

## Homily for the Funeral of Msgr. William H. Shannon May 4, 2012

By **Rev. Charles E. Curran**

We gather here today to give thanks for the life and work of Father Shannon, to pray for him, and to celebrate his going home to the love of God that is the strongest reality in our world.

The three readings in today's liturgy chosen by Msgr. Shannon help us focus our reflection and prayer this morning. The first reading from Wisdom speaks of the beauty and power of wisdom, which is an image of God herself. The second reading from Romans reminds us that God's love for us is stronger than any other reality, and the Spirit of God's love intercedes for us in our weakness. The gospel reading from John proclaims the good news of the resurrection. Mary Magdalene has seen the Lord, and announces it to the disciples.

In his life, Father Shannon reminded us of what it means to be a pilgrim in a pilgrim Church. He knew that in this life he would never know and express the fullness of wisdom, of God's love, and the reality of the resurrection; but he strove to make these realities ever more present in his own life and in the life of the Church.

The trajectory of his own theological development over the years testifies to his desire and searching for a greater appreciation of these three realities. Back in the late 1940s and early fifties, he instructed his students and others on the lay apostolate and the Christian Family Movement. Even before Vatican II, he appreciated the importance of the newly developing biblical movement in the life of the Church. He championed the renewal of the liturgy, calling for the participation of all the baptized in the Eucharistic celebration. Later, as a result of his study of Thomas Merton, he came to a greater appreciation of contemplation and non-violence, and the connection between the two. All of these developments nourished his own spiritual life, and also what he shared with others in so many different ways.

Father Shannon taught theology here at Nazareth College from 1946 to 1982. No one in this diocese has ever or will ever teach theology to more people than Bill Shannon. He was a well-liked and respected teacher who was never satisfied with just repeating what he had taught before. He incorporated his new understandings and approaches into his teaching. Two people have told me the same story. They mentioned to him in conversation that they still had the notes from his classes over thirty years ago. Bill's response was: tear them up!



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After he retired from full-time teaching in the early eighties, he made a monumental contribution to Catholic scholarship and life in his writing, especially about Thomas Merton. He was the general editor of the five volumes of the *Collected Letters* of Thomas Merton and wrote five other books on Merton and his spirituality. Father Shannon was the founding president of

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the International Thomas Merton Society. In addition he published seven other books dealing especially with spirituality and prayer. Patricia A. Burton has compiled a forty-eight page complete bibliography of his published works.

Father Shannon was truly a pastoral minister of the gospel. His only parochial assignment was an assistant pastor at Sacred Heart Cathedral for two years after his ordination in 1943. He ministered as a teacher throughout his time at Nazareth College to his students and to many other people in the diocese, but his primary ministry since 1980 has been to the Sisters of St. Joseph here in this motherhouse. He has assisted them in his liturgies and his homilies in breaking open to them the realities of wisdom, God's love, and the power of resurrection. He cared for them in their living and their dying. His homilies for those sisters who died have been collected into a book. By becoming an associate of the Sisters of St. Joseph, he showed his admiration for and commitment to this congregation. But Bill would be the first to say that the Sisters ministered to him as much as he did to them.



His ministry also had other forms. His books on prayer and spirituality helped many to appreciate the all-surpassing gift of God's love and how we could better respond to it. He also served as spiritual director for many others. In addition, I have been told that he served longer on the priest's council of the Diocese of Rochester than any other person. Bishop Clark once told me that he wanted Bill as a member of that council as long as he was able.

His commitment to the biblical and liturgical renewals made him an enthusiastic supporter of the Vatican II reforms in the Church. The Church is primarily the people of God, all of whom are called to be perfect as the heavenly Father and Mother. The most important gift we have all received is baptism. The triumphalism and clericalism of the pre-Vatican-II Church was not for him. Look at how he dressed and conducted himself. This reminds me of a phone conversation I had with my mother in the early 1980s after my father died. Bishop Clark had appointed her to his committee studying the role of women in the Church. Since she did not drive, I asked her how she was going to get to the meetings. Her answer was that Bill Shannon was picking her up. My first thought was that maybe she had found a new male friend, so I asked somewhat gingerly, who is Bill Shannon? Her answer was, you know who Msgr. Shannon is! Believe me, my eighty-year-old mother was not in the habit of calling Monsignors of Holy Mother Church by their first names!

Bill lamented the trajectory in our Church moving away from Vatican II. He was especially upset by the growing centralization in the Church that de-emphasized the role of the local church, the failure to recognize the role of the *sensus fidelium*, and the inferior role of women in the Church. But as a true pilgrim, he faithfully worked in every way to carry on the work of reform in the Church.

His whole life was that of a pilgrim on a journey to the New Jerusalem, but this came through even more poignantly in the last years of his life. His body failed him, but his mind and heart were as vibrant as ever as he carried on his teaching, writing and pastoral ministry. In the last months he shared with some others his sadness at not being able to pray well at times. What an irony! – the one who helped so many of us to pray in his last days sometimes felt no consolation in his own

prayer. That is why he chose the selection from the Letter to the Romans. The Spirit helps us in our weakness when we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit herself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. Bill's faith remained strong, even in the occasional experience of the dark night of the soul. He like Mary Magdalene had seen the Lord and believed in the power of God's love.

We gather here today as part of the great number of our co-believers who have been touched by Bill Shannon's commitment to wisdom, to the overwhelming reality of God's love, and to the power of the resurrection. We pray that today he now knows and experiences the fullness of wisdom, of God's love, and of the resurrection.