

Homily for Gregory Baum's Memorial
by *Philip McKenna*

These wonderful readings from Sacred Scripture have been carefully chosen for this memorial of our dear friend and teacher Gregory. They are, as all Scripture, first of all God's word to us to draw us into union with God's self.

We chose them I think because we can easily imagine Gregory himself reading them and letting them form him and motivate him.

We can also imagine Gregory teaching them, or from them, for we see the resonances of these texts in his "theological pathway."

And thirdly now that Gregory has passed over to life with the invisible blessed in God, we can see him as a wonderful example of the full human pathway shown to us by Wisdom, Paul and Jesus.

The first reading from Wisdom is especially dear to me as it is an edited version of the Prayer of Solomon, Chapter 9 which I fashioned many years ago as my prayer before theological study. The bits I edited out were Solomon's specific prayer for help with being a King. I never shared it with Gregory but I know he would have prayed it with full conviction.

I note particularly the vivid sense of everything and all truth seeking as given by God--And how limited even our best efforts are-- "We are weak and of short time."—And that "She would labour at our side."--And that even as we search out the high deep things of the Unknowable Godhead, we return always for help with the urgent tasks of this time and world.

How hard Gregory worked! How hard and joyfully(!), as Professor Scharper noted in his Toronto Star Obituary. Right to the end, after prayer, he would go to his desk and work. In August he said he was having difficulty concentrating on long articles so he was exploring starting a blog!--About the wonderful things Pope Francis was saying . . . Time ran out . . .

When it comes to Paul's letter to the Romans, it is Gregory's example of the Christian life that comes to mind—His resistance against conformity to our world's values, his lifelong openness to what Paul calls being "transformed by the renewing of your minds so that you may discern . . ."

We need to learn from Gregory's pathway to be open to new dimensions of faith and understanding, as he was right into old age.

I once joked with Gregory that he should call his theology "Retrieval Theology" for I never saw a thinker more adept at retrieving from past controversies, the Gospel value that was present in both sides. He never lagged in zeal or ardor of spirit for this work. Personally he showed us an example of modesty, affection, civility, non-retaliation and generous hospitality.

Paul asks us to be “patient in suffering.” So we should mention here the insoluble problem of human suffering that exercised Gregory all his theological life. He knew that traditional language unchecked by negative theology left us with a morally monstrous God. In the face of unspeakable suffering, Gregory says at the end of his book: “The one utterance I could make is *resurrexit. Resurrexit*, Christ is risen, is a good note on which to close the story of my theological pathway.”

And what are we to say about Matthew’s account of Jesus going “up the mountain” and, as the new Moses, delivering this extraordinary fulfillment of the Law—Beyond commands we are given invitations, --actions of the heart beyond ritual or legal exactitude.

With all its inevitable anguish, Gregory embraced this freedom of God’s children who have within themselves the New Law, the Holy Spirit, Wisdom herself.

I was struck by “Blessed are those who mourn” thinking of the loss of our friend. Then, as if corrected by Gregory, I read the commentary that said Jesus is talking here about Israel mourning the sins that caused the oppression of the poor. Gregory never stopped reminding us of structural injustices of our culture. He always said that for a Christian—his sense of peace must always include a restlessness about injustice.

Let us now turn to the Supper that Jesus gives his friends and that keeps us in unbroken union with our beloved dead—who live in God.

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