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Pedro Ballester: “An athlete along the track of love”

A large crowd joined Archbishop Arthur Roche and thirty concelebrating priests for the funeral of a young man who followed Christ heroically in a three-year battle with cancer.

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“When Pedrito committed himself as a celibate lay member of Opus Dei, with that generosity which is so characteristic of youth, he could not

have known how the Lord would call him to follow in His steps even to the sharing of His Cross and His Sacrifice for others.” So preached Archbishop Arthur Roche, Secretary of the Congregation for Divine Worship, to his parents Pedro and Esperanza, his two brothers, and a large congregation who had gathered for the funeral in Manchester on 23 January.

More than 500 people heard how Pedro Ballester, a young Englishman of Spanish parents, had bravely suffered three years of intense pain united to the Cross of Christ, before giving up his soul to God on 13th January, only 21 years old.

The archbishop, who had greatly valued Pedro ever since he had got to know him while Bishop of Leeds (when the Ballester family lived in Yorkshire), came from Rome to be the principal celebrant at the Mass.

He praised Pedro's parents for "cooperating with God in giving him to us, in forming him as such a fine Christian and human being – the best! – a great man although so young. And for your generosity in giving him back to God, even though you miss him enormously."

Preaching in the Holy Name church in the heart of the Manchester university campus, Archbishop Roche described how Pedro's faith helped him find happiness in his illness and how, even when in intense pain, he was constantly and generously interested in others. An example of this, the archbishop said, was the way Pedro "moved quickly away from any enquiry as to how he was to 'how are you?'"

"Although immobilised through illness," Roche said, Pedro "ran like an athlete along the track of love" and "gave his life willingly to God".

Despite Pedro's young age, the archbishop concluded, he has become both "father in the faith and a brother along the way of the journey to many. And he will I believe be the source of many gifts for many others who yet remain to know him."

THE FULL TEXT OF THE HOMILY FOLLOWS:

My first words must be to express on behalf of everyone here our deepest condolences and closeness to Esperanza and Pedro, Carlos and Javier, to Grandparents, Uncles, Aunts, Cousins, the family of Opus Dei and those closest to the Ballester family, at the death of Pedro, your son and brother and our dear friend.

[The next section was addressed to his relatives in Spanish]

Our hearts go out to you, the family of Pedrito, at the loss of this fine

young man whom you loved and cherished, and who loved and cherished you.

How worried he was for you, especially Esperanza and Pedro, when he knew the seriousness of his illness and the suffering that its final outcome would be to you. In these years so many have been in the background with you praying and hoping for a miracle.

God gave us one, but it was not the one we expected or hoped for like the disciples on the road to Emmaus. He has given something which, through the example of Pedrito, many have benefitted already and will continue to do so in the years ahead.

I also want to say thank you for cooperating with God in giving him to us, in forming him as such a fine Christian and human being – the best! – a great man although so

young. And for your generosity in giving him back to God, even though you miss him enormously.

Your boy became both a father in the faith and a brother along the way of the journey to many. And he will I believe be the source of many gifts for many others who yet remain to know him. He gave his life willingly to God. That seed will bear great fruit. Our sincere condolences to each of you and our prayers for you because we know something of your pain at losing him.

[Then he addressed the rest of the congregation in English]

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,
dear friends,

We are among many today who, in different parts of the world, are quietly yet with deep affection joined with us, as we pray for and pay tribute to a remarkable young man

who has touched the lives of many - and most without him knowing it - through his patient, faith-filled, happy and loving endurance during these last three years of an illness, which he bore uncomplainingly and with considerable courage and which has been both a witness to the beauty of life at whatever stage or condition and a great example and encouragement to all who were close to him or kept vigil with him during these years. In the words of Saint Paul, “The life and death of each of us has its influence on others; if we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord, so that alive or dead we belong to the Lord”. (Romans 14:7-8) How very true that has been as we came to know better Pedrito and his love for the Lord, either through personal contact or through the many chain-links of prayer of people throughout the world during his illness.

There is no greater tribute nor place to commemorate his life and commend his soul than in this Sacrifice of the Mass, which gathers the whole Church both on earth and in heaven as here, at this Altar, eternity intersects with time and binds us together united in the Mystical Body of Christ.

Occasionally, perhaps like many of you, I attempt a crossword in the paper and not infrequently I find myself thinking that if only I had the answer I might just even understand the clue itself. Apart from a test of one's intelligence, the cryptic clue is also a matter of perspective, of connecting the known with that which is hidden, the puzzle with the reality. The breadth of our perspective sharpens our focus on reality. The answer, we already possess; its working out is something that takes a little longer.

How true that is of life itself. Indeed, how true that must be of every individual – created in the image and likeness of God – unique in every way – universes within themselves. It is God who is both the answer and the clue, who brings to perfection, and bestows greatness, as we learn today from the Book of Wisdom: “Length of days is not what makes age honourable, nor number of years the true measure of life; understanding, this is man’s grey hairs, untarnished life, this is ripe old age. He has sought to please God, so God has loved him ... Coming to perfection in so short a while, he achieved long life”. (Wisdom 4:8-10a, 13)

The ‘understanding’ spoken of by the Sage is in seeing God present in everything; and ‘long life’, knowing that our destiny is beyond that which we see. Both, clues and answers to

the mystery which is our life and the glory which is to be ours in heaven.

The disciples' journey on the road to Emmaus shows us how easy it is in the face of great suffering and bewilderment, even for those who were close to Jesus at that moment, to lose sight of the clue and the answer even after sharing intimately in the life of Christ on earth. Jesus, God become Man, shared our humanity, everything about it apart from sinfulness, to show us that with Him nothing is ever lost, nothing is ever wasted, even in the hardest and most heart-breaking events. The disciples in their experience of the crucifixion lost sight of this and became disoriented. They were faced with their own lack of resourcefulness - facing a meaningless void, which despairingly weighed them down. As close as they were and had been physically through the last years of

our Lord's life, they had at this moment lost sight of Him, full as they were of their own preoccupations. They had forgotten how it was to look into His eyes and there to re-engage with what they told the stranger had been their hope: that He, the Christ, would be the one to set them free.

It is a remarkable thing to say of someone so young, but I firmly believe that despite his considerable suffering and pain Pedrito never shared that same disillusion of the disciples. He lived confidently the prayer, full of hope, of today's psalm, "I trusted even when I said, "I am sorely afflicted"" (Psalm 115: 10) He shared his sufferings willingly with Christ upon the Cross. He discovered a love in Christ which is stronger than death. How else could he have said to a friend within days of his death, "I have never been happier"! He was a man of faith; and it is clear

to me that that faith, tested by suffering, had carved out a space in his heart so that God became even more present to him. It was an emptying of himself which made room for God's love which then made room to express a real love and concern for others and for their salvation, readily seen in his moving quickly away from any enquiry as to how he was to, 'how are you'!

When Pedrito committed himself as a celibate lay member of Opus Dei, with that generosity which is so characteristic of youth, he could not have known how the Lord would call him to follow in His steps even to the sharing of His Cross and His Sacrifice for others. But we know, that as he rose each morning, even from his hospital bed when able, he kissed the ground and uttered the word of Michael the Archangel, serviam! - I will serve! And so he did, with great magnanimity, with patience and

good humour. He used all that was available to him to serve, to be the minister, giving what he had in his failing health to the service of the Lord and for the benefit of others.

This deep trust in the Lord, despite being 'sorely afflicted', tells us that Pedrito had really encountered Jesus in a very special way. He had looked into the face of Christ and seen in His eyes all his own longings and aspirations and he wanted to be like his Lord. He felt irresistibly called, and having put his destiny into God's hands, he trusted the path he was being led along, even if he did not always comprehend it. This was neither negative nor passive, how could it be, for with Christ we expand to a size beyond that which by nature we tend to shrink. God had made mankind for greatness and Pedrito knew it. For someone so young, it was a very deep perception born of a profound trust in Christ and a love

for the wisdom of the Gospel – a gospel that puts love above all else.

That insight, I believe, developed a sharp perceptiveness - that something that gave birth within him to greatness of spirit. For great he was, and brave, with a great love for life. Much of it given to him by his family – and what a special family God gave him - and part of it developed by Opus Dei, both of which he loved greatly but which did not alone account for everything that was within him. Christ's glory was not simply to be manifest on Mount Tabor and at the Resurrection, but also in the Garden of Agony and on the Cross. Glory is not simply an external marvel, but comes from what lies deep within a person; with what you do with the things with which you are confronted. As Saint Paul says, "it brings to light things hidden in darkness and makes plain the secrets of the heart." (I

Corinthians 4:5) Where was God?
God was right there. For where love
is, there too is our God.

I think that most of the clues to what
made him so special are contained in
his faith in the Lord, his love for the
Church and his deep desire to preach
Christ to everyone. That alone speaks
more eloquently than anything else.
It also speaks of a priestly heart
which he received at Baptism – a love
that sustained him right up to the
end of his earthly life – and a faith
that inspired him to discover more in
this life than that beheld alone by the
eye of nature.

These things, together with his desire
to sanctify the work of each day and
to be of service, were like codes
which for him opened an unexpected
and beautiful treasure – not in what
we possess but in what we are and
what we are all called to become in
Christ. They are the coordinates of

how we should all aspire to deal with reality - keys to something very powerful for goodness and greatness.

Although immobilised through illness he was running like an athlete along the track of love – drinking deeply from the Fountain of Life.

Qoheleth, the author of the Book of Ecclesiastes, was a shrewd student of life and all that makes up our earthly experience. He noted, after observing for many years the ebb and flow of life – a time for this and a time for that - that God who created everyone had “set eternity in their heart”. (3:11) What a wonderful image – to be created for greatness and for eternal glory. The intensity of this inner reality conjures up for us what it was that gave Pedrito a light for his path through life and what ennobled him with remarkable faith and bravery in the face of the many challenges and difficulties he had to

face in his serious illness and his approaching death – all taken and approached straightforwardly, with no fuss, humbly and with humour and an occasional tot of whiskey.

He stood with confidence at the threshold of a very Great Mystery – of something that was leading him elsewhere but that was not alien to him. I can hear him in my mind repeating the words of Saint Paul: “Nothing can separate us from the love of Christ. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate [me] from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord”. (Romans 8:38-39)

It is things such as these that reveal to us what lies deep inside a man and what it is that lies at the heart of a

holy man –looking at reality through a broader perspective who is Christ - and facing it always with living faith and, despite his own pain and sickness, of always being more concerned for someone else than for himself. At his death, one of Pedrito's uncles said: "If you were given the chance to choose one thing you'd like to witness on this earth, this would be it."

It is impossible to summarise and adequately pay tribute to any human being. There are things which belong to God alone and which we confidently leave to his mercy as we pray for his soul. But God was visibly manifest in this young man's life.

Dear Pedrito, as we remember you with great affection within this Mass, so loved by you, there is much in what we now do at this Altar that gives us a great insight into what made you such a fine man and a holy

man, a brave man and a gentleman, a son and a brother and a good friend. We loved you much, we shall miss you dearly – and, I have no doubt, that when we too reach our journey's end that having prayed for you, you will have done your very best for us to make it possible for us, too, to enter the Lord's Kingdom. May you now, after a life of faith well lived and a work so well done, rest in peace.

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