EULOGY FOR FR. MICHAEL MORRIS, O.P.
Vigil Service

St. Albert’s Priory
Oakland, California
Thursday, 21 July 2016

Lk 1: 39-55 

The Visitation and Magnificat

My name is Father Michael Carey. I’m a classmate and friend of Father Michael Morris.

For as long as I knew him, and that was a very long time, Father Michael always wanted – and often acquired – the very best that this world could give. He dreamed of grand homes, he enjoyed the best food and drink, and he collected – rather madly, really – the best books and the best art. Still, there was something else, an even stronger force that finally ruled his life.

As Michael was finishing his Bachelor of Fine Arts at USC, he was also making his decision to study for the priesthood. And of course, he wanted to do this in the best possible way. He felt called to join a religious order, and so he applied for and was accepted to the one that he considered the very best – the Jesuits.

Lucky for us, Michael also felt the irresistible allure of beauty. Just
before joining the Jesuits, he read a book about the Dominican Order called *The Knighthood of Truth*. The chivalric and romantic religious spirit it depicted so captivated Michael’s imagination that he knew he had to join the Dominicans. Perhaps the Jesuits remained for Michael the best of the religious Orders – if such a judgment can even be made – but Michael thought that the Dominicans were the most beautiful. And in any contest between beauty and the best, beauty would always win the day. So Michael became a Dominican friar.

After the normal studies in philosophy and theology and ordination to the priesthood, Michael’s dedication to beauty only intensified. He did graduate studies in art history, receiving his MA from Cal, Berkeley. He studied for a year at the renowned Courtauld Institute of Art in London, and he then completed his studies, and was awarded the PhD in art history from Cal Berkeley in 1986.

From that time forward, Michael primarily lived a professor’s life. We should recognize, though, that his academic career didn’t diminish his pastoral effectiveness. An example of this is the way he affected one of his professors at Cal, a very respected art historian named Le Ettlinger. Le was a
secular Jew who just barely escaped from Germany as World War II was breaking out. By the time Michael knew him, Le was teaching at Cal and he directed Michael’s doctoral dissertation. This took a few years, of course, during which time Le and Michael became good friends. Well, after falling under Michael’s spell, Le asked to enter the Catholic Church. Michael personally catechized him and baptized him. Later, he also buried Le in our Dominican cemetery in Benicia, not far from where Michael will be.

Michael’s effect on Le wasn’t unique. He had a knack for welcoming people into his life, for developing genuine friendships, and for making us feel that, in Michael’s own personal sky, each of us was a star whose light he couldn’t live without.

As Michael developed his courses in religion and the arts at the Dominican School in Berkeley, his Los Angeles heritage almost required him to address religion in film. And so he taught a course on that subject, hosted what he called his “cinematic salon”, and developed a major collection of original posters for religious movies from the early days of silent film up to the present. This collection has been exhibited in several museums throughout the United States, and has even traveled to other parts of the
world. Michael also published a biography of Natacha Rambova, the very talented wife of the silent movie star Rudolf Valentino. In these projects we see that Michael’s finely-tuned taste gave him the freedom to find beauty in movies as easily as in museums.

Michael was a very good writer. And of all the writing that he did, I think what pleased him most was the essays he published regularly, for almost twenty years, for the liturgical prayer journal Magnificat. These were small pieces that explained to an incredibly large audience of lay people the iconography and significance of religious art. Just shortly before he died, Michael was able to collect all of those articles that were devoted to the Virgin Mary, some forty-five of them. Magnificat is now preparing them for publication, and they will appear in book form this coming October. This is the last project that Michael completed, and I know that he was especially pleased that it should be a book about the Blessed Virgin.

No one who knew Michael, of course, could miss his effervescent personality, but some might not have seen his very deep faith. Michael was always a disciple of beauty, and that colored his spirituality as well. In his final illness, Michael asked that prayers for him be said through the
intercession of his fellow Dominican and fellow artist, Fra Angelico. We had prayer cards made, and Michael was pleased to think that, even if he were not healed, Fra Angelico might help someone else and receive the saintly recognition that he deserves.

Toward the end of his life, Michael also intensified his devotion to the Blessed Virgin. And how could he not? As we heard in tonight’s gospel, Elizabeth excitedly greeted Mary and said, *Blessed are you among women.* And Mary said, in effect, *I am blessed, but only because I am the handmaid of the Lord. My soul proclaims his greatness.* To Father Michael, Mary was a gloriously beautiful, living icon of God among us.

When I visited Michael in May, just shortly after his diagnosis, we spent hours together speaking of the more important things. When he wasn’t feeling well, he would lie in bed, and I’d sit beside him, and we’d talk. After one longer conversation, I suggested that we say a rosary together, and he said, “Yes. Let’s do that. It will be my third rosary today.” He didn’t sleep well then, and when he woke at night, he said he’d pray what he called his Midnight Rosary.

A few of you might know that Michael had erected a small altar and
shrine in the walk-in closet of his bedroom. He knew this was comical, so he played right along and called it Our Lady of the Wardrobe. In spite of this humor, though, Michael’s devotion to Mary was absolutely sincere. It was there, on that altar, that Michael said his last Mass. And in the days before he died, Michael told me, he consecrated himself completely to Mary over and over again.

There was one more devotion that was an important part of Michael’s later spirituality – his devotion to the Holy Face. You see the painting of it here. When Michael acquired this painting, it was in very bad condition. But it had a miraculous history, literally, and so Michael had it restored and re-framed and he hoped to spread people’s devotion to it. Just days before he died, Michael asked one of his students and friends to bring it to his room and to hang it near his bed. He told me that he liked to sit and just gaze upon it while praying, moving as it were through the image to the reality that lay behind it and beyond. As the psalm verse on Michael’s memorial card says, “It is your Face, O Lord, that I seek. Hide not your face.”

Michael leaves us, then, a perhaps surprising example of faith, of prayer and deep devotion, of unexpected love and tenderness, and of patient
and gracious suffering into the very day he died. It is absolutely clear to me that as cancer was killing Michael’s body, grace was bringing his soul to new life.

When Michael died, he left us an important collection of his writing, movie posters, books, and art. He also left us the much more important collection of his friends. But when we think of Michael, what we should really cherish is not what he collected, but that God collected him.