

Remembering Father Flavian at Gethsemani

A Reflection at the Memorial Mass for Fr. Flavian Burns, OCSO
October 20, 2005

By Michael Casagram, OCSO

Fr Flavian, whom we remember in a special way this morning, died October 12. He was a dear brother to many of us. He served the community here as abbot from 1968 to 1973. He had entered Gethsemani in January, 1951 at the young age of 19. Besides being abbot here, he was twice superior at Holy Cross Monastery at Berryville, VA, to which he had changed his stability. He was buried there last Monday.

Fr. Flavian – he didn't like being called Dom Flavian, as abbots were called at that time – played a crucial role in the history of Gethsemani, being the abbot who really initiated us into the changes of Vatican II, though these were well on the way when he became abbot in 1968; '68 was a year of great change in the nation as well: student demonstrations on campus, the momentous Democratic convention, the inner-city riots, the shocking deaths of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, the accidental death of our own Fr. Louis. In the midst of all this Flavian was a man intent on the life of prayer. He had served as confessor for many of us while he was prior and even after he went to the hermitage for the first time in '66. He was a powerful symbol of change in his own very gentle way. He loved to encourage the monks to be men of interiority, persons who truly sought God at whatever cost.

Life at Gethsemani had become too busy for him, so that once abbot he wanted to quiet things down. He closed the gift shop we had at the time. He asked the diocese to have another place than Gethsemani as its official retreat center so that ours could be for those who wanted quiet, a less-organized style of retreat. He cut back on a lot of the work projects the monks were involved in at the time. He wanted the monks to have time for *lectio*. He himself was a well-read man and a natural teacher. He wanted the monks to have time for leisure so as to pursue a life with God. Not all were happy; a few even decided to leave – but no one could deny that he was a person of deep convictions about the life we were here to live. Were he here today he would probably be asking us what we were about, if our community life was conducive to creating a climate where we might truly be persons of prayer.

Flavian is pleased, I'm sure, that we just read the gospel of the Beatitudes to remember him. His own search for God showed him just how much Jesus will turn our own



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value systems upside down and inside out. He had his own failings, and he came to know these and wanted us to do the same, so as to know also the great mercy of God who calls us into the deepest intimacy with himself. To live into the Beatitudes is to live into the very life of God, a life we then are to share with one another. To quote a text he loved: "Because the Bread is one, we though many become one Body in Him."



**Gethsemani Scholastics with their Father Master, early 1950s
Frater Flavian in back row, third from left,
immediately over right shoulder of Merton**