

Homily at the farewell Mass of Jeremy Gray SM

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The two texts that we have just heard are taken from the liturgy of today, January 5. They are perfectly suited to this Eucharistic celebration which gathers us one last time around a brother, a friend, our seminarian Jeremy Gray. The first text recalls for us again to the great commandment, the one which we have heard from the beginning: We must love one another. The second speaks to us of the vocation of Phillip and Nathaniel, who tradition identifies as Bartholomew, two of the 12 apostles who lived in intimacy with the Lord and who were witnesses of all He said and did. Was it necessary to choose other texts to allow us to be enlightened and comforted by God's word when Jeremy's brutal death has plunged us all into sadness and incomprehension? During his short life – less than 30 years – Jeremy put into practice the double call that the word of God addresses to us today: to follow Christ and love his neighbour, to the point of being ready to give his life as He did. That's what Jeremy did, and all of us can give witness to that.

There are others among us who would be more qualified than me to talk about him. In particular I'm thinking of the members of his community who welcomed him last February, or of some of the parishioners of the South, from St Louis to Yaté, and including Mont Dore and the Isle of Pines, who got to know him and quickly gained a high regard for him. Or those who worked with him in the different pastoral tasks that he had been made responsible for, notably catechesis or with Secours Catholique. That I am speaking and not them is only due to the request of our Regional Superior, Fr Gidrol, because of my role as Jeremy's supervisor, a role that was given to me by his superior in New Zealand when he sent Jeremy to do his pastoral placement in New Caledonia. We would meet about once a fortnight at the Cathedral. But as he was based in St Louis, Jeremy was under the direct responsibility of the community's local superior, Fr Christopher and the curé du secteur paroissial, Fr Milio. To them, and to the third member of the community Fr Tino, I want to express all our sympathy and our solidarity in this terrible trial that they have just been subjected to. Their pain is our, yet it remains primarily theirs because of the special fraternal ties built up between them and Jeremy.

Jeremy arrived from New Zealand last year to do a two year pastoral placement in New Caledonia. All those of us who have been to that country know how different it is to our own, not only the landscape and the language but also the culture and the customs (driving on the left is not automatic the first time). That was the intention: to plunge him into a different cultural world, a different Church and a different background. For Jeremy, in spite of his good command of French and his advanced knowledge of French literature, there was still a violent cultural shock. New Zealand had prepared him to live in a multi-ethnic world where the Pakeha (that is the name given to the whites over there) and the Maori live side-by-side. But in New Caledonia, he discovered a reality that was completely different from what he had known in New Zealand, where he was no longer

in a position of superiority. As a result, he began to question himself on his previous behaviour. One can be sure that on his return home, his behaviour towards all his countrymen, Maori, Polynesian, Asian and others, would have been different.

Jeremy had an open spirit. He was very interested in the other, in others. He wanted to understand them. That's why he forced himself to learn or to speak their languages. He succeeded very well so far as French goes but he didn't want to stop there. From the beginning, he wanted to learn some bits of Tayo, the language spoken in St Louis, and Wallesian, because he often met people of this ethnic group in Mont Dore and elsewhere. He had a gift for languages – it was one of his many gifts. He wanted to develop it, to make it bear fruit. This was part of his placement, part of the challenge that he had been asked to accept. He was very grateful to those who helped him in this apprenticeship of new languages and new cultures.

Jeremy wanted to be close to people, not only by language but also by his way of life. When they offered, on his arrival, to buy a car for him to get around in, he refused outright. He preferred to be the same as everyone else, or at least the same as the less fortunate, and take public transport. Certainly this took longer – sometimes the bus didn't come on time or at all – but he didn't complain and he made other arrangements, just as ordinary people do. Finally, he made a concession and agreed to accept a bicycle. For him, this was his way of living the religious poverty that he had committed to by his vow taken three years ago on 1 January 2005. The option for the poor was for him a way of life. He wanted to live out radically the first of the Beatitudes of the Gospels: Blessed are the poor. Thank you Jeremy for this witness that you have given us in our New Caledonian society so carried away by consumerism and endless waste.

At the end of the year, Jeremy began to wonder about whether to stay a second year in St Louis or not, because he was very interested in teaching and he wanted to immerse himself more in the Melanesian world. With the approval of Fr Kevin Conroy, who was responsible for his formation in New Zealand and who had come to visit him during the year, he had decided that he would spend his second year at Azareu, serving the parish and the Catechesis Centre, where he would help Fr de Viviés, a Marist like him. They would form a community together. This prospect both delighted and distressed him at the same time, because he was attached to St Louis, to his confreres and the people of the South. He didn't want to leave them and cause them pain. This was a sign of his character: he was endowed with an acute sensitivity. It took him several weeks to regain interior peace, with the grace of God which he asked for in prayer. And Jeremy prayed a lot. Since his arrival in St Louis, he fixed daily times of prayer and he remained faithful to them till the end. Nothing in the world could make him want to miss his meeting, his daily face-to-face with the Lord, even if it meant not staying out too late at night. Equally, he loved to “go out into the desert” for a time of solitude with the Beatitudes Community in Plum. These days allowed him to take stock of his daily life and to “taste God” face to face. It had been arranged that he could continue to do that, even from Azareu. For this witness of friendship and intimacy with the Lord, thank you Jeremy. Has he not chosen you to be with him, like Phillip or Nathaniel?

And so it was with a spirit at peace with his community and friends that Jeremy left last Wednesday for the Mission of Touaourou, for a friendly, community outing to welcome in the new year that would bring a big change in his life and that of his community. And that's how the drama came about that we have all heard of and that has completely overwhelmed us all: he was drowned on the reef of the Mission in a hole of water concealed by the rising tide, which he had fallen into with the young, six year old Ishmael, who was with him and who he managed to get out of the deadly trap. We know how Ishmael's dad, Alfred, alerted by the child's cries, was nearly drowned himself in bringing help to Jeremy who was being sucked in by the whirlpool. We know how another man, Soane, rushed to their aid and succeeded, at risk to his own life, in getting Alfred out of the hole, because he was drowning and Jeremy's body had disappeared. And how the sea ultimately returned his body, lifeless. The whole drama played out in just a few minutes. By the time the doctor and the police got there, they could only confirm Jeremy's death and the state of shock of Alfred, Ishmael's father, who was taken to Gaston Bourret Hospital while Jeremy's body was taken to the municipal morgue at Noumea. Very quickly, with modern means of communication, the news of what had happened spread throughout Caledonia, and beyond our borders as far as Rome, seat of the Marist Fathers' general administration. Fr Denis O'Hagan, Provincial of New Zealand, took the first available plane to go and take the sad news to Jeremy's mum who lives in Christchurch in the South Island. It is there that Jeremy will be buried on Wednesday and Fr Christopher has already left to be present and represent us at that service.

Since this took place, I have received numerous testimonies of sympathy from the whole world, because in entering the Society of Mary, Jeremy entered into a family of planetary dimensions. Those the furthest away came from France, the United States and Canada; the closest, from Wallis and Vanuatu, where Jeremy was expected on the 14th for a well-earned vacation with Denis Revi of Mallicolo, his friend from the seminary who was ordained a deacon last December 8, the same time as the ordination to the priesthood of deacon Elie Bebebus from the Pentecost Islands, who will be coming to New Caledonia as soon as he gets his visa. Messages were received in New Caledonia as well of course, both written and oral and even in the street, where someone stopped me to tell me of their pain on learning of the news. All speak of his gentleness, his smile, his humility, his simplicity, his intelligence, his discretion... So many qualities that we have noticed in him and appreciated. His death was a reflection of his life: a gift of himself to God and neighbour and a following of Mary, who had called him to serve her Son in the Society that bears her name. He died in giving his life to save that of a child, Ishmael. Alfred and Soane, for their part, risked their lives to try and save Jeremy's. What an unforgettable example for all of us of a real charity lived to the extreme. May Alfred and Soane be sincerely thanked for what they have done. May they not be tormented by the failure of their attempt to save Jeremy – they did what they could. That is what matters and we are very grateful to them. The rest is up to God.

Of course at this time we also think of Jeremy's mum Allayne and of his dad Warren, newly reunited by the loss of their only son. We can imagine the immensity of their pain; we share it and we pray for them. We think also of the Marist fathers in New Zealand

who mourn one of their young brothers and who are preparing to pay their last respects to him in the parish of Manurewa (Auckland) which he know well. Fr Christopher will be with them. He will be able to give them the details they hope for regarding what happened and the heroic way in which Jeremy died. Above all, he will be able to tell them how much we in New Caledonia love him and how we are grateful to them for the trust they have placed in us to accompany him in his journey towards priesthood, during this time of pastoral experience that brought him to live among us in a strange land that he adopted. And we too, we adopted him: he had become a part of ourselves. Jeremy, we miss you a lot, you know: “We miss you!” [original text in English].

May your sacrificed life be a seed of priestly and religious vocations for our churches of New Caledonia and New Zealand which are so much in need of them. You loved young people and you rejoiced to participate with them in the next WYD in Sydney. May they not forget all you have taught them, less by your words than by your example. You have announced to them the Good News. May it bear much fruit in them.

Jeremy, go in peace. AMEN.