

Eulogy for Bernard Lee, S.M., Th.D.

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Dear Bernard,

For nearly fifty years, you and I studied and taught together, discussed an endless list of subjects, and wrote three books. Like our lives, our words mingled together for half a century. Today we come to our final text. One last letter.

I told you last week in one of our last conversations—as I often had before—that I can't imagine the shape of my life without you in it. In this is letter I'm trying to describe the shape of your life as I saw it through my eyes over nearly half a century.

From the time we met, it was plain as day that the Lee family was your heart. I recall your devotion to your mother. And your strong memories of your father. And your sister Pat's strong care for you over the years, especially during the past three heartbreaking ones. (We should all have an advocate like Pat when we cannot carry on alone). And I did hear tell of your

legendary political dialogues with your brother Bob. (I'm pretty sure the family didn't call them "dialogues.")

You were brother-in-law to Davene, Dewey and Gerald; uncle to Rob, Michael, Jerry and Lee Anne and their partners; great-uncle to their children, and one of 9 cousins. The Lee family kept growing and so did your love.

Near the end of your life, we would drive to 244 Rigsby Street and park in front of your boyhood home. You would always point out that the fence in front of the house now wasn't there in your time and that our friend Ed Speed's family lived next door. As we sat there in the car, you had come full circle.

In your family world, your name was **Bub**.

The second world of your life was the university. You were a life-changing teacher. You didn't pour knowledge into your students' brains. You read with them, addressed their questions, and made room for differences to surface. You challenged them to stretch, to live in a larger world.

Your classroom always had the same shape: You in a circle with your students. You challenged people there to imagine possibilities arising from reading a text closely, consider their value, and get to work implementing the worthwhile ones. You often said: "Faith is about doing, not knowing." For you, theology was practical. Those who dwelled in the Lee Circle take its spirit with us.

You were a prolific author, from your first book published in 1974 to your tenth in 2000, with scholarly articles sprinkled in before, during and after that. You studied and wrote about things that captured your attention—that mattered, not just to you, but to the world around you.

In the 1980s, you joined other theologians in what some consider the important theological work of the last half of the 20th Century. You were one of the scholars attempting to get back to the Jewishness of Jesus—that he was born, lived and died as a Jew—and what that realization means for Christians and Jews today. In your most important book, ***The Galilean Jewishness of Jesus***, you excavated Jesus from underneath the layers of triumphal statues and paintings, liturgy, music and dogma that had piled up over 2000 years. Your words resurrected Jesus, and not just for me.

You were truly a professor, responding wholeheartedly to your vocation in the academic world and touching countless lives deeply, both directly and indirectly, as your students became teachers. I have been in touch with many of your colleagues and former students over the past three years. All of them asked me to thank you for how you changed their lives. And so I did. And you were moved. And they were moved.

The absent graduates of Lee Circle are grieving with us today. In the university world, your name was ***Bernard***.

For 65 years you were a member of the Society of Mary. A Marianist. For most of those years you were a teacher at four universities, and for several of them you were chancellor here at St. Mary's, where your task was to strengthen the Marianist culture of the university.

You not only lived as a Marianist, but also contributed to the theology of religious life.

Your vision of the heart of religious life appeared in two books published later in your career. It was this: It is a religious community that does ministry, not separate individuals who share letters after their names and legal membership in an organization. You understood that there are no communities without individuals, but also that the only thing that can transform the world is empowered communities. Communities, not isolated individuals, are the primary vehicles for ministry, education and social change. For you, Marianist life was—above all—about community for ministry. All other roles, identities, and responsibilities and identities arise from and for community.

Over the past three years, I saw with my own eyes how the Marianists community gathered around you as the end of life approached and arrived. I came to appreciate more fully how your brothers Tim Dwyer, John Manahan and Mike O'Grady respected you over the years and how your lay Marianist sister and brother, Brenda and Kevin Fitzpatrick, cared for you.

A few months ago, we were doing laps on the St. Mary's campus in your wheelchair. A woman approached us and said: "You may not remember me, Fr. Lee, but I want to thank you again for the cross you brought me from Jerusalem thirty years ago. It's hanging in our living room." She was responding to the you she knew, Fr. Lee, a Marianist of St. Mary's, a human being who paid attention to others and remembered and responded

In your Marianist world your name was *Bernie*.

Bub, Bernard and Bernie—Three names in your three worlds, but just one you. You lived where family, university and religious life came together. At that junction you received and gave life. You flourished and so did we who met you there.

So, old friend, as we prepare to bury you among your brothers in a short while, can you help us imagine what has happened to you in a way that might lighten our grieving hearts?

Because you were a serious student of Judaism, it occurred to me that it would please you if I invited the great Jewish thinker Maimonides, to stop by on this Sabbath afternoon to give us a glimpse of the world to come, the world in which you are living now.

Maimonides wrote:

In the life hereafter, there is no eating, no drinking, no connubial intercourse, but the righteous sit with their crowns on their heads and enjoy the radiance of the presence of God.

*“**crowns on their heads**” refers to the knowledge they have acquired, and because of which they have attained life in the world to come....*

*To “**enjoy the radiance of the presence of God**” ... means that the holy ones attain to a realization of the truth concerning God to which they had not attained in this life.*

Bernard, with all due respect to the great Maimonides, I doubt that you are sitting around in your crown in the world to come, just enjoying the radiance of God. No. I'm sure you have a few questions and suggestions for God, and She no doubt has some for you. A new Lee Circle begins in the world to come. The sacred game of conversation, to which you devoted your life, rolls on, in the world where we are and the world to come, where you are. Now you connect the two.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for truth, for they shall have an unending conversation with God.

Rest in peace Bub, Bernard & Bernie.

Mike