

Jesuit grew where he was planted

By Father Joseph Breighner

Over the years there has been a lot of good-natured kidding about which groups of priests God likes the most – Jesuits, Franciscans, Redemptorists, Passionists or plain old diocesan priests such as myself.

One day, so the story goes, God sent a message to every priest in the world which said, “I love all of you equally.” It was signed, “God, S.J.”

So, God is a Jesuit?

I have to confess that I saw God vividly in one particular Jesuit who died recently: Father Vince O’Brien.

Father Vince spent much of his life teaching, but I knew Vince in his other ministry – working with the separated, widowed and divorced, mostly in the Archdiocese of Washington. I met Vince on retreats, at workshops, anywhere that hurting and grieving people gather. Vince was always a man for others.

In the not-so-distant past, divorced Catholics were excommunicated. Even those who separated but did not remarry were made to feel like second-class citizens in the church. Many whom others saw as last, Vince saw as first – first in need of his time and energy and compassion. And he gave his all generously.

I was unable to get to St. Matthias Church in Pennsylvania for his funeral, but I was listed on the program as an honorary concelebrant. I have been singularly adept at avoiding honors in my life. To be listed with Vince ranks as one of the highest honors possible.

Vince had some favorite sayings. Allow me to share a few. “Grow where you are planted.” When I see wild flowers blooming in inconspicuous places, I notice how they just grow where they are. They don’t seem to be looking for anyone’s approval. They don’t seem to care if anyone even sees them. They just are. They give glory to God by just being. Do roses feel guilty because they have thorns? Do dandelions care if no one likes them? Do they worry about dying in a short time? How much we can learn from flowers of the field. Just be you, the you God created you to be!

Another one of Vince’s sayings was, “A smile, a laugh, gives your ‘alleluia’ a concrete human expression.” For Vince, liturgy changed life. He wanted people’s outward

expression to reflect their awareness that they were healed, loved and forgiven. Joy is a sign of God in the midst of life's tragedies.

"Everything is a gift." Wow. Wouldn't life be so different if we saw everything as a gift. To be grateful for the chair I sit in, the keyboard I type on, the roof over my head, the rain falling outside my window and on and on. Our mind is not our friend. Our mind always tells us that we need something else to make us happy. The spirit of God within us tells us to see everything and every moment as a gift. We don't want to miss life and the gift that life is. Don't miss being happy now by waiting for someone else or for something else to come later. Later never comes. The mind will always want more.

One of Father Vince's blessings was, "May you always be aware that God blesses you in all the circumstances of your life. May you carry this awareness with you as you continue your journey to your heavenly home."

On Father Vince's program was printed the following quote from Father Pedro Arrupe, longtime superior of the Jesuits: "Nothing is more practical than finding God and falling in love with God in a quite absolute, final way. What you are in love with seizes your imagination and will affect everything. It will decide what will get you out of bed in the morning, what you will do with your evenings, how you spend your weekends, what you read, what you know, what breaks your heart, and what amazes you with joy and gratitude. Fall in love. Stay in love. It will decide everything."

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