

WELCOME HOME, BROTHER

— *brother Richard*

*May death come gently toward you,
Leaving you time to make your way
Through the cold embrace of fear
To the place of inner tranquility.¹*

DURING THE MONTH OF DECEMBER BROTHER COLUMBA WAS ALWAYS anticipating the celebration of his birthday on the 18th of the month.

We think of him especially at this time since we will not be celebrating it in the traditional way we have for years with a supper/party, but this year giving thanks for his new birth in God and the remembrance of his last days among us as a time of inner tranquility/peace, joy and laughter.

We remember how after enjoying a Sunday evening supper and a few laughs with the brothers, then singing our Compline/Night Prayer together, brother Columba shuffled with his walker to his room and prepared himself for the night's rest. Suddenly there was a loud crash and we ran to his room to see what was happening. He had fallen, but seemed alright. We helped him into bed and he slept the night, but in the morning he could not get up out of bed. Brother Columba had broken his hip.

We took him to the hospital and the doctors operated on him the following day, but they immediately recognized that brother Columba was having heart and lung complications that would involve major interventions with doubtful/unpromising results for his future health and life. His choice was not to intervene but to receive whatever comfort possible for the time ahead.

The day after the operation brother Columba had very little pain and was joyful, full of laughter. His niece, Barbara, living in Vermont with her husband, Charlie Chapman, and their grown-son, Chad, who worked at the hospital, came to visit him and brother Columba held forth with joyful family memories and stories they had never heard before. A nurse came to ask him if he wanted anything and he said "ice cream", and she said, "of course." He delighted in his dish of ice cream.

The next morning brothers Peter and Richard arrived at the hospital to arrange with the nursing personnel his transfer back to the monastery. When they arrived the nurse was just cleaning up his breakfast dishes and she said that he woke up and asked what was on the menu for breakfast. She asked him what he wanted and he said, "pancakes and bacon!" She said, "you've got it." And he enjoyed his breakfast saying "thank you" to the nurse with each spoonful he was fed. He then started to doze off. Standing at his bedside the brothers told him they had almost everything ready for his trip home to the monastery, and that they were just going out of the room to get a bite for themselves but would be right back. As they returned, the nurse working with the brothers to arrange the trip home met them in the entranceway



¹ Words of the Irish teacher and poet, John O'Donohue, from *To Bless the Space Between Us: A Book of Blessings*, New York: Doubleday (2008) p. 180

and said she had seen a sudden change in his condition and began to pray the Our Father with him. As she prayed the words “thy will be done...” brother Columba breathed his last.

He was home...finally beyond his struggle with dementia and beyond the fragility of his body's limitations that prevented enjoyment of potting the plants and turning over the earth to plant new seedlings. Now it was brother Columba for whom the seed broke open and he was born anew into life eternal.

So many persons have reflected since his dying that he was the first to meet and welcome them as visitors to the priory, presiding from his welcome-mat in the garden and tending the apple trees around the pond. His embrace of others was all-inclusive and his warm smile was disarming. His spirit continues to invite us home amid the laughter and loving embrace of God's garden. ■

