

TRIBUTE TO FR. CHARLES BRANDT, ON THE OCCASION OF HIS
40TH ANNIVERSARY OF ORDINATION TO THE PRIESTHOOD,
GIVEN BY TED FORTOSKY, ST. PATRICK'S CHURCH,
CAMPBELL RIVER, FEBRUARY 4, 2007

Your Excellency, honoured guests, ladies and gentlemen. My wife, Danielle, and I are very pleased to be here today to honour Father Charles Brandt on the occasion of his 40th Anniversary of Ordination to the Priesthood. Father Charles is a special person and a very good friend.

We are former residents of Saskatoon, having just moved to Comox in November. However, we first came to know Father Charles Brandt when we attended a Christian Meditation Conference in Winnipeg, in May of 1992. Father Charles happened to be a guest speaker at that conference and his topic was on God's presence in our natural environment and the relationship of human beings to that environment. We were singularly impressed with Father Brandt's depth of knowledge, his appreciation of everything in nature, his faith in the divine creator, and his commitment to silent prayer.

We were astonished to learn that a hermit could be so active and involved in life, in people, in problems, in community. And, I recall, we were quite surprised and delighted to learn that this hermit lived in Black Creek, BC, not too far from Comox where we had a summer home. This was the beginning of a friendship that has endured over the years.

As you have heard, Father Charles' spiritual life journey brought him to Vancouver Island in February, 1965, where he began his life as a hermit, living in a cabin in the Merville area on the slopes of Mount Washington near the Tsolum River. Bishop Remi de Roo ordained him a priest in November 1966, with a pastoral assignment to serve the People of God as a priest hermit. During these past 40 years, Fr. Brandt has provided wonderful service to the People of God.

Fr. Brandt is a monk of the Trappist tradition following the rule of St. Benedict. He is a great reader and admirer and friend of Thomas Merton. His hermitage, today, is located in the forest on the Oyster River. Father may live in the forest, but he certainly is not lost in the forest.

Although Danielle and I first got to know Fr. Brandt as a hermit, over the years we discovered many other unique dimensions that complemented and expanded his priestly calling. Some of these include dimensions such as:

- ecologist
- prophet
- lover of nature
- teacher of meditation

I will comment briefly on each dimension.

- As an ecologist. Fr. Charles has been an active member of the Tsolum River Restoration Society since 1982. This group is trying to bring the river back to life, with salmon in it, as it was before a Mt. Washington mine leached copper into the river, polluting it. Actually Fr. Charles has been involved with scientific testing of soil and water samples of the Tsolum River for almost 30 years. He has been a true champion of conservation and the proper use of earth's resources. I would like to read you a quote from the *Island Catholic News*:

“In Brandt’s case, he has gone out into the world in a unique way to proclaim the sacredness of creation in the board rooms of lumber companies and on national television.”

- As prophet. When it comes to spirituality and nature, Fr. Brandt speaks as a prophet in the tradition of Fr. Thomas Berry whose teachings have inspired a generation’s thinking about humankind’s place in the Earth community and the universe.

Here are some quotes from Fr. Brandt’s talk given at the Navigating Life Conference held at Christ the King Church in Courtenay last year:

“Only a sense of the sacred will save us: for humans and non-humans alike.”

“We are losing our wild salmon, species of life are being extinguished...as we lose these life forms we suffer soul-loss, so we have to change.”

“That is what Christianity is all about, change, metanoia. Our Society has to change from having a disruptive influence on the earth to one of having a BENIGN PRESENCE.”

- As a lover of nature:

Fr. Charles is known for his work in ornithology, which he has highlighted through his creative and artistic photography of birds and natural landscapes. He has recently produced a stunningly beautiful video on swans entitled, *Benign Presence*.

Everyone knows that Fr. Brandt loves fly-fishing. I can imagine him standing in the Oyster River just before sunrise, before the mist has cleared, casting for that elusive steelhead. I think he has read every book that Roderick Haig Brown has written about fly-fishing. He even demonstrated to me, and let me practise how to cast a fly fishing rod, in the parking lot at North Island College. Now that's enthusiasm.

Fr. Charles is a traveller and hiker. I am sure you have all seen him in his Volkswagen van travelling on the Old Island Highway heading for some yet unexplored destination. His adventures have included such remote northern places as Kincolith and Greenville on the Nass River where he did research on totem poles.

Well, the story is told that, on one bright sunny day, a police officer saw Fr. Brandt's Volkswagen van buzzing along the highway and he put on his flashing lights and pulled him over. The police officer approached the van with his ticket book and pencil in hand. He said to Fr. Brandt, "Do you realize you were going above the speed limit? I'll have to give you a ticket." Fr. Brandt said, "Officer, do you have to give me a ticket? I'm just a poor preacher."

The police officer looked at him and said, "Yes, I know. I've heard you."

- As a teacher of Christian Meditation.

Fr. Charles teaches and practises Christian Meditation, a form of silent prayer which has a long tradition in the Catholic Church dating right back to the desert fathers in the 3rd and 4th centuries. Father has given retreats on the subject and has spoken at numerous conferences. He also leads a meditation group at his hermitage.

Fr. Charles believes that in silent prayer there is a unitive cosmic force that enables us to comprehend the beauty, the complementarity, the harmony of all created things and our place in this creation. That force is the song of creation that God composes in our hearts.

Fr. Charles believes that meditative prayer holds great hope in that it can help society change from having a disruptive influence on the earth to one of having a BENIGN PRESENCE.

In his words, "Only a sense of the sacred will save us."

I want to close on this note about meditation because it is through meditation that we met Fr. Charles some years ago.

Bishop Richard Gagnon, in today's liturgy, reflected on the "sanctifying value of the hermit's life". I believe we have all been blessed wonderfully by God through Fr. Brandt's priesthood and hermit life. And, on behalf of all of us here, I want to express our sincere congratulations and gratitude to him for 40 years of selfless service.

Thank you, Fr. Brandt.

I would like to thank Brian Down, for preparing the slides, and to Bridget Pomeroy for her help in projecting it.

Thank you Bridget.

I have 2 speeches depending on the length of today's homily. I am opting for the shorter version.

At my symposium recently, Father Brandt gave us this quote from Pope Benedict 16th;

“A Theologian who does not love art, poetry, music and nature can be dangerous”

Please rise and acknowledge the champion of art, poetry, nature, music, and humanity (Applause)
Father Charles Brandt

Of all the speeches I have delivered, and homilies that I never will, this, for me, is a unique honour and privilege.

I first met Father Brandt 30 years ago at the home of our mutual friend, the late Dr. Richard Murphy.

Dick Murphy, as some of you may know, was not only a great philanthropist, as this church and land will testify, but also a much loved and respected environmentalist.

Since then we have met a number of times, either sipping champagne at Mary Murphy's home, dining at Col. Saunders Bistro and, only recently, at the D.I. where, it being my turn, Father Brandt ordered a special blended Malt Whisky.

Speech.....

I'm going to tell you a story. You'll be forgiven if, while listening to it, you think it is the "Da Vinci Code" or an Indiana Jones film. After all, it is a story about the conservation of historical documents, great philosophers, the US Army Air Corps, and a tug-of-war between powerful churches. Like any good adventure story, it takes place in exotic locations such as Florence and San Francisco, Munich and Rome, and in the wilderness.

The story differs from Hollywood blockbusters in two important ways. The first is that it takes place, in part, on Vancouver Island. The second, and most important difference, is that it is a story about a profoundly ethical man, a man whose respect for life in all its forms, not only reflects the fundamental principles of Christianity, but is reflected in a life of study, travel, contemplation and deep respect for the environment.

The story begins in Kansas where Father Brandt was born and lived with his 2 brothers and 3 sisters. At the age of 3, he fished for crawfish and perch and recalls that during Spring every tree had a birds nest. His teachers recognized his interest in the natural world; in particular, Mrs. Allden she had him doing watercolours of apple blossoms almost **EVERY DAY**. He had other talents, too, winning state tenor solo and the state oratory contest.

After winning a debating scholarship to William Jewell College in Missouri, Father Brandt entered the University of Missouri in 1942, to study wildlife. However, these studies were put on hold when he entered the Enlisted Reserve. He was in active service in the US Army Air Corps and trained as a radar-navigator.

Although proficient at his current profession, Father Brandt was not consumed by it. Instead, his head was turned by religion. One important inspiration in this respect was Dr. Calvin, who Father Brandt appreciated as someone who was both religious and knowledgeable about science. As you know, anyone who has met Father Brandt respects him for this **EXACT SAME QUALITY.**

He contemplated religion for years while studying. At Cornell University, he was awarded a fellowship in bird sound recording and was elected to Phi Kappa Phi. Now for those expecting a titillating chapter to this adventure story, you're probably thinking, that this is an American college Fraternity party. Unfortunately for those, whose imagination is running wild, Phi Kappa Phi is in fact an honorary scientific society. Father Brandt was first in his class. At this time he was mulling over the advice of a Reverend Francis Voelcker who encouraged him to study for the Anglican priesthood.

Eventually Father Brandt embraced these impulses. He made the decision to study for holy orders, and was accepted by Bishop Bowen in the Diocese of Colorado. He was ordained to the Anglican priesthood in 1950.

While learning Latin, and reading about philosophy and religion, Father Brandt became moved towards Rome. In 1956 he was received into the Catholic Church. However, he was still uncertain about his final profession. This was the time of Vatican II when monks were studying their roots. Father Brandt discovered that the first monks were hermits in the Middle East and Egypt and found himself attracted to this life.

March 6, 1965 is an important date for all of those who have had the privilege of knowing Father Brandt. While at a Trappist monastery in Iowa, Brandt heard of a small group of hermits living on Vancouver Island, and on this date he arrived in Courtenay. He asked about the hermits and was driven to the hermitage. Father Brandt located a spot on the 100-acre site and established himself there.

In August of that year, he was incardinated in the Diocese of Victoria and the following year was ordained at Canadian Martyrs by Bishop Remi De Roo. His parents and sister Ella were present and a Father Weed flew out from New York for the event. He was the first hermit monk ordained in the Catholic Church in several hundred years.

Over the next few years Father B found sites for several of the hermits.

His expertise, drew him around the world, working and studying in conservation centres in Switzerland, Rome, Florence, Munich and England. His skills were also invaluable in Canada. For example, he worked for the Canadian Conservation Institute in Moncton, and restored the famed Audubon's Ornithology work for the library of the Legislative Assembly in Fredericton. In the late 80s and early 90s he was transferred to the Paper Lab at the Canadian Conservation institute in Ottawa, and from there, flown to Whitehorse to work on archival materials damaged by floods in Dawson City.

After a period as chief conservator of the Manitoba Archives in Winnipeg, he left the archives and returned to his hermitage. There he turned to conservation of the natural environment, and in particular began work to preserve the Tsolum River which had become badly polluted. The Tsolum River Enhancement Committee was formed, and Brandt was appointed chairman. He did extensive research and masterminded a letter-writing campaign to various levels of provincial and federal governments. His address list soon included television personalities, radio talk show hosts, newspaper environmental reporters and journalists. Before long, the Tsolum River issue was known across Canada.

Public recognition for his many works came only recently, with a profile on Man Alive airing on CBC television and an article in the Vancouver Sun. In 1997 his "Meditations from the Wilderness" was published by Harper Collins and his work "Self and the Environment" was also published.

Father Brandt has also spoken about the issues he cares about. He was a speaker at a national conference of Christian meditation at the University of Victoria and in 2001 was a keynote speaker at the Western Conference of Christian Meditation in Edmonton. The environmental groups fortunate to have him as a member include the Steelhead Society of BC, the Campbell River Environmental Council, the Tsolum River Enhancement Committee and Restoration Society and the Oyster River Enhancement Society and Watershed management committee.

I will finish with a story within a story. As Bob Jones described in a short biography, when the Steelhead Society of BC presented Father Brandt with the Cal Woods Conservation Award at their 1989 annual convention, Father Brandt did not attend. He was, however, extremely pleased to win the award, which honours the memory of his late friend Calvin V. Woods. Several weeks earlier, a massive oil spill had washed ashore on the west coast of Vancouver Island, and Father Brandt was helping to clean up the beaches, hence his inability to attend.

Father Brandt has travelled the world, received recognition from Universities, the media, and the Church. But it is a testament that despite these accomplishments, what remains most important to him to this day is exactly what moved him as child. At the age of 13 he read Thoreau and would go to the woods like Thoreau did, to see what life was all about. His support for aboriginal rights and land claims settlements today, show how he roots for the underdog, the fish and the fowl.

Messages: - Abbreviated

Sister Pascaline - Osage Monastery, U.S.A

His concern for the earth, rivers and friends
Of the forest has been unquenchable. He has
often written and spoken out to decry abuses.

Bishop Remi De Roo – An esteemed member of our
Clergy

He has been a forerunner in the field of
contemplative life on the Island. I wish him
health, peace and joy in his dedicated life for
many years to come.

Dave Barret – Former Premier of BC

Father Charles Brandt is an outstanding citizen
who doesn't avoid taking a position on important
public issues. He demonstrates a social
conscience that should be the goal for all of us.
P.S. If you or Father Brandt are friends of the
Jesuits, then I will do anything you order me to.

Karen Sanford – Former MLA

Not only a gifted bookbinder but a dedicated
environmentalist whose research and tireless
work to restore the Tsolum River was a great
assistance to me in Victoria. Charles Brandt is
an inspiration.

Colin Gabelmann – Former Attorney General

Whenever I cross the Tsolum River I think of Father Charles Brandt and the strength----- and power of 1 person. Charles has been a major force for many years in shaping our community's attitude about conservation and the need to protect special places. His quiet passion in advocating for our natural environment has inspired many.

Gordon Campbell – Premier of British Columbia

Message from the Premier:

As Premier of the province of British Columbia, I would like to commend Father Charles Brandt for his lifetime commitment to conservation and environmental protection. His passion has been recognized by many, and his thoughts and reflection will be appreciated for generations to come. Congratulations on your 40th year of ordination.

Sincerely, Gordon Campbell, Premier.

In conclusion, we have to thank God, Father Charles, for giving us your life.