

A theological-pastoral-spiritual reflection on Bro Albinus' life and work from the website of Dr Jeffrey & Angie Goh < <http://www.jeffangiegoh.com> >

## 86. Infused with the Spirit of Jesus: Remembering Brother Albinus

16-08-2013

'Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. [Luke 12:32-34, NRSV]



Bro. Albinus at his office

Michael O'Flaherty, known to us as Brother Albinus, F.S.C., passed away on 4 August 2013, aged 83, after a long and illustrious ministry in Christian education and service to the poor spanning six decades. That ministry was his vocation, his mission, his life.

His passing was for us, and we suspect for many who worked closely with him, a crippling loss. But this was not the time to lament. We recall Jesus, on hearing the news of the death of John the Baptist, at once withdrew from the crowds and sought an isolated place to not only mourn the event-changing loss but, even more urgently, to commune with His Abba Father to discern His way forward. On our part, rather than giving in to the temptation to wallow in lamentation, we could again find solace and joy only in remembering and celebrating his many gifts, the sacrifices he made in his life and ministry, his presence amongst us for all those years, his words, his precious friendship and his awesome discipline. And so, as news of Brother Albinus' death broke, our instinctive response to the culmination of a life too seriously important to let slip by without some deep processing, was to spontaneously retreat to a private space of silence and meditation.

In gratitude to Providence, we accepted Brother's passing for its timeliness so that, as our reflection stood with both feet in the present, our eyes might be peeled firmly on the future. In that reflection, three elements, amongst other elements, about this great model of a Christian and a great educationist captured our imagination.

### [1] A Vision of Discipleship

*People know a genuine man of God when they see one.*

A habit does not make a monk, but in Brother Albinus, people clearly saw a life lived in deep intimacy with God. In him, the people of Sarawak were long accustomed to seeing a genuine Christian lifestyle and respecting it. It was a lifestyle far away from a self-absorbed life to a Godward-directed life. And yet, it wasn't a way of living aimed at ensuring his own salvation, as if working for one's own salvation was the singular preoccupation of Christians. Rather, it was *in Christ* that he lived and moved and had his being [Acts 17:28] – loving God with all his heart, and loving neighbour as himself. And that was neither some quaint talk nor some indolent theology; he *lived* his Christian calling in constancy and in perpetuity, till death.

In a contribution to society that is truly immeasurable, his life-work consisted in:

- ◆ promoting academic excellence for all, regardless of race or creed,
- ◆ combining it with a painstaking cultivation of well-rounded students good in sports and steeped in strong moral values, and
- ◆ constantly looking out for students poor in financial means and learning skills.

In so dedicating his life, Brother Albinus never had to bother with the debate, always popular in some quarters, on evangelism versus social action. For him, Christian discipleship has got to be a well-balanced combination of Gospel proclamation and tangible acts of love, service, and mercy towards our neighbours, especially the poor, and never pitted against each other. God's grace motivates action; words and deeds go together. In a life consistently characterized by prayer and work [*ora et labora*], therefore, Brother Albinus entertained no perceived wall separating these two. His entire life has been a winsome testimony that gospel proclamation and social action are inseparable. So in the 24/7 living out of his Christian vision, he was always in words matched by sacrificial deeds challenging all individuals – regardless of race and creeds - to work for justice and peace even as they confront the process of conversion and new birth in their respective cultures and stations in life.

Brother Albinus' insistence on priority treatment for the poor in the field of education is well-known. At times, this option for the poor, translated into his singular searching question - "How are the poor students factored into all this?" - would embarrass financial planners of parish tuition centres and Catholic private schools for whom financial feasibility understandably held sway over other concerns. For the best part of the last two decades, his incessant concern for the educational opportunities of the poor had borne fruits through the Lasallian Foundation he founded in Kuching to help teach slow learners and rural students in special tuition classes. And so it was with special poignancy that we heard the Lord Jesus' assuring words at the funeral Mass at St Joseph's Cathedral, Kuching for Brother Albinus:

- ◆ "I tell you solemnly, in so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of mine, *you did it to me.*" [Matthew 25:40]

## [2] An Ecclesial Imagination

*Corruption is the scourge of every society.*

While conversion for the individual Christian is a constant calling, the key to understanding the Second Vatican Council [1962-65] is its singular stress on God's continual call to the *church, as a people*, to greater fidelity to God in its covenant commitment *as a community of faith*, to a more authentic worship, to a spirit of reconciliation within and outside its fold, and to an ever deeper commitment to works of justice and compassion.

From conversation with him over the years, three recognitions inherent in Brother Albinus' ecclesial imagination came to the fore.

### [a] Recognising Ecclesial Sinfulness

A man of discipline and moral fortitude, Brother Albinus hated corruption in high places – even more so in the Church than in the civil society. In the last two decades and more, Brother Albinus had had the misfortune of reading loads of horrendous revelation of unbelievable corruption in high places within the Church – colossal clerical sex abuse of children, financial fraud, and inner power struggles and what Pope Francis has called “careerism” in clerical ranks. In many ways, the Church in its ordained and consecrated leadership – that is to say, the institutional church – mirrored the corrupt dimensions of society, instead of being a countersign to a godless society on account of the Good News it claims to possess. Worse yet, in its direst moral degenerateness, this institutional church commits such acts of sin as are unparalleled even amongst the pagans [cf. 1 Cor 5:1]. And worst of all, in the face of all this, the pervasive behaviour of the Roman Catholic episcopacy remains, even today, one of arrogance [cf. 1 Cor 5:2].

The blinding obstruction in church leadership is that humility is confused with humiliation. The whole world knows it and is closely watching this "Church" with contemptuous fascination.

Brother Albinus hated arrogance and pomposity.

The worst thing for the Church is not even that the ordained and consecrated classes of the Church committed all those unimaginable atrocities. It is the systemic cover up and the eagerness to sweep all the dirt under the carpet in an ill-advised attempt to quickly move on. Grossly lacking is the desire, not to mention the will, to seriously confront the evils and undertake the *serious process* of mourning and repentance. This systemic cover up, if allowed to succeed, will forever keep the Church enshrouded in the state of an untruthful community, perpetually living a lie!

In his encyclical *Ut Unum Sint*, Pope John Paul II saw in the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, “a clear connection between renewal, conversion and reform.” Recognising the need for a “spiritual awakening” for the church, he drew attention to the Council's call “for personal

conversion as well as for communal conversion.” In humility and openness of spirit, Pope John Paul, at the threshold of the new millennium, publicly apologized for the sins of the Church, and the world respected him all the more for that! And in his straightforward commentary on the late Pope’s humble sin-confession on behalf of the Church, Brother would say, “That is very good!”

Vatican II documented a special concern for the kind of face the Church is presenting to the world. In the theology of sacraments, Christ is the Sacrament of God, showing the true face of God – “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father” [John 14:9]; and the Church is the Sacrament of Christ, as the world sees no other Christ than the face of the Church. Yet the Church, in the words of Karl Rahner, SJ, the most eminent Catholic theologian of the twentieth century, is “a sinful church”. The church community must constantly undergo conversion, so that the face of the Church may be renewed to reflect the genuine face of Christ.

## [b] Recognising Charisms

A lamentable part of the church life that galled Brother Albinus is *the confusion of humility with humiliation* in clerical culture. This results in a perpetual malaise in the Body of Christ in which the Spirit is consistently stifled. In countless forms though this malaise may manifest itself, they nevertheless have their root in a common source - the tiny ordained sector of Christ’s ecclesial Body, the Church, jealously guarding by canon law and administrative control, an elevated position of unassailable status and power, dignity and privileges, vested offices and political patronage, to the exclusion of the rest of the huge Body. The gifts of baptism, the very sacrament that stands at the door to the sacred, are eclipsed.

Brother Albinus understood well and embraced the Pauline imagery of the Church as a body with different parts, all equal in importance, all graced with gifts meant for the good of the body. While different, these gifts come from the same source – the Holy Spirit [1 Cor 12]. To elevate one’s gift at the expense of others’ is, in the words of the biblical scholar Professor Raymond Collin, *a blasphemy!* To the very end, Brother Albinus used the brain God gave him, and called us all to do the same, to maintain a responsible posture of intellectual honesty before God and the faith community. In his ecclesial imagination, the educationist in him doggedly promoted the Pauline teaching that all gifts are to be accepted and welcomed, for they are God-given. No one has them all; so jealousy, arrogance, and independence are equally inappropriate within Christ’s body. Hating as he did arrogance and pomposity, clericalism was anathema to his Irish sense of laity rights and obligations. In him the laity found a warm and friendly religious, who steadfastly refused the perks of the ordained, and who understood, appreciated and befriended the laity, respecting their God-given charisms. He understood well the critical remark of the renowned professor of liberation theology, Leonardo Boff, who insisted that while God gave us spiritual “*charisms*”, the institutional church singularly emphasised the unassailable “*power*” of the ordained. What get sidelined in this intra-ecclesial power-manoeuvring are divine gifts; what enjoys untouchable ecclesiastical elevation is a human scheme – all for tribal interest over and against the rest of the Body.

### [c] Recognising God's Option for the Poor

What does it mean to be Christ's people in a world of need?

Labouring in the field of education, Brother Albinus kept a keen eye on students with problems. Some children are slow learners. Many successful people are "late-developers". Some poor families have not a single table in the shed which they call home, and some are without modern day lighting and amenities. Their children are not "normal" students; they simply cannot follow the normal classes. The system of automatic promotion in the Malaysian free education has left in its trail many children who could not even read or write. Without help, they will never catch up. With help, they may never really catch up with the rest, but they may get a serious chance of securing some decent jobs and having a serious prospect at a decent life. Albinus saw that the Church must step up and help make things better. Blame and shame, the tools of the devil, serve nobody. Forgiveness, acceptance and grace are the tools of Christ and ought to be practised with joy by the Church.

Albinus saw all that and, in the last two decades of his life, instead of complaining about a degenerate Church, plunged himself into the difficult task of helping to form and to be the Church that he believed in. He set up concrete programmes and mobilized the Lasallians to carry out what the Christian Church has at its best always been known for, namely, its exemplary love and sacrificial service to 'the least of these', the poor. In all this, Brother Albinus needed no church parish; he turned the larger society in which he lived into his parish where the work of God was carried out, with love and dedication. He recognized and lived God's option for the poor.

### [3] An Infusion of the Spirit of Christ

*Life breaks us all. How do we help people rise from broken places?*

"The spirit that we have," Sr. Joan Chittister, O.S.B., once wrote, "not the things that we do, is what makes us important to the people around us." Incredible as it sounds, Brother Albinus spent more than sixty years in our little corner of the Far East – Singapore, Kuching, Sibul – and choosing to die, aged 83, in the mission field where he worked his entire adult religious life. He became the first, only upon his vehement insistence and so probably the last, foreign De La Salle Brother to be buried in Malaysia. What kind of a man could achieve something like that? What manner of man could duplicate to the hilt what only Saint Paul could and did fittingly claim bragging right of?

- ♣ "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith." [2 Timothy 4:7, NRSV]

The spirit is the key.

It never ceased to amaze us how, despite the ravages of sickness that took a heavy toll on his body, his mind remained razor-sharp. His eyes, piercing to the very end, bore eloquent testimony to the spirit of the man. It was truly amazing how much was still left after so much had been taken away by illness. Even ill, his taste, his relentless determination and his judgment held.

In the end, we all die, as it were, in the middle of a story - *in medias res*. Literally to his very last breath in the hospital, Brother Albinus was still asking to be briefed on some “unfinished” programmes. What we learned from Brother Albinus’ death is that character is essential, and that character shone through in his life work and in how he died. They spoke eloquently of his will, his work ethic, his strength, his principles. He epitomised the truth that our human spirit is at its best when it is infused with and animated by the Spirit of Christ. Again, Saint Paul, blessed with its actual experience, gave expression to it in awesome simplicity:

- ◆ “It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” [Galatians 2:20, NRSV].

In grief and in awe, the rest of us lesser mortals whom Brother Albinus left behind might be wondering what to do now. Eminently, there are those Lasallians who are alumni of Lasallian schools, as well as those who worked closely with him in the Lasallian Foundation that he founded to reach out to the least, the last and the lost in every society. But there are also those, like ourselves, who never went through the Lasallian schools but who in the last two decades had come to admire and respect this towering worker in the Lord’s vineyard for his spirit and his work and were collaborating with him on some projects, some of which remaining “unfinished”. In an unexpected way, the passing of Brother Albinus has yielded for us a palpable sense of what the first disciples of Jesus must have felt when He was so abruptly and tragically snatched away from their lives two thousand years ago.

- ◆ *We are somewhat bewildered*: He is no longer around for consultation or to tell us what to do. What are we to do now?
- ◆ *We grieve, we mourn, we lament*: He has left too soon. We feel orphaned. What can we do now?

Yet, as we grieve, mourn and lament, we cannot not lift up our spirit to celebrate his profound gift to us. And, like the first disciples who in grief and confusion *remembered* all that the Lord had taught and commanded of them, we too remember what Brother had so clearly said, “After I am gone, you continue to do what you are doing now.” And in his typical, straight-forward Irish exhortation, he added real simply: “You just carry on.” The Lasallians, and we by association, know it, for our eyes have seen nobility and beauty in a genuine Christian soul. Our encounter with him, much like the encounter of the early disciples with Jesus, warmed hearts and grew faith. It was a great privilege to have known him. Our *memoria* of Brother Albinus

gives us strength; and our *eucharistia* for his gifts heightens God's grace for us. We cannot back down now. We "carry on". We owe him to succeed.

O Lord, may the soul of Brother Albinus rest in peace!

Saint Jean Baptiste de La Salle, pray for us.

"With Jesus in our hearts, forever." Amen.

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