

# Remembering Father Flavian at Berryville

Homily at the Funeral Mass for Fr. Flavian Burns, OCSO  
October 17, 2005

By **Abbot Robert Barnes, OCSO**

*A Funeral Mass of the Resurrection was celebrated on October 17, 2005, at Holy Cross Abbey, Berryville, Virginia, for Abbot Flavian Burns, OCSO, who died on October 12. Main celebrant and homilist was Fr. Robert Barnes, the present abbot of Holy Cross. Father Flavian, originally a monk and later abbot at the Abbey of Gethsemani, had become the fourth abbot of Berryville in August, 1990, which meant that henceforth his vow of stability was at Holy Cross Abbey. He was buried in the monastery cemetery among the brothers whom he himself had buried when superior from 1980 to 1984 and as abbot from 1990 to 1996.*

*The Lord God will destroy the veil that veils all people, he will destroy death forever.*  
(Isaiah 25:6a, 7-9)

*We are full of confidence and would rather be . . . at home with the Lord.*  
(2 Cor. 5:1, 6-10)

*Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.*  
(Luke 23:44-46, 50, 52-53; 24:1-6a)

Father Flavian has left us for his Father's house. He is no longer here. It is our duty and our grace to bury Father Flavian's body today, in expectation of the resurrection of the dead, among the brothers to whom he bound himself, when he became abbot and monk of this monastery. Like Jesus on the cross, and the thieves who hung beside him, as every child of Adam must inevitably do, Father Flavian breathed his last breath late Wednesday night. Not everyone however, when he or she is at the point of death, says with our Lord, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." But in his monastic life of over fifty-four years, Father Flavian learned to live the full meaning of those words Jesus uttered. And when his final breath came, while he and Brother Michael were praying the Lord's Prayer together, that cry of Jesus was just as truly Father Flavian's own: "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit."

Thomas Burns entered the Abbey of Gethsemani in 1951. He was nineteen years old. The young novice, Brother Flavian, hoped that there he would find what he longed for: to live in the house of the Lord all the days of his life. Today he has completed his life's journey, with its many twists and turns that he never could have anticipated. His earthly dwelling now is ended.



**Abbot Robert Barnes,  
OCSO**

The life of every Christian, of every human being, is a mystery. This mystery of life may be the more clearly seen when expressed in the lives of monks, but it is true of us all. After seventeen years living for God in his monastery, Father Flavian was chosen to be the abbot by his community, at the relatively young age of thirty-six. He served for five years in that demanding ministry to his brothers, when he asked to retire from his position in order to resume the hermit vocation that he had lived prior to his election. That was how he planned to spend the remainder of his life as a Cistercian monk, the way he believed God intended for him. It is most fortunate for us all that we do not foresee our future rather as God himself plans for us.

When Holy Cross Abbey in 1980 asked Father Flavian to help us in a time of need, to serve as our superior, he pondered and then consented to our request and left his hermitage at Gethsemani. His one condition then was that, after he had helped us to prepare for an abbot, he would be able to return to his life as a hermit. After our community elected Father Mark Delery as the third abbot of Holy Cross Abbey, Father Flavian promptly returned to his hermit calling. But only a few years later, he again was asked to help a monastery, Assumption Abbey in Ava, Missouri. And again he left his hermitage to obey what God asked of him. Obviously, people saw qualities of leadership in Father Flavian that made them keep making demands on him. But his heart was always in his hermitage. "One thing I ask of the Lord, for this I long, to live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life" (Psalm 26).

That is why it was so unexpected, in 1990, during Berryville's second time of need, that Father Flavian would consent to be elected by our community as our fourth abbot. That was a great personal sacrifice on his part, a surrender of his own spiritual desires, the placing of his spirit into God's hands. By his consent to God and to the community of Berryville, Father Flavian left Gethsemani behind and became the abbot of his new monastery. He served for six years in that ministry.

Then, when his term of office ended in 1996, he met a great surprise. Father Flavian was sent to Charlottesville, Virginia, to the monastery of Our Lady of the Angels at Crozet, to be the chaplain of the Cistercian nuns and to celebrate the Eucharist with them. At Crozet Father Flavian found within his chaplain's house that hermit life which he had long desired but had surrendered when he became the abbot of Berryville. This was God's gift to Flavian, not something of his own planning or his efforts, after he repeatedly was made to set aside his personal wish to live the hermit life. For those last eight and a half years of his life, he received from God's hand what he had so long desired.

The vocation of a Cistercian monk is a call to the cenobitic life, to a vocation lived in community with one's brothers. Thus, it is a rare thing for a Cistercian monk to be called to live as a hermit. But it is granted to the monk who discerns with his abbot that God calls him to live his vocation in this special way. Father Flavian knew when he was in his early thirties that he was called to the hermit vocation as a Cistercian monk. He pursued that desire all his life, but he never placed his own wishes above God's will for him, in the service of the needs of the Cistercian Order: abbot of Gethsemani from 1968 to 1973; temporary superior of Berryville from 1980 to 1984; temporary superior of Assumption Abbey in Ava in 1986 and 1987; and abbot of Berryville from 1990 to 1996. It was more important to God that Father Flavian's heart be purified of his own will in this way and freed to live more completely for God, than to live even the life of a hermit, but according to his own wishes.

Father Flavian always chose what was God's purpose for him, even when that choice called him from the hermitage he so desired. And when he found inner freedom from his own desire for the

hermit life, God unexpectedly gave to Father Flavian the fulfillment of what he had so longed for, as chaplain to our sisters of Our Lady of the Angels Monastery where he spent his final years. Now his life's journey is completed, and Father Flavian has gone to God.

Death is such a mystery to us – a mystery of pain and of loss, but also a mystery that the wisdom of this world does not comprehend. In truth, it is a great mystery that the terrible death of Jesus on the cross sanctified and made precious the lives of all who believe in Jesus. The mystery of death is such a precious mystery, to the person who lives more by faith than by sight alone. This is the wisdom of God, that is nonsense to a world which lives only by sight. To our physical awareness Father Flavian is dead and gone. To our spiritual senses of faith and of hope and love, Father Flavian is more alive now than ever he was before.

“Why do you seek the living one among the dead?” the angel asked the women at the tomb. Here is not where Father Flavian any longer lives. His body will rest with us in our cemetery. But his dwelling is now to be in heaven, a dwelling provided by God, not made by human hands, that shall last forever. We too, who walk by faith, would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. But for us that time is not yet. One day, as Isaiah prophesied, the Lord God will destroy death forever. For the present we wait in hope, full of confidence.

The spiritual senses of faith in God's wisdom more than in our own, and of hope, placing our spirit in his hands, these sustain us in this present life. But faith and hope, as we know, shall not last. Faith and hope shall cease, when we come to see what we now believe and to experience that for which we yet hope. But the spiritual sense of love, which begins for us here and develops within us our whole lives, that shall never cease. To the capacity of love we have attained during our present life, God will ceaselessly fill us for all eternity. For God is love: “*Deus caritas est*,” as Saint John assures us. With Isaiah the prophet let us rejoice and be glad that he shall have saved us. And with Saint Paul let us continue to be full of confidence in him. And with the holy women at the tomb, let us spend our lives seeking the living one rather than what is dead. As Jesus warned the Sadducees, “The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob is the God of the living, not of the dead. All are alive to God.”

Let us live our lives, as Father Flavian lived his life, seeking him who is the truly living one – in faith and in hope, but above all, in love. And may our loving God grant to Father Flavian and to all our departed loved ones the full measure of grace and love he has prepared for them. Amen.