

HOMILY GIVEN BY FR ANTHONY CHANTRY MHM 28th MAY 2009

I feel it a great honour to be with you all here today for this very happy celebration marking 50 years of service as a priest and a Mill Hill Missionary, in the person of Fr Len Kofler.

When on behalf of Len, Thalia first asked me to preach at the event I did not hesitate to accept this privilege, mainly because it provides me with a golden opportunity to represent not only the high esteem in which our Society holds him but also the deep appreciation we all have, of him and the wonderful ways he has served the Lord and us, during the past half century, nearly half of which has been spent here at St Anselm's.

Len, this gathering of your friends, colleagues, admirers, fellow missionaries, and current students bears testimony to our love for you and our admiration. The welcome presence of His Excellency the Papal Nuncio, the personal representative of the Holy Father, speaks for itself.

Len is first and foremost a missionary. His first missionary appointment was to New Zealand where from 1962 until 1967 he ministered to the Maori people in the parishes of Panguru and Rotorua. He learned their language and customs, and enjoyed their songs and dances. Much of what he experienced has stayed with him all his life. Bearing this in mind, I think we should ask him for a demonstration of the traditional Hakka Dance of New Zealand's All Blacks Rugby Team fame.

30 years ago, in 1979, I first met Len at St Joseph's College, Mill Hill: I was a student and he was my teacher, my first teacher of psychology. We students greatly respected him as a man of great learning, yet always approachable, caring and personable. We had a nickname for him and that was "Dr, Dr, Dr" arising from the fact that he holds three doctorates. He never invited recognition of his academic achievements; on the contrary, he wore his qualifications with the ease and humility associated with genuine self-confidence.

There is no doubt that Len is a gifted scholar. Doctorate number one was in Sociology awarded by the University of Trent. According to my research it involved 30 exams in such diverse subjects as Law, Statistics, Economics and Town and Country Planning, the latter two subject no doubt of great help to you in your hunt for good property deals here in Margate.

Doctorate number two was in Theology, awarded by Salzburg University. Here he extended his learning to include Pastoral Theology, Liturgy, Catechetics and Moral Theology.

Doctorate number three was in Philosophy and focused on psychology; the psychology of education, of personality and of infancy, Childhood and Adolescence, culminating in his thesis: "Theory, Factors and Process of the occupational development of the priestly and religious vocation."

And so it was that in 1977 Len came to St Joseph's College, Mill Hill with an appointment to do "Operational Research" for our Missionary Society. A year later became a lecturer at the Missionary Institute of London.

In 1980 Len was appointed President of the Missionary Institute during which time he developed his skills of administration and management as he proceeded to upgrade, expand and reshape the Institute, bringing it up to a level of national prominence. It was in the course of these years that Len began to nurture a concept and hatch a plan that would eventually change the lives of hundreds of people throughout the world.

Seeing and experiencing the needs of those around him—formators, parish priests and leaders—he was determined to begin a programme "to train those directly responsible for human and spiritual growth in others". The proposed project immediately captured the imagination of more enlightened Church leaders, notably the late Cardinal Hume, as well as our own SG, Bishop De Wit and many other congregational leaders and bishops.

I am told that Cardinal Hume had told Len that he prayed for a certain handful of people every day and he was one of them, which could, of course, mean anything; but I suspect that it came out of very genuine and practical support for the realisation of his dream. Indeed, he continued to take a very keen interest in the Institute until the day he died. His successors have and no doubt will continue in the same vein. Likewise, successive Superior Generals with their Councils, one of whom is here today. Fr Maurice McGill, continued to give him their full support.

Your dream came true in 1984 when St Anselm's was born. You began in Damascus House, Mill Hill which soon proved too small. So you began your legendary hunt for accommodation that brought you to Margate on a hunt for a hotel. There were one or two doubts raised about exactly what Len was doing. "I think he is going into the Catholic Hotel business" some might have thought!

Thalia and he came down to view a hotel on the market. The previous owners later admitted that when they first met them, they could not understand why this strange couple wanted to buy a hotel at all because the both had absolutely no idea about how to run it.

You could almost hear them saying to each other, “The man with the German accent was mainly interested in how he could gather all the guests into one room and talk to them every day, and the lady asked only of analysing their handwriting and doing something with the guests’ bodies. They were obviously wasting their time”.

Len the property-hunter soon gave way to Len the innovator, as he, with the help of inspired and inspiring co-workers, created a menu of courses for spiritual and psychological development.

Over 4,000 Church leaders and formators from over 80 countries have passed through one or more of the many life-giving programme of this Institute. They came here for many different reasons; to seek healing, to find forgiveness of self and others, to learn new skills and discover fresh approaches to old challenges, to find themselves in a world of confusion, to discern the promptings of the Spirit, to crave enlightenment, to prepare for the demands of leadership, to lick the wounds of life’s noble battles, to fathom the depths of God’s love and to experience the God who, though clothed in mystery, delights in intimacy. Furthermore, a mini St Anselm’s has been set up at Chem Chemi in Nairobi, Kenya at the invitation of the Association of Sisters of Kenya.

It is impossible to measure the level of success of this Institute, yet speak to some of those who have come through the St Anselm’s experience, with an open heart and receptive minds, and they will speak of liberation, renewed dedication, enhanced self-confidence, clarity of personal and professional boundaries, invigorated relationship with God, and the many varied fruits of the process of integrating spirituality with psychology, a lifelong quest of Len’s.

Talking of fruit, let us here acknowledge one of Len’s special gifts. As you might know he is fond of gathering fruits and nuts from nature. He is quite happy to climb an apple tree, for example, and shake it vigorously until all the ripe fruits have fallen. This in a teenage boy would be normal and even laudable but for a man in his 70’s? Recently a passer-by was quite shocked to see you up in the tree and asked Claire whether you were all right. She tried to re-assure the stranger that Len was quite sane though she was not too sure herself! Please, Len, no more tree climbing.

The graphic example of Len’s playfulness give us a simple metaphor for his work, for sometimes we all need a bit of shaking in order for us to discover and gather in the ripe fruit of our potential: angels and demons within us, ready to be discovered and confronted. And above all, there is no greater joy than to rediscover that we are loved by God and by others, that we are loveable and no juicier fruit than to find healthy ways to love each other.

I once hear Len describe the mission of St Anselm’s as the work of teaching people how to love. We can have no better example of love than the love of God as shown forth and lived out by Jesus Christ.

“Love one another, as I have loved you”. Jesus challenges us to embrace God’s love in our lives, that our own joy may be complete, for it is in reaching out to others in loving acceptance that we feel at one with the humanity, it is forgiving others that we find freedom from bitterness, it is in serving others that we discover our own giftedness and break the shackles of fear, and it is in laying down our lives in self-giving that the true meaning of life is revealed.

This love is difficult and needs plenty of practice. Humanity desperately needs the organised opportunities to learn it how to love: schools that will train others to teach others how to love, in the unique way in which god has loved us in Jesus Christ. And in our Church I believe that we still need to help our leaders and our people to embrace a model of leadership that is rooted in the example of Jesus, for whom the person, not rules and laws, is ultimately the focus of loving attention. How long will it take us to learn that we are valued for who we are, not for what we can do?!

One ex-student of St Anselm’s told me that every time Len met him he would always start with one question; “How are you?” His genuine interest in WHO we are is the measure of the man, and an illustration of his profound spirituality which strives to reach, as Paul writes, “the fullest knowledge of God’s will”.

In his recent book “Healing Relationships”, Len presents his own theory of personality consisting of an embodied trinity of Higher, Middle and Lower selves. The Higher Self is the most enlightened aspect of our nature through which we communicate with God. It is the Holy Ground of Awe in us. The Middle Self is the conscious Self, where we reason, think and make decisions. The Lower Self represents the Jungian “unconscious”, the memory centre where all our life’s feelings are stored, often hidden from our understanding.

Our problems begin to end when we learn how to balance the interaction between the three Selves. I suggest that it is love and only love that achieves this. Loving relationships with the Self, conscious and unconscious, and loving relationship with God bring us to the point where we can love each other as God has loved us in Jesus Christ.

For Len, this is a mystical journey, one that is unique to each of us, sometimes painful and discouraging, sometimes liberating and exhilarating, always leading us in the direction of fulfilment in God's love, as his friends commissioned to go out and bear fruit in abundance. Len understands this and has helped thousands of seekers to discover this, and live it out and to pass it on to others throughout the world.

When interviewed by the local Press you said, it seems a long time ago since I was ordained, but I'm not finished yet. I'd be happy to keep working till I was 90, if I keep my health. I leave that up to Him".

Humble Scholar, Dedicated Missionary, Patient Leader, Playful Hunter-gatherer, Faithful Friend, Inspiring Teacher, Gentle Spiritual Guide, Compassionate Carer, Sensitive Healer. We wish you long life and much happiness and every blessing in all that you do. There is no doubt that God chose you and sent you out on a Mission of proclaiming God's Love to the world. We are witnesses to this.

As we now come together to share the one bread and the one cup of the Eucharist, may we all be deeply thankful for the gift of each other in general, of Len in particular and to God always, whose love frees us to love, even unto death.