

Dearly beloved in Christ: Christ is risen!

On Friday the Church, bishops, priests, deacons, nuns, monks and all the baptized buried God's faithful servant, Hieromonk Roman (Braga) at Dormition Monastery in Rives Junction. His funeral was a Paschal light burning brightly, reflecting the Light of the World, our Lord Jesus Christ who came into the world, took on our flesh, to heal us who are sick with sin, as He healed the paralytic today.

The first striking thing about Fr. Roman's funeral was not the three bishops, four deacons, over thirty priests, over twenty monks and nuns and the hundreds of people. It would have been a surprise if there weren't that many people given his holiness and humanity. It was the timelessness and the other-worldly beauty of his funeral. I quickly gave away my book because I couldn't balance the candle and the book at the same time without possibly setting myself or someone else on fire. (It was like Joe Goodman was looking over my shoulder). The beauty of the chant, the Psalms that were sung, amid the icons of the church with Fr. Roman's mortal remains in our midst, bearing the marks of his illness and death. Yet there was in it joy, as Christ is risen was sung again and again, announcing anew to the world as if for the first time that death is now powerless because Christ is risen.

The service was very long. I'm glad I gave away my book because then I wouldn't look ahead to see where we were and how much more we had to go. Sure, our backs ached, our feet hurt, it was warm. But those were minor inconveniences compared to what we were doing, singing Fr. Roman away to his rest. We notice a rose flower, the thorns not so much, though we know they're there when we are pricked by them. It is the beauty and the scent of the flower that stays with us. It is the beauty and the perfume of the prayers that we said for Fr. Roman's repose that remain. Time was not to be reckoned as we prayed for him. We had entered the beauty of the kingdom of God.

Fr. Roman was carried to the grave and placed in the hole in the earth dug for his mortal body. Everyone, clergy and monastics, laity, adults and children took turns shoveling dirt onto his casket until his grave was full and the cross was placed above his resting place. I sent a picture on my phone to Matushka with the words, "Until the Second Coming." Fr. Roman's grave, like the graves of all our beloved dead, are temporary. They will be emptied when we hear the Savior's voice calling us to Himself when He comes in glory to the earth. All will be raised up, mortal bodies and souls reunited, bodies changed in the resurrection. As Jesus tells us, those who have lived in evil will rise to the resurrection of judgment but those who have lived in Him on this earth will rise to the resurrection of life.

Fr. Roman did not want any eulogies. He did not want people's tears. As he said, the soul needs not tears but prayers. And he referred to himself as a great sinner. Such was his humility. It is this holy humility coupled with love that I am sure have vouchsafed him rest among the saints, taking his place as one of them.

Fr. Roman lived for 93 years and did not have an easy life. When the communists took over Romania he was imprisoned not once but twice. And as a priest, the communists took special care to be cruel through physical and psychological torture, through isolation and solitary confinement. Who would give thanks for that? Yet Fr. Roman said he was grateful for what the communists did to him because by stripping away all his possessions, even his liberty and the community of others, as they tried to turn him into a beast, he said distractions were removed from him and he turned inward, inside himself to discover God. Because God is not outside us. God has made us in His image. We already have the divine image within. Jesus says "the kingdom of God is within you." (Luke 17:21) And that image of God shone through Fr. Roman by his sufferings, by his being a modern day confessor of the faith, that is one who calls Christ Lord and God though it will mean suffering and imprisonment.

Where Fr. Roman could have been embittered against those who treated him so shamefully he prayed for them. When given humiliation, he responded with humility. When given torture, he responded with a blessing. When exiled from his homeland, he followed God's will. These things may sound impossible to us. They are not. Humility and love are not reserved for monks and nuns. There are for all of us. And in them we will find salvation. If I think about something in the past where someone wronged me, it's easy to tense up, feeling blood pressure rise, becoming agitated. What does that serve? Fr. Roman's example is nothing other than the example of our Lord Jesus Christ. What freedom there is in forgiveness! How light the load is when we look to see some good in every person! How we are filled with Christ's joy when we pray for those who love us and those who hate us! The humility to forgive is life-giving. It takes what we "want" or the vengeance we may seek out of the equation. That is, forgiveness puts to death our pride. This is how Fr. Roman lived. It is a choice to live like this, a choice to live like Christ. That's important for us to remember before we make the choice to hold a grudge or seek retribution.

And in the last two years Fr. Roman experienced again a loss of freedom and ability as he became ill. He remarked that dying was difficult. Little by little things were stripped away from him. First, he could no longer serve the Liturgy. Then he could only come to services in a wheelchair. Eventually he couldn't even do that and had to remain in his monastic cell where he still kept his rule of prayer. When he celebrated his 93<sup>rd</sup> birthday three weeks before his death, he was asked if it was okay to sing "Many Years" for him. He said, "No. I am only now beginning to learn to die." So he took joy in the smallest things. When the nuns thought his time was near, he astonished them when he awoke and asked for ice cream. The joy he had at that simple treat made him say that monks are only children with beards. When he could no longer get out of bed and keep his prayer rule he said "God has to take over." Finally, he could not even speak but wordlessly was able to make the sign of the cross in prayer. Now he added to his voluntary poverty of earthly things the poverty of his physical helplessness and confinement. He fulfilled Jesus' words in Luke's gospel, "Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God." (6:20)

One of our diocesan priests remarked, "He was truly a saint, refined like silver through his suffering." In his weakness as he was dying, the God's words to Saint Paul were fulfilled in Fr. Roman, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." (2 Corinthians 12:9) All the impurities were burned away in Fr. Roman so that he glowed with the radiance of sanctity. And so he fell asleep in the Lord Jesus Christ, not afraid of death because he knew that the death of the Savior has set us free.

Many people spoke to one another of miracles worked by through Fr. Roman's intercession in their lives. On the way to the cemetery a priest said to me he hopes Fr. Roman is made a saint by the Church soon. Many spoke to one another of his being a saint though Fr. Roman would be the first to call himself a sinner in need of prayers.

Though tears were shed at losing Fr. Roman's physical presence, yet there is joy at gaining an intercessor in heaven. Among his favorite sayings, "Love one another as God loves us." "Look to see the good in every person." "Pray without ceasing." Prayer is not only the words we say from our prayer books or here in church, it is also what we do, living in Christ in every moment of our day, whether at home, work or school.

From Fr. Roman, as a living example of our Lord Jesus Christ, let us learn how to be humble, how to forgive, how to love one another as Jesus Christ loves each one of us. Christ is risen!