



Homily at the Funeral of  
Fr John Holyoak  
25 July 2005

### Funeral of Fr John Holyoak

If one wants to really know another human being, one can ask the question: who or what is it that he or she loves? When we discover who or what a person loves, we know everything that is worth knowing about them.

If one had listened to the memories being recounted last night in the vigil of this funeral liturgy, one would have heard from every speaker that John Holyoak loved his family. It is a precious memory for all of them, and ourselves as well, that on the Monday on which he died, John was able to spend the afternoon with his brother Ray and his two sisters who had come from Brisbane, talking about the past and looking at family photographs. John had a special place in his heart for his brother Ray and his wife Lyn, because he was able to go to their home every week for a meal. Because they lived in Townsville they were the family with whom he had the most contact. He spent the last couple of weeks of his life living with Ray and Lyn after he came out of hospital. The sympathy of the diocese and of all John's friends throughout Australia are extended to his family whom he loved so dearly and who will miss him so much.

Last night one would also have discovered that John loved the Church and the priesthood. It was clear to me from the four years that I have spent in Townsville, during which I have come to know John better than I did in the past, that John loved the Church and the priesthood on two different levels. On the level of faith he loved the Church as the Body of Christ and the sacrament of our salvation. He loved the Church because it was the community in which he met Jesus Christ, in which he was nourished by Christ's teaching and especially by the eucharist which he loved to celebrate daily and which was clearly the foundation of his life, the bedrock upon which he stood.

The same is true of the priesthood. John had a deep sense of the sacredness of the priesthood. The priesthood was for him a gift of God and the sacrament through which Christ ministered to his people. In that sense, the priesthood was something that he was both proud of and exercised very humbly because he understood that he was only an instrument of Christ.

On another level, John loved the Church and the priesthood in all its humanity: its beauty, its tawdriness, its eccentricity, and its sheer silliness at times. He loved Rome and Roman ceremony and even Roman intrigue and gossip. He loved the tales of the unusual priests of the past and the all-too-human stories that are as much part of the body of Christ as is the presence of Christ himself.

Like so many priests, John's life and his vocation were one and the same. He didn't work as a priest, he lived as a priest. There was no other John Holyoak and he would not have wanted there to be. It was a great joy to me that on the Saturday before he died he took the initiative to organize for himself to come across the road from Villa Vincent to join the priests for lunch on Saturday as he had every Saturday. On the Saturdays of the last few months he normally did not say much and was not able to eat much, but he wanted to be there with his brother priests. We missed him very much as we toasted him last Saturday when for the first time we gathered without him. It was always his responsibility to open the wine and even though he would forget to do this towards the end, we still left this job to him and now, as in the far more important areas of his ministry, we have to step in and do what John did so well.

I have already said that he loved celebrating the eucharist. The choice of the Gospel reading today is a very good choice for John Holyoak. He loved to preach the scriptures to a congregation. As Jesus explained the scriptures to the disciples on the road to Emmaus, so Jesus used John for many decades to do the same for the people of Townsville diocese. And as the disciples recognized Jesus in the breaking of the bread, so did John delight in enabling congregations, day after day, likewise to recognize Jesus in the breaking of the bread and in the communion which he ministered to him.

In his latter years he celebrated the eucharist daily at Villa Vincent, but his greatest love was to preside at the eucharist in the Cathedral, and in our acting Cathedral of St Patrick's, South Townsville, which he had served previously as Pastor. I often turned up at Villa Vincent and he stepped aside and concelebrated with me. We worked well together as a team. When I went to the Cathedral for mass he was always there before me, standing at the door greeting

the people he loved so much and whom he knew so well. They are representative of countless congregations throughout the diocese whom he likewise loved to greet and to serve, especially through the eucharist.

On the last Saturday on which he came for lunch, John told me as he had so often about so many things, that he had forgotten to go to mass that morning. "I just forgot" he said with resignation. It is a great consolation that on the Monday on which he died, he remembered, and therefore was able to join the congregation at Villa Vincent, to receive the Lord for the last time, even though neither he nor anyone else knew that it was his last communion.

Last night we heard the stories of the people of the Cathedral. They grieve in a special way for John whom they knew as their pastor, as do so many others from other parishes. He served in various ways in the parishes of Bowen and Ingham, South Townsville, Railway Estate and the Cathedral, the Burdekin Valley, Charters Towers and Magnetic Island.

I think John Holyoak also loved the Sisters of Mercy. He joined them for lunch every Sunday. I think they will miss him in a special way because he was just so much part of their lives. He took them for granted as an integral part of our diocese and he was always glad to be with them.

John also loved Canon Law and especially the Canon Law Society meeting each year. He loved his work in the Tribunal and being consulted on canonical questions. It is good that Fr Adrian Farrelly, who is representing the Canon Law Society and the Queensland Tribunal, is here today as a concelebrant. John would have been very glad of that acknowledgement, as are we.

The last thing I want to say about the things John loved may appear a little strange. I think John Holyoak loved going to meetings. I think he loved committees. I think he loved agendas and minutes and reports and decisions to be made. He loved knowing the quirky little stories about who owned what bits of diocesan and parish property, where the boundaries were, and the history of property changing hands and financial deals of the past. We heard from John Sherriff last night how integral John Holyoak was to the administration of the diocese and how deeply he was valued and how much he was respected.

He was Chancellor of the diocese from 1968 and a member of the Board of the Provident Fund, later to become the Diocesan Development Fund, from 1969. He was Secretary of the Roman Catholic Trust Corporation from 1974. In all of these roles, he continued through until this year. He served also as Diocesan Secretary, on the Sustentation Fund, the Sick Priests' Fund, the Senate of Priests, the Priests' Life and Work Committee, the Superannuation Fund, the Council of St Paul's College, and as a Diocesan Consultor. Administration was something that he liked to be involved in and neither of my predecessors or any bishop, for that matter, would discourage a priest from following through on that particular liking, because such men are few and far between.

This past year John has been failing and it has been very sad to see. Particularly difficult for him was that his memory was beginning to fail him. However, what I admired was that whenever he would forget something, he would simply say to me with a kind of a resignation, or a shrug of the shoulders, "I forgot" or "I didn't remember it once again". But more significantly, he was calm about this diminution of his powers, those powers which he relied on for so long in all those administrative roles in which he had served so well and which had given him such satisfaction. When he would simply shrug his shoulders, I think he shrugged within his heart as well and simply accepted what had come upon him. Of all the things I know of him, that acceptance is what I admire most. He accepted the loss of what had been one of his greatest assets and simply continued to do what he could do as a priest, and was eager to do as a priest. That kind of resignation and that kind of calm, that simplicity of spirit, only comes to those who know God.

So we pray now that as John meets the God he has served for so long, he won't have any difficulty recognizing him because he has known him so well and served him with such generosity and dedication as a priest of our diocese. "God has put (him) to the test and proved (him) worthy to be with him; he has tested (him) like gold in a furnace, and accepted (him) as a holocaust".

We thank you, John, for all you have done for so many. It is promised that “those who are faithful will live with (God) in love; for grace and mercy await those he has chosen”. May God welcome you with his grace and mercy.

**+ MICHAEL E PUTNEY**  
**Bishop of Townsville**