



## Requiem Mass for Rev Fr Henry Byrne

### Homily

**Most Rev Timothy Costelloe SDB  
Archbishop of Perth**

**Friday 25 August, 2023  
Our Lady of Grace Church, North Beach**

*Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death.*

I think it is true to say that, while in one sense bishops get to know a great deal about the priests who minister with them in a diocese such as ours, in another sense we probably have little access to the deepest truths about a person, and especially about the depths of their faith. What we can say with confidence, however, especially on a day like today when we gather to entrust Father Henry into God's loving care and thank God for Fr Henry's life of fidelity since his priestly ordination in 1956, is this: that ultimately the only explanation for such a long life of faithful service to God and God's people is a depth of spirituality, an intimacy with God, which must have at the heart of Fr Henry's life.

As a faithful son of Ireland, with its strong tradition of devotion towards Mary, the mother of Jesus, we can be sure that the prayer which with which I began these reflections, the Hail Mary, would often have been on Father Henry's lips and in Father Henry's heart. How many thousands of times must he have prayed this prayer, often alone, and often together with his people. We should not doubt for a moment that his prayer has been heard. *Holy Mary mother of God pray for me. Pray for me now, today, pray for me at the hour of my death.* When Father Henry went to bed on the eve of the Feast of the Assumption of Our Lady we do not know if he had any intuition that the Lord was about to call him home, but what we do know is that the prayer he had prayed so often was being fulfilled. Mary was surely praying for him and with him, and accompanying him, as he was led into his journey into the mystery of God.

The second half of the Hail Mary catches beautifully a central aspect of our Catholic tradition about Mary. She is the woman who was given to us by her Son as he was dying on the cross - given to be our mother and our helper and our supporter - and she does this first and foremost by praying for us and with us - by joining her prayers to ours and our prayers to hers as together we turn our eyes with trusting faith to God.

Many Christians who do not belong to our Catholic tradition struggle to understand why we pray to Mary. Surely, they say, we can pray directly to God: why do we need to go through anyone



else? The answer, of course, lies in our belief that we are all brothers and sisters together in the community of faith. We belong to each other, we are responsible for each other, and God calls us to care for each other, to learn from each other, to support and encourage each other. This is why we so instinctively ask each other for prayers. And because in death, *life is changed not ended*, we turn to those who have already died, especially those whose lives of holiness have been recognised by the Church and ask them too for their prayers. Death does not destroy the bonds of love and care between people. Those who have gone before us, marked with the sign of faith, and now rejoice with the Lord in heaven, become our champions, praying with us and for us, joining their prayers to Mary's, in a grace-filled expression of that love which death can never destroy.

That we belong to each other, and that we are responsible for each other, lies at the heart of our Catholic understanding of what it means to be a community of disciples of Jesus. "By this," he says, "will everyone know that you are my disciples: that you love one another as I have loved you."

*As I have loved you* - this is a tall order, for Jesus tells us that you cannot have a greater love than that love which would lead you to lay down your life for others. And this, of course, is what Jesus did. He called himself the Good Shepherd and explained that the Good Shepherd is the one who lays down His life for His sheep.

When Father Henry, as a young man, heard within himself the call from Jesus to become a priest, he said "yes" to that call knowing that it was a call to walk in the footsteps of the Good Shepherd, laying down his life - giving everything he had - to the people to whom God would send him. As it turned out, God sent him here to Western Australia and in particular to the people of Maylands, Kalgoorlie, Shenton Park, South Perth, Beverley, Lynwood, Scarborough, and lastly here to the people of North Beach parish. In each place he committed himself to doing his best to be a living sign of the presence of the Good Shepherd, the presence of Jesus, among His people. He tried to help those who were tired and weary to find green pastures and quiet waters, as good shepherds always do. He tried to help those who were lost or who had fallen to walk again along the paths of righteousness, as good shepherds always do. He tried to bring comfort to those who felt that they were walking in death's dark valleys, and to help people understand that no matter what happened in their lives goodness and mercy were always gifts being held out to them by the Lord.

It is no surprise, then, that the gospel chosen for today's Mass should be the passage from Saint John's gospel in which Jesus proclaims Himself to be the Good Shepherd. Father Henry knew exactly what being a priest was all about, and for 67 years, he committed himself faithfully to this call, enriching the lives of countless people along the way.



Father Henry has now passed through the gates of death and has entered into the great mystery of eternal life. As we entrust him today to God's great mercy and compassion, we do so knowing that even the best of us fail often, and sometimes badly, to live the life of fidelity to which God is calling us. Father Henry would not want us to neglect our duty to pray for him that he might be granted forgiveness for his sins and enter fully into the joy of his Lord. We do so willingly and with great confidence for we know that at the moment of his death he was being supported and accompanied by the prayers of Mary his mother and ours. He had asked Mary so often to pray for him at the hour of his death. We can be sure that his prayer was heard.