

Paul Watson: Mass of Christian Burial:  
May 21, 2005

What do you say to a person who has come back from the dead? Well...Not much I hope. You listen. Paul Watson was such a person, and those of us who did listen to him, benefited immensely. Paul had a story to tell and wisdom to disseminate, and a profound, vital faith to share. Paul came back from the dead in 1993 from near terminal alcoholism. I'm not telling tales here – Paul's struggles with this disease are a matter of public record, well documented in his personal conversion story, as well as a part of his personal history that he shared freely and often.

After Paul entered the Catholic Church at the 1995 Easter vigil, he offered his enormous gifts to Christ's church, in many and varied ways, in the manner of his namesake and hero, the Apostle Paul. How fortunate for us, his friends and fellow parishioners, who had the privilege of listening to Paul often: as a lector par excellence, proclaiming God's word with conviction and profound personal faith. We listened to Paul the Magister, teaching in RCIA or offering his artistic tour of this church, or relishing his witty and heartfelt prologue at the Mass of Rededication, offered right here at the 5:00 pm Mass on October 19<sup>th</sup> 2003. We listened to him share his spiritual journey on various occasions: at Parish council, at scripture sharing, over coffee and donuts, or with anyone who wanted to engage him one-on-one. And who can forget his compelling movie commentaries and critiques. How will we know what is worth seeing now, without them.

We are fortunate also that so much of Paul's interior life was an aspect of himself that he chose to reveal. Recently he invited us to journey along with him through what he called his "Adventures:" the on-going trials and purifications of a soul responding to the reality of having cancer, and the fears and fallout that accompany it's debilitating treatments. I am not the only one who thought, after reading Paul's reflections: "Oh God, may I respond with even a fraction of Paul's faith and trust were such an affliction to befall me."

His weekly "adventures" kept us all posted on what was happening, not only in his therapy, but more importantly, in Paul's heart and soul. Paul accepted the medical prognosis to be hopeful in the face of Cancer. But Paul entered this battle with potent spiritual weapons as well. He endured the chemo, the MRI's the CT scans, the radiology, needles, and intravenous, but we know from his spiritual musings that he trusted more in Prayer, novenas, the Sacraments , and the Communion of Saints.

He writes:

*"Now, at this particular turning point, I've managed to unearth that old tattered novena. It really is quite lovely. The daily prayers speak of God's love and compassion, of the need for simplicity and humility, of letting God shine through our frailty and weakness, of sensing that love does, and will prevail. So that will be my guide as the rapids approach."*

Paul also trusted in and depended upon his friends and community: He writes:

*"There's another blessing, too. I can come back to my room, open up the e-mail and read messages from so many of you. They delight me, they move me, even to tears, they respond and encourage, suggest and even admonish. Thank you, each, all, for so much of your love."*

You are welcome Paul. They were small tokens of the debt we owe you.

One of the great spiritual challenges to all Christians is...to befriend death. Befriending doesn't mean we pretend that faith makes dying or death easy or without fear. As we sit here in the presence of the mortal remains of Paul Watson, we feel a profound sense of loss. A unique, wonderful and unrepeatable "I" has been taken from us. All of us here, particularly his lovely daughter, Amanda, know first hand, death's cruel power to separate us from someone we love deeply. In addition to death's power to fill us with grief and loss, there is yet another, ruthless side to death, that we must acknowledge as well: death has a way of defining us. Death reveals our fragile, finite nature and imposes harsh limits on our dreams.

So, how can we befriend what appears so unfriendly...and alien? To befriend death in the Catholic sense is certainly not to be enthusiastic about it – but rather, to be ready for it, in the same way that Jesus was ready. While it is true that death has a way of defining our mortal lives, death is NOT the last word. We are here today, gathered in faith, precisely because we believe that Jesus Christ is the LAST WORD. Because we are caught up in Christ, because He calls us friends, and has given us his Spirit, we do not allow death to define us. In Christ Jesus our Savior it is we who define death. Faith enables us to look at death, no longer with our own eyes, but with the eyes of Christ.

Imbued with the savior's vision, we are not compelled to stare at death as an enemy, but to look through death, and see it for what it is: not a door to be slammed in our face; but a doorway, a threshold, an horizon beyond which lies - the fulfillment of god's promise - fullness of life and love.

Paul Watson believed what the Poet Wordsworth wrote:

"God's Life is eternal - God's Love is immortal.

*Death is only a Horizon, beyond which our limited, earthy eyes cannot see.*

*Lift us up Strong Spirit of God; that we may see further into the mighty expanse of your eternity."*

Befriending death is a life-long, spiritual task – it involves hard work, faith, and prodigious amounts of trust. It was a task that Paul took seriously and even relished.

I am reminded of another spiritual pilgrim and author, Henri Nouwen, who also spoke of befriending death, and, offers an image which I believe captures well, Paul's approach to his own suffering and mortality and his way of faithfully surrendering to God's providence and love.

Nouwen tells of having gone to the circus and witnessed a amazing trapeze act – the flying Rodleights. He writes this way: "One day I was sitting with Rodleigh, the leader of the troupe...talking with him about flying. He said – as a flyer, I must have complete confidence in my catcher. The public thinks that I am the star of the show; the spotlight being on me. But the real star is my catcher. He has to be there for me with split second precision; and grasp me out of the air as I come towards him.

How does this work actually, I Inquired. The secret, Rodleigh said, is that the flyer does nothing and the catcher does it all. I simply stretch out my arms with absolute trust and wait, trying not to interfere with the catcher, as he links with me and pulls me up to safety. I'm amazed said Nouwen. You actually do nothing. Yes, Rodleigh said. The worst thing the flyer can do is try to catch the catcher and foul up his timing and grip. It's the Catcher's task to catch me. A flyer must fly, a catcher must catch; and the flyer must have absolute trust, with hands outstretched, that the catcher will be there when it counts.

Paul was a flyer – he was learning over the last 12 years, the beauty and power of "Letting go and letting God," the secret of flying. Paul was reflecting on a passage from the letter of Peter,

