

FUNERAL HOMILY FOR ARCHBISHOP GEORGE NIEDERAUER

St. Mary's Cathedral, San Francisco, May 12, 2017

Cardinal William Levada

"For if we live, we live for the Lord, and if we die, we die for the Lord; so then whether we live or die, we are the Lord's." Dear Sisters and Brothers, we heard these words proclaimed in the reading from St. Paul's Letter to the Romans; Archbishop Niederauer chose to have this reading proclaimed at his funeral Mass.

When he moved from the residence at Menlo Park to Nazareth House in January, after his diagnosis of interstitial pulmonary disease - an incurable disease that progressively closed down the ability of his lungs to provide life-giving oxygen into the blood - he remarked almost casually, "Well, it looks like this will be my final move." He was right.

A week ago Sunday, April 30, he marked his 55th anniversary of priestly ordination. He lay in bed, with his priest's stole around his neck and stretched out on the bed clothes. He concelebrated Mass with me; there was a congregation of four at his bedside: two Sisters of Nazareth, Sister Linda and Sister Fintin, and two of his faithful caregivers, Laura Bertone and Mary Schembri.

The Gospel reading that day recalled the disciples on the road to Emmaus, who said to their companion - still unrecognized as Jesus, now risen from the dead -- "stay with us, for evening draws near, and the day is almost done." So for one last time, the priest and bishop George Niederauer once again recognized Jesus in the Eucharistic breaking of the bread. It seems likely to me that the disciple in that Nazareth House

bed would have adapted the prayer of those disciples of long-ago, praying "Yes, Jesus. Stay with me now, Jesus. Take me home with you." Two days after celebrating his last holy Mass, we might say that his "day was done." On Tuesday morning, May 2, he passed into eternal life.

As he had lived "for the Lord" during his 80 years, including his 55 years as a priest, and of these 22 as a bishop, so he died that day "for the Lord." During those days of his final illness he was recollected, patient, alert, visiting with friends who stopped by or called on the phone, despite his increasing reliance on round-the-clock oxygen, reading messages that evoked gratitude for the memories they brought back, and for the prayers they promised. Of course he experienced moments of anxiety about his approaching death: once he asked me, "Have the doctors told you how long this [dying process] will take?" I had to say they didn't seem to know exactly. He on the other hand was a precise man, and liked to know things exactly. But he put up with the uncertainty, since he knew that sooner or later it was the Lord who was calling him home. I cannot exaggerate my sense of edification at his serenity in the face of his imminent death. I extend in particular my condolence to Anne Arthofer, at her loss of her dear cousin and good friend.

We gather with him today for his last celebration in this beautiful Cathedral church, which he had the privilege of calling his liturgical "home" for the almost seven years of his ministry here as Archbishop, the eighth since the founding of our Archdiocese in 1853. Now it is his memory, not his voice, that speaks to us, reminding us of the promise of Jesus in the Gospel of today's Mass: "I am going to prepare a place for you, ... and I will come and take you to myself."

This is the great promise and final summons of Jesus our Good Shepherd to the sheep of his flock, to the ones he said - as he did to his first Apostles - "I no longer call you servants, but I call you my friends." If we hear the voice of the Good Shepherd, and do what he commands us, we too can have the sure faith that He will "take us to himself." Here is the final witness of this good man, faithful priest and Archbishop, who stood in our midst as an icon of Jesus, the Good Shepherd. Since his ministry here was a relatively small part of his long life of 80 years, it may console us who knew him over the years to reflect on the rich gifts he brought to this final decade of his life and ministry of service here in San Francisco.

Born in Los Angeles, he was the only child of George Niederauer and Elaine Sullivan, who came to California from their native South Dakota. He was, however, no stranger to San Francisco. Throughout his childhood and youth, the Niederauers often visited his mother's sister Georgine Sullivan, who worked at one of the City's now shuttered department stores selling merchandise to the City's famously dressy women. I remember sharing some of those visits during our high school and college years. To understand where our friend got his keen wit and gift for gab, you only had to spend a little time with his family.

He was of course an excellent student. Throughout his life he demonstrated a prodigious memory. In these last years we would occasionally joke about how we had to dredge our memories for the names of people and places that didn't come up on our mental screens till 5 or 10 minutes too late! But his storehouse of witty sayings never seemed to abandon him. When we celebrated our

80th birthdays last year - he was older by one day - I thought to remind him of the adage "age before beauty." I quickly realized my mistake. He quipped back immediately - with a fake smile - the Gertrude Stein line "Pearls before swine." I can assure you that I knew I had been put in my place!

After getting a Ph.D in English literature from the University of Southern California, he was assigned to teach at St. John's Seminary College in Camarillo. For 27 years - half of his 55 years as a priest - he dedicated himself to the formation of future priests for the Archdiocese of Los Angeles and neighboring dioceses in the Southwest. Not only did he distinguish himself in teaching college English literature, but he was able to indulge his passion for movies, teaching an elective in "film appreciation." I once heard one of his former students remark, "he never taught a boring class." High praise, indeed!

He continued his work at the seminary for many years as spiritual director, and finally for five years as seminary Rector. Thus he was a spiritual director for a generation and more of future priests during their seminary formation, and for many other priests when he became Co-Director with Jesuit Father John McAnulty, with a view to succeeding him as Director of the Cardinal Manning House of Prayer for Priests.

But God had other plans. His work as spiritual director and rector at the seminary was a great blessing for the Church, but it was also a unique preparation for the work of a bishop. So Father Niederauer became Bishop Niederauer - first as Bishop of Salt Lake City for eleven years, and then as Metropolitan Archbishop of San Francisco.

When a priest has been chosen as Bishop, he is notified by the Papal Nuncio, who calls from the Vatican Embassy in Washington to tell him that the Holy Father has appointed him as Bishop, and asks him for his assent. Usually this news comes as a surprise to the appointee, who may ask for time to consider prayerfully this life-changing news. The Nuncio may express a certain reluctance over a possible significant delay in delivering the newly-appointed bishop's response to the Vatican's Congregation for Bishops. Perhaps the fact that three of the Archbishop's classmates (Cardinal Mahony, Bishop Brown, and I) were already bishops made it easier for him to resolve any hesitation in accepting. I can imagine his prayer taking this course at some point: "Oh well, I suppose I must accept. If those three can do it, it can't be so difficult!" Perhaps too he then asked the three of us to be his consecrating and co-consecrating bishops as a silent act of repentance.

As bishop he was much sought after for retreats - especially for brother bishops, for priests, for men and women religious, for seminarians. After his retirement at age 76 from the office of Archbishop of San Francisco, he continued his retreat work as Archbishop Emeritus. Last year, by my reckoning, he gave at least six such week-long retreats. One could not but admire how meticulous he was in preparing his homilies, classes, talks and retreat conferences to fit his audience, surprising perhaps for someone who seemed never at a loss for words.

These brief recollections can perhaps flesh out the too brittle picture of this good priest and bishop in some secular quarters, where there is often little understanding of, or sympathy for, someone who sets his heart on spiritual things, following the urging of St. Paul in his letter to the Colossians: "Seek what is above,

where Christ is seated at the right hand of God" (Col 3:1).

For a faithful Christian like Archbishop Niederauer, and we hope like ourselves, we are always challenged to live "in the world, but not of it." If, or better when, we meet with incomprehension, even misunderstanding, in our attempts to live by "professing the truth in love," as St. Paul urged the Ephesians (4:15), perhaps we, like Paul, can take consolation when we recall how Christ, standing before the Roman governor, responded to his question, "Then you are a king?" by saying, "For this I came into the world, to testify to the truth." To which Pontius Pilate retorted dismissively, "And what is truth?" (John 18:38).

Archbishop George Niederauer lived his 80 years applying the truth of the Gospel to his own life as a Christian, and as priest and bishop, preaching and teaching others to join him on this journey. He did so with great intelligence, "laced" with good humor. I think all of us who knew him would agree that he loved to laugh, and to see us laugh with him. He used the many gifts God gave him to great good effect, and we thank God for lending him to us for this long while.

Last Sunday was the fourth of the Easter season, when we celebrate with great joy the bodily Resurrection of Jesus from the tomb where he was placed after undergoing capital punishment by hanging on a cross until he died. The theme of this fourth Sunday is taken from the Gospel reading about Jesus, who told his disciples, "I am the Good Shepherd" (John 10:14). Every priest and bishop is ordained with the image of the Good Shepherd as his model, even - no, especially in the sense of giving his life for the sake of his flock.

On Good Shepherd Sunday, the Office of Readings in the Liturgy of the Hours has a homily given by Pope St. Gregory the Great at the end of the 5th century: it seemed to me made for today. "Dear Brothers and Sisters – Gregory said -Let us set out for [the green pastures of eternity] where we shall keep joyful festival with so many of our fellow citizens....Let us stir up our hearts, rekindle our faith, and long eagerly for what heaven has in store for us....No matter what obstacles we encounter, we must not allow them to turn us aside from the joy of that heavenly feast....Nor must we allow the charm of success to seduce us, or we shall be like a foolish traveler, who is so distracted by the pleasant meadows through which he is passing, that he forgets where he is going."

Dear Archbishop Niederauer, you yourself epitomized Gregory's moving homily by your life and ministry among us. You never forgot where you were going, and we shall never forget the good example you have given us. We thank you, and we thank God for you. Requiescat in pace. Amen. Alleluia!