

Eulogy – Father Bernard Sander
June 9, 2008

I candidly admit to having mixed feelings about doing this eulogy. On the one hand I am greatly honored that Abbot Nathan asked me to share some stories and thoughts about Father Bernard. But on the other hand I am greatly daunted. I am standing before an assembly of Father Bernard's family and friends, a man many of you knew well and all of you loved dearly. This church is teeming with your cherished memories of and stories about him. What can I say, I wonder, that surpasses your own stories? I only hope my memories will harmonize with yours and reinforce them, and in their own way help tell the story that was Father Bernard, as you knew him. I first came to know Father Bernard when I came to Mount Angel Seminary as a high school freshman. At the time Father Bernard was the Rector of the Minor Seminary and a young man—barely in his mid-thirties. Of course, to a fourteen-year-old kid that was old and a Rector was a man of awesome authority, so I can't say I soon was on intimate terms with him.

But with the wisdom of hindsight I can say that even the young Father Bernard as known and remembered by a very young seminarian possessed the qualities that characterized him all his life and made him such a beloved figure. Three especially come to mind: his kind and calm wisdom; his intuitive vision; and his openness to new ideas.

As for his kind and calm wisdom, early on in my seminary career I was a beneficiary. It was expected, we were told, that during the summer a seminarian was to keep in touch with his pastor. When I came home for the summer after my first or second year in the seminary even I have to admit that I wasn't too good about dropping by to see the pastor regularly. I never gave it a thought to be honest until I ran into Father Bernard as the summer was drawing to a close. As I recall it was at the big Marian procession at Crooked Finger on the Solemnity of the Assumption. Father Bernard saw me and laughing, said, "You know, Joe, I had a letter from a pastor recently about a seminarian. He was angry and said I shouldn't let him return to the seminary because he hasn't been by to see him once this summer." That's all Father Bernard said; in his calm, kind and wise way he had made his point, and I got it, (though I am not sure if I ever fully mended my ways about visiting the pastor!) Secondly, my seminary experience also taught me (mostly with the wisdom of hindsight) what a great visionary Father Bernard was. He was Rector of a pre-Vatican II seminary and the seminary certainly conformed to the standards of the day. But Father Bernard was remarkably aware of and receptive to many new ideas that were bubbling up at that time and he passed on to us. In those years he was particularly attuned to lay movements and the importance of the laity in the Church. He was an especially enthusiastic promoter of CFM, YCW, and YCS, movements which were dedicated to bringing Christ and Christian living to marriage and family, to workers in their workplace, and students respectively. There were times when we didn't appreciate to the full what he was doing, and found his commitment a little over the top. (Abbot Bonaventure once told me a mantra the college guys devised ran "We live for you/ we die for you/ Good old YCW.") But we all benefited from his vision and insight, and when all is said and done, we were given the foundations that prepared us for ministry in a post-Vatican II Church.

Thirdly, Father Bernard was open to new ideas. Undoubtedly a main reason why he was such a great visionary is because he was so open to new ideas. He took them from wherever he found them and from whoever had them. He even took them from students; he was always willing to listen—and hear--what students had to say. He and Father Ambrose Zenner, the Rector of the Major Seminary, promoted student government and it was a pretty lively organization. How often we heard speakers and met visitors whom Father Bernard had invited to the seminary because he was convinced they had something important to say—and because he knew them. Of course not always did all his ideas work so well. I remember once he got the great idea that students should

have a hand in in-house discipline. So regularly a student judiciary body would meet and the indicted came before the group to hear the charges against them and receive their due punishment. It didn't last very long. I think Father Bernard concluded that it was a little too like a kangaroo court and was not such a great idea so quietly he dropped it.

Kind and gentle as he was, Father Bernard was no fluff ball. He could get quite annoyed. One occasion I shall never forget occurred in the course of a meal. There used to be reading at table in the pre-Vatican II seminaries just as there still is in the monastery. The college fellows read, each one taking a turn for a week at a time. One day--I remember the scene so clearly—the reader was reading along and he came to a word he didn't know how to pronounce. It wasn't a big word but he didn't know where the accent fell. Rather than just say it and read on, he came to a dead stop and tried to figure it out. It seemed like an eternity and everyone inwardly winced, trying to help him get the word out. Finally he took a jab at the accent and then, as if to throw in some comic relief, he added, "I guess." Father Bernard was not at all amused. In fact he was livid. Soon after he rang the bell and we all stood for the final prayer. But before praying he really let the poor reader have it. I forget what he said, probably something to the effect that public reading is an important assignment and readers are expected to prepare—and use a dictionary if they have to. I remember the reader was a big blond kid from northern California and in a second's time he was beet red from the top of his head to the collar of his shirt and probably beyond.

I have used up almost all the time a decent eulogist should be allotted and I'm still talking about Father Bernard as Rector. There are still so many things to reminisce about in Father Bernard's life because at a time when most people are thinking about retirement, Father Bernard took on the role of Abbey Guest Master, and ran the guesthouse for twenty-five years. Perhaps that is where he did his greatest work. Undoubtedly it is where he achieved his greatest fame. How many thousands of lives he touched over those years. I am willing to wager that most of you present here this evening met Father Bernard while he was in the guesthouse. In fact, it seems to me that during those years that he was Guest Master about 90% of the people who became acquainted with the abbey, did so through Father Bernard.

But even though that was a new ministry, it was the Father Bernard I knew in the seminary who ministered: kind, open, and a visionary. He was the man who offered hospitality to anyone who came and sought counsel. Often when people came for spiritual direction he would tell them, "You have to start reading the Psalms," and he would give them a copy of Abbot Bonaventure's translation of the Psalms. Before they knew it they were also signed up to become an oblate, or maybe he directed them over to the seminary to take a class or two. The Academic Dean didn't always appreciate having unregistered auditors popping unannounced into classes, but a good many off hill MA students began their academic career in the seminary by accepting Father Bernard's advice to sit in on a class or two.

He was also a man who was so remarkably open to new ideas because he had the vision to see how beneficial they would be. I can't begin to recall all the abbey events that he had a finger in, but Christian in the World and the Summer Conference are two that come readily to mind.

But when all is said and done it wasn't what Father Bernard did through all these years. It is more a case of who he was, a man who cared deeply, who gave himself entirely, who loved the Lord totally and saw Him in everyone who came as a guest to the monastery. For all his wisdom, vision, and openness that is the man we really knew and loved. We pray now that the angels will lead him into Paradise and the martyrs will welcome him on his way. I just hope they got a chance to do it last Tuesday before they were elbowed aside by all of Father Bernard's friends who wanted to give him a welcoming hug as he entered those pearly gates.