

Fr Andy's Reflection for the weekend. It certainly made me realise the way Fr Brian had a great influence on me and my family.

GROUNDED IN PRAYER

As I reflect in these strange times I have witnessed that many of our care homes are turning into prisons. Even though the public has been asked to make sacrifices during these lockdown days, many elderly people, especially with dementia have not been asked. Some are enduring an enforced isolation that seems to be a violation of their basic human rights, and many of them simply do not understand why they can no longer see those they are close to. They ask for them and they are refused. They feel abandoned and scared and many others deteriorate. There are other ways of dying than from the virus. It is distressing that someone with dementia is not allowed to see their loved ones. Surely, they can be trusted to obey hygiene rules and social distancing and stay away if they are unwell? Enforced loneliness is simply wrong and causes untold pain and harm. Children calling to their trapped parents through a fence, comforting them despairingly through a closed door, trying helpless to communicate on the telephone or Skype. Death alone. Family are key carers, they have not placed their loved ones in care homes to abandon them to a life of isolation.

I have tried to imagine what Father Brian would have made of this coronavirus scenario. Of course, we would be in lockdown together, so the first thing to do would be getting rid of all the knives in the kitchen. While taking on board the draconian restrictions Brian would make the most of a bad situation and make prayer and reading his top priority, recognising God's grace at work in this crisis. Brian suffered a slight stroke the year before he died, so he rarely went out unless we took him somewhere, especially to the pub. I did his shopping and washing and made him the odd meal now and again. In fact nobody could have been more prepared for a pandemic than Brian! He lived that year as if there was a coronavirus crisis going on! But his whole life was directed to praying, especially the Scriptures and to spiritual reading.

In the five years that I lived with Brian and indeed, for the forty odd years I knew him, he taught me three things about prayer. First of all that prayer is not saying prayers, but prayer is primarily a lived context in which our prayers are finally said. A bus load of teenagers was returning from Mexico to the US. They had gone down there as a kind of Christian charity to help out the exceedingly poor people. They had worked hard all day and getting on the bus, they were very tired and very, very hungry. They crossed the border back into the United States and stopped at a diner; and they waited and waited! Finally, one of them was bold enough to go over to the waitress and asked if they could be served. The waitress told them she would serve them, but they (pointing to two black teenagers among them) cannot eat in the diner; they would have to eat on the bus. The teenagers looked at one another, and one of the finally said, "Well, we weren't hungry anyway," and they all went back to the bus!

Now, two people got up the next morning to pray. One was the waitress and one was one of the black teenagers. So, who just said prayers and who really prayed? Which one was at rights with God? Brian helped me realise that genuine prayer flows out of, and is a part of, a context of justice and love. Jesus himself was very clear on this subject too when he said, "If you are on your way to church to offer your gift at the altar and remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift at the altar and go and be reconciled with your brother and then come back and make your offering". (Matt 6) Prayer is not just saying prayers.

Secondly, I remember when I was a deacon with Brian and in the January of 1979 there was a fierce snowfall that was so bad we could not get to the cemetery at Thurcroft to carry out the funeral rites of this man and so they had to bury him without the services of a priest. A couple of days later the family asked us to meet them at the cemetery to bless the grave and offer some prayers. The snow was still thick, but the roads were clear. The wife of the deceased thanked Brian (and me) for coming and said to us, "George is right over here", pointing at a heap of snow. We all moved slowly in the snow when the widowed wife said, "Well, I think he's over here." After moving around a little further, the daughter said, "I think he's over there". So we traipsed over to where she pointed out to discover he wasn't there either. It was getting colder and after a few more minutes searching around for the plot, the wife calls out, "George, where the hell are you?" Brian looked helplessly into his funeral book and then the mother and daughter burst into laughter; and after the laughter came a few tears. After the tears Brian had a prayer for George wherever he was! Again, Brian taught me to pray from the heart, not from a book. This brings me on to the third thing and that is about praying the Scriptures. The Scriptures is not so much a book, but as the great Rabbi Henry Abramson said, it is God's love letter to his people.

I have come to love and read the Scriptures ever day in one way or another. By taking a passage of Scripture, usually the Gospel of the day, I allow the Word of God to penetrate the core of my being and form the foundation of my life.

If it was not for the Scriptures I fear that the coronavirus pandemic crisis would hijack my thoughts and become the dominant thought pattern, filtering through my whole mindset. However, the Word of God has become an anchor that keeps me firmly rooted in Christ. Perhaps that is why my daily (solitary) Mass not only feeds me with the Body of Christ, but with the power of the Scriptures – the Word made flesh and becoming real in my everyday life. This Sunday's reading from John's Gospel we hear Jesus tell his disciples, "I shall ask the Father and he will give you the Holy Spirit to be with you forever. The Spirit of Truth is with you, he is in you. I will not leave you orphans. Anybody who loves me will be loved by my Father and I shall love him and show myself to him."

Jesus will send us the Holy Spirit who will guide us in our daily lives, showing us the right words and actions in the situations we find ourselves. It is no coincidence that the Holy Spirit is also known as the Comforter. When things are not going well for us and when we are feeling overburdened by the events taking place around us, we may find comfort in knowing the Holy Spirit of Jesus lives in our hearts.

Father Brian would have prayerfully weathered this coronavirus storm and come through it all the stronger and so shall we. It is nearly eight years since Father Brian died, but his prayer life still lives on, not at least, within me.

PS WITH APOLOGIES TO BRIAN "An elderly man called Brian suddenly falls over in the street. Some people gather round to help. 'Are you all right sir?' asks one man. 'Oh yes, says Brian. "I seemed to just suffer a dizzy spell and so fell over.' 'Oh dear,' says the man. 'Have you got vertigo?' 'Not really', says Brian, 'I only live round the corner!'"