

HOMILY AT THE FUNERAL MASS FOR FR BOB MAGUIRE

St Patrick's Cathedral, Melbourne
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Archbishop Mark Coleridge

In my seventy-fifth year, as I move to the end of my working life as priest and bishop, I speak words of farewell to the man who more than any other led me to the priesthood; and I do so in this cathedral where I was ordained deacon, priest and bishop. As I look back across the life of Bob Maguire, therefore, I look back across my own life as well.

I first met Fr Bob when I was in my late teens and he in his early thirties. I was a university student, with diplomacy my intended career; he was a young priest, appointed chaplain to a fast-fading organisation known as the Catholic Young Men's Society. Bob was determined to give it new life; and that meant gathering together a group of students like me to serve on the Executive. I said yes, not because of any great faith or commitment, but because some university mates of mine had also said yes.

I'd grown up in a very staid Catholic parish with an Irish parish priest who had been there for forty years. He was a decent and cultured man, but there was nothing in him that stirred thoughts of the priesthood in me. In Bob Maguire, however, I saw something I'd never seen before – a rare human vitality, a passion for the Gospel, an enthusiasm for all that was emerging in the Church from the Second Vatican Council. Bob made the Catholic Church and the priesthood seem exciting and even fun. He called us all on an adventure; and that call has deeply shaped not only my life but the life of so many others.

Over the years, I learnt of Bob's troubled early life as the fifth and youngest child of Jim and Annie Maguire who had migrated from Scotland. Jim, it seems, was boozy, violent and irresponsible, certainly when it came to money. The family moved from place to place and lived in poverty of a kind that Bob never forgot. Survival was the prime task. Ernest Hemingway once wrote that "the world breaks everyone and afterward many are strong at the broken places" (A Farewell to Arms). Bob was one of the many. He was broken by much in his early life but he grew strong in the broken places – which is why he was able to understand and embrace human brokenness and to work passionately to bring strength to the broken.

He decided to enter the seminary, he claimed, because a classmate of his at school had said that he was going to the seminary. Bob thought that wasn't a bad idea, so off to Werribee he went. But there was surely more to it than that. There was the mysterious call of Jesus; but there was also the search for structure, stability and security, which marked Bob's life as a whole. It's why he thrived in the seminary; it's why he chose the priesthood; it's why he liked serving as a military chaplain; it's why he made a home in South Melbourne and was so reluctant to leave.

It may seem strange to say that the search for structure, stability and security marked the life of a man who was such a bold and free spirit. Yet Bob Maguire was a man of seeming contradictions. He was in some ways rebellious, yet in other ways he was quite conventional. He seemed at times a man who fought against the institutional Church and its hierarchy. Yet Bob Maguire was very much a man of the Church, who was respectful, even at times deferential towards bishops. There was a rebel in him, but he was a rebel within the Church: he never walked away. He was always the outsider who was, and needed to be, an insider.

He could be as amusing as anyone I've ever met. Yet there was often an undertone of melancholy to Bob's mirth, not unlike the clown with the painted smile behind which there lies the pain. He certainly had a sense of the tragic in life, though in the end the humour prevailed, not as an escape from the tragic but as a way of surviving and even making sense of it. He was called the larrikin priest; yet he was a cultured man of deep sensitivities. He was man of great heart, in that sense emotional, but he was also quite un sentimental. His use of language could be powerfully poetic, epigrams from some deep place, but he could also speak and understand the lingo of the streets. He was a lovable character who stirred great loyalty and affection, but he could be impossibly cantankerous. He was very sociable, but was also very solitary, a man who was close to people but in whom there were also great distances. That combination of closeness and distance is one of the reasons why social media had such an appeal for him in later life.

He was very much the showman who enjoyed the celebrity that came to him, yet he was not naturally a self-promoter. He seemed at times a shy man with many protections to whom the limelight had come without him ever really seeking it. Once he was there, however, he reveled in it, because it provided him with another kind of structure, stability and security – but also a platform for the Gospel which was always the fire in his belly, the Good News without borders. He was very much a man of the people, but he was no less a man of God. For Bob, the two were the same thing: the poor were Jesus. In them God found him and he found God.

Though the son of immigrants, Bob Maguire never left Australia, despite the urgings of friends through the years. To those urging him to go overseas he replied unforgettably, "Why?! I can be unhappy anywhere". That's true of course; but Freud it was who distinguished between ordinary unhappiness and neurotic misery, and Bob was never neurotically miserable. If it's true that I can be unhappy anywhere, then so too is the opposite: I can be happy anywhere. And Bob was happy to stay close to home. Once he settled in South Melbourne, he didn't want to leave.

If he didn't travel far and wide, he did in another sense travel deep and wide – deep into the lives of people like myself and the poor and broken who were his best friends, and wide into the vast network of rich and poor, powerful and powerless, saint and sinner, which grew up around him through the years. For Bob became a brand, but he never sought just to sell the

brand. At times perhaps the brand overtook the man, but in the end the man himself, in all his extraordinary humanity, rose above and beyond the brand.

That's what enabled him to travel deep and wide into this society where he struck a powerful chord in surprising places. He was an Aussie original, who presented a face of religion that Australians recognise and respond to. He wasn't a wowser; he was always on the side of the battler; he was about action, not just words; he rolled up his sleeves and got stuff done; he was down to earth, had mud on his boots; he didn't judge or condemn; he wasn't tribal, but opened his door to all; and, not least, he had an unrivalled and uncontrived sense of humour. Put that profile together, and you have the kind of religion that has a chance in this country. Put the opposite profile together, and you have the kind of religion that has no chance. Bob favoured the kind of religion which Pope Francis describes, "I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security" (*Evangelii Gaudium*). Bob could've written that.

In her poem *When Death Comes*, Mary Oliver has this:
When it's over, I want to say all my life I was a bride married to amazement.
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.
When it's over, I don't want to wonder
if I have made of my life something particular, and real...
I don't want to end up simply having visited this world.

Bob Maguire was a man married to amazement, which is why he was amazing. He took the world, the whole world, into his arms and made of his life something very particular and real. He didn't simply visit the world: he made the world his home. He pitched his tent here unforgettably, just down the road, and his tent grew larger and larger as more and more people came looking for shelter.

It will be those people above all, those he called the unloved and the unlovely, who will gather round God to welcome Bob home where all the suffering and sorrow will turn to endless joy for him and for them. That's our faith and our prayer, pure and simple, as we bid farewell to the traveler who sets out on his final journey into God, at the end of which there will be so many to greet him, as there are to farewell him here. Bob enters eternity a poor man who has loved the poor and who, like them, will surely receive the most merciful judgement from Jesus who became poor for our sake.

Eternal rest give to Bob, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon him. May he rest in peace. Amen.