly the first few days after Aloysious arrived. I came back to the presbytery for dinner one night and laid out on the table were three crisp, clean serviettes, all three enclosed in different serviette rings to ensure we used our own serviette. Not only had Aloysious cleaned out the serviette drawer – it did need cleaning – he had also emptied the four cutlery drawers in the kitchen, cleaned them and the cutlery to an inch of their lives, thrown out all the surplus bits and pieces that had accumulated and left the rest in their right place and sparkling. I thought to myself, I wonder what would happen if Aloysious and Richard Leonard were in the same community. Or Dan Madigan for that matter. Or all three!

Bronnie Clulow wrote: "Aloysious endeared himself to so many of us in the Canice community with his brutally honest homilies, often so confronting as to shake us out of our reveries during a Sunday mass. How often did we gather for coffee after Mass where the only subject being discussed was the homily message?" Very early after the arrival of Aloysious I was on the receiving end of his "brutally honest" assessment of me. I was so put out that I can't remember now what he was pointing out, it was something to do about my being clerical. I remember clearly thinking to myself, I'm either going to have to avoid this man or love him. I chose the latter. It wasn't as if I had much choice, we were living in the same house.

It was the third member of our community that made it easy to love Aloysious. Everyone thought Phil Crotty was wonderful. I once asked him how he achieved this. "It's the old Indian rope trick," he said, "you keep them guessing." Phil had Aloysious and I eating out of his hand. I would be purchasing the right bed so that Phil could easily get in and out of it, Aloysious would be preparing him delicious meals. Phil even had Elizabeth Strutt hauling boxes of donated books for Jesuit Mission to his car and Elizabeth was in her 80's. Aloysious and I were both so busy looking after Phil that we had no time for any differences there might have been between us.

Aloysious was vibrant, intelligent, articulate, sartorial, charismatic, charming, beautiful. An exotic creature in our midst. We loved you, Aloysious. It was a difficult love: you opened our horizons, disturbed us, challenged us. You spoke with passion. You spent yourself visiting refugee centres and advocating on their behalf. You exercised your formidable intellect on interreligious dialogue, especially between Muslims and Christians.

There were three influences or relationships that shaped Aloysious. The first was his self-described “idyllic childhood” growing up in Malaysia. In an interview for Province Express in 2011, Aloysious said: “I was an army brat and grew up in military housing in an army camp. I ran around the army camps with my Muslim friends, ate at families’ tables probably as often as I ate at home, and they did the same. My family was a traditional Catholic family: Sunday Mass, Saturday novenas to Our Lady of Perpetual Succour, followed by benediction. My mother came from a Taoist-Buddhist family, and she became a Catholic to marry my father. So, we also grew up keeping the traditions of Taoism, offering food and burning joss-sticks to honor our ancestors during the Chinese New Year. Oh, he added, and one of my sisters is a Muslim, married to a Muslim and I have now four Muslim nephews and nieces.” These early relationships set the path for Aloysious to work in interfaith relations, particularly Christian-Muslim relations.

Given the significant number of Muslims in the asylum seeker and refugee population in Australia, Aloysious was asked by the Provincial, Fr Steve Curtin, to be the replacement for Fr. Sacha as JRS Director in 2011. Thus began the relationships Aloysious formed with refugees, relationships that profoundly influenced his experience of God, his thinking, and his preaching. In a speech he gave in Rome, one year before his stroke, at the Lay Centre at Foyer Unitas, an educational institution for the formation of laity, Christian unity and interreligious dialogue, he spoke about a time in South Africa when he visited with a nurse a terminally ill refugee housed in a small, inadequate room in a crumbling building. “God was waiting there for me,” he said, “God in exile, hungry, sick, dying. Utterly dependent on the kindness of strangers.” He challenged our culture of well-being that protects us from the suffering of others. He came to see that Christians are called to live out of the memory of being a community in exile, displaced not settled. In the end he became one with the refugees: displaced, terminally ill, stricken, with no way out. “I don’t know what happened,” he said to me. “I can’t sleep.” “I’m bored as hell.” “Do you feel you are in the hands of God?” I asked. He nodded. “Are you happy to be in the hands of God?” “Not always,” he replied, with the beginning of a smile. “What to do?”

The third relationship that shaped Aloysious was the one that shapes all Christians, his relationship with Jesus. In that same Province Express article, he said: “The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius...leads you into deep friendship with Jesus, a friendship that invites you into radical freedom, the freedom to be exactly who you truly are, no less and no more...That friendship with God leads you to say, ‘all is grace, all is gift.’ These words are aspirational, lofty. They don’t touch the hidden life we have in Christ; the wrestle, the struggle we have with God and God’s hold on us. In that speech in Rome, Aloysious quoted a favorite author, Fred Rogers: “Love is an active noun, like the word struggle.”

Let us now think of Aloysious and that idyllic childhood in the army camp, running around with his Muslim friends, eating at families’ tables. Let us think of him with the terminally ill refugee in that inadequate room in South Africa. Let us think of him with his family, Muslim and Christian, all right there in the front row of the church when he was ordained a priest. Let us think of him out on an evening bicycle ride through the army camp with his father and having to get off the bike at sunset because the Last Post was being played throughout the camp. God drew Aloysious into God’s own heart. Jesus lifted up on the cross drew him to himself.

When Aloysious made his profession of Final Vows in the Society of Jesus on March 10th 2013, here at St. Canice's at the 10.30 Sunday mass, he drew our attention to the last verse of a favorite hymn, sung during that mass by our cantor, Pascal. Pascal will sing that same hymn this evening as our communion reflection.

Here might I stay and sing,

No story so divine;

Never was love, dear King!

Never was grief like Thine.

This is my Friend, in Whose sweet praise

I all my days could gladly spend.