

LAWRENCE OWENS

Laurie was born in Liverpool in 1924. He celebrated his 89th birthday just three days before he died. Laurie's father preached for the Catholic Evidence Guild. Father and son might have been soul mates but Laurie's father passed away at the age of 26 when Laurie was only two years old. Once his father died, the money ran out and my grandmother was left to bring up the children in respectable poverty, juggling factory work and cleaning jobs with rearing a family. It was, as Laurie recalled, a hard life.

The main influences on Laurie were his mother and his elder brother Joe. The brothers referred to my grandmother as 'The Matriarch'. Though they sometimes disobeyed, they never contradicted her. She was a pious Catholic who reared Laurie in the faith. My father told me that, despite all her efforts, he was not particularly devout as an adolescent. It was Joe that made him take his faith seriously after his brother returned from the war and settled in Liverpool. My father always revered his brother's piety and his open-handed generosity.

The atmosphere in which Laurie grew up in Liverpool before the Second World War is vividly conveyed in a piece Laurie wrote in the late 1990s called 'Lenten Days'. I'll read you the opening passage

For some reason, Shrove Tuesday was never celebrated in our family; perhaps there were not enough eggs for the pancakes. My earliest memories of Lent concern the Ashes – the symbol of darkness and death to which I became accustomed at a very early age. I must have been about 3 or 4 when my mother told me, reinforced with a wagging finger, that on no account was I to rub off the ashes received that Ash Wednesday morning. Alas, while playing in the street, I fell headlong down a steep incline, finishing up with a lump on my forehead as big as a golf ball. My crying alerted a kindly and well-meaning neighbour who proceeded to smear some of her precious butter over the lump, thus mixing it with the ashes. With that my memory mercifully ceases; I cannot

recall whether the lump or the loss of the blessed ashes was the main cause for concern when I got home.

In the 1950s Laurie left Liverpool to work as an engineer in London and Manchester. For two of these years he was a Franciscan novice but, deciding that his vocation lay elsewhere, he left the order before taking vows. Instead he married Eileen in 1960 and had three children who are all here today.

Laurie was a kind and generous father. For a man of such strong views, he was also a pretty tolerant parent. He rarely told us what to do and almost never got angry with us. My father put a huge amount of effort into giving us the formal education he did not himself receive. I can't recall him spending any money on himself or, indeed, on my mother. Almost all of the many books he read were borrowed from the various libraries he visited on a regular basis: owning books was in his view a waste of money. In order to afford two sets of school fees he worked for long periods for an oil company in Algeria. Although he never complained about this, living in a camp in the desert where drinking was the main form of relaxation cannot have been a pleasant experience.

A letter my father left me concludes with the wish that 'he be remembered as a loyal son of the church whose theology has been a life-time study and a great nourishment for the mind'. Laurie was certainly devoted to the institutions of the Church. He was not a sociable or a clubbable man. At home he sighed whenever the telephone rang and shrank from the sound of the doorbell. He didn't socialise much at work or have many personal friends. But he did believe strongly in the social character of the Catholic faith.

After my father came to St Matthews in the mid-1960s, he filled several roles within the parish. He took catechism classes after Sunday mass, preparing young people for confirmation and he was at various times an altar server and a Eucharistic minister. He also wrote a series of thirteen pieces for the parish magazine *Endeavour*, each one or two pages long. They are little gems, carefully constructed and lucidly written. Some are purely theological but many are enlivened with anecdotes and bits of autobiography that helped me in writing this address. But Laurie's main contribution to the life of the Parish was to the

music of the liturgy. One of the glories of the Catholic Church is its tradition of sacred music. My father was inducted into that tradition as a boy chorister in Liverpool. He remained a bass choral singer throughout his life and took care to pass these musical riches on to others, something for which I am myself deeply grateful.

At St. Matthews, my father first sang in what he called the 'Big Choir' up in the organ loft at the 11am mass every Sunday, where I joined him as a treble in due course. In later years, he ran the folk group singing at the 9.30am mass, a quite different repertoire to which my father conscientiously adapted. Laurie had no academic musical training but a series of talented choirmasters and serious church choirs had made him into a highly effective and knowledgeable choral singer with a rich bass voice that blended easily with those around him. Choral singing was one of my father's emotional outlets, an opportunity for self-expression and what appealed to him about it was that the expression was collective, not just individual. Of course he also encountered the personal difficulties and disagreements to be found in all choirs. Whenever they got a bit trying, he would recall the words of a parish priest he once knew: 'the Devil gets into the Church through the choir loft'.

The demands made on him by the church were not always as welcome as was singing in a choir. Once, when still a young man, my father was looking forward to a pious but restful trip to Lourdes. Arriving at Victoria Station, he noticed a priest he knew shepherding a group of disabled pilgrims onto a train. The priest, delighted to hear that Laurie was also on his way to Lourdes, explained that one of their helpers had failed to appear. He asked Laurie to step in. Laurie spent the next week lifting, carrying and pushing the pilgrims all around Lourdes.

In his letter, Laurie described theology as a 'life-time' study. Mostly Laurie pursued this study alone, outside the academic world and the educational system. He left school at 14 even though the Jesuits, spotting a bright boy, offered to pay for his education beyond the school leaving age. My grandmother, reluctant to accept charity, declined their offer and thereafter my father's

intellectual life was confined to whatever leisure hours he could find between work and family life.

In fact Laurie's main focus was not so much theology as biblical criticism. For Catholics of his generation, study of the bible was somewhat problematic. In one of his *Endeavour* pieces Laurie recalls

the small Protestant church where, at the age of 8 or 9, I surreptitiously attended bible classes (in order to qualify for their Christmas party).

Needless to say, news soon got back to my staunchly Catholic mother. Not only had I imperilled my immortal soul but had scandalised our Catholic neighbours. It took me years to shake off the impression that the bible was a Protestant book!

Fortunately in 1943 the Vatican authorised Catholic scholars to apply the methods of textual criticism developed in the C19th to the Bible, and my father spent his adult life following the results of this late flowering of Catholic biblical scholarship. I only wish he could have been part of it. He did what he could to participate, attending talks at Catholic institutions in London and lectures at Birkbeck College. In retirement he taught himself Greek. The principal sadness of his final years was being unable to continue his study of the Bible.

Laurie was by temperament a conservative in liturgical and as well in theological matters but he was also a keen supporter of the reforms of the Second Vatican Council. In fact the best word to describe him is orthodox. He was among the minority who accepted the papal encyclical *Humane Vitae* but he did not seek a return to the days of the Latin Mass or the Fortress Church. Indeed, he was suspicious of all factions within the church and declined to join more than one organisation because they appeared to be questioning the authority of the Bishops. A 'loyal son of the church' is what he sought to be and succeeded in being through a turbulent patch in the Church's history.

So far as I know, my father did not fear death, though he was very moved by the death of his brother Joe in 1990 and that experience may have caused him to write the words with which I'll end:

Some might consider the phrase 'Happy Death' a contradiction in terms but Christianity has the answer to death, and real joy in life does not seem possible without it. Christ's Easter Victory makes death the gateway to Heaven, the endless joy of seeing God, no longer as through an opaque window but face to face as He really is.

David Owens

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