

Making a difference in the lives of those we serve...

This article was written and published in the St. Thomas of Canterbury parish bulletin about Fr. Bob Phelps, O.F.M. Cap. where he helps out each weekend.

The writer Patrick Query is a professor of English at West Point.

Courtesy of Br. Carlos Hernandez, O.F.M. Cap.

The Poetry in Our Midst:

Ever, by Robert Phelps

Anyone who has heard at least, say, two of Fr. Bob Phelps's homilies knows that we have a bona fide poet among us. Often Fr. Bob will conclude a homily by humbly requesting the congregation's indulgence as he reads one of his poems pertinent to the day's theme. Indulgence is never needed, though, as his poems hit their target convincingly, movingly, and with minimal fuss. They have a unique way of bringing the language of liturgy down to the gritty, mundane level of ordinary life while at once elevating ordinary life—and the awareness of the poem's hearers—ever so gently upward toward the poetic and the divine.

Franciscans aren't known as hifalutin folks. The poems in Fr. Bob's book *Ever* are built of the most familiar material of the everyday: an old woman, a child, a tree without leaves, shoes, a blue coffee mug, rain. And yet each of these objects is relentlessly particular: not any mug, *this* mug; not any tree, *this* tree on *this* winter morning. Nor do any of the objects, or the poems, settle for only the level of mundane reality. Instead, they nudge the reader's chin upwards, toward the light shining just above the frame. A down-and-up motion pervades the poems: Zaccheus climbing and being called down from the tree, a ball tossed to a little girl (and not caught), leaves falling but also limbs as "up-reaching fingers in prayer / to the father of trees." In their own way, all the poems look squarely at death and then "deny, as I have been taught" that dying is "the end of the story."

The poems in *Ever* are the poems of a writer—and a priest—with his sleeves rolled up. Many arise out of Fr. Bob's experiences of contact with death and the dying. All are colored with compassion, the bafflement of being human, and the hope that glimmers behind what we can see and touch. Not one smacks of the ivory tower or the Hallmark card.

My favorite poem in *Ever* is "The Runner." Perhaps it's because my wife is a runner. Perhaps it's because it describes the icy shore of Lake Michigan, which my wife and I know well. But I think it's primarily because of the poem's gleeful surprise at the miracles of everyday life—visible, for instance, in the exuberant exclamation points: "She's wearing shorts! I am an old man who is cold and she's running, / and wearing shorts!" The book as a whole is about endings of all kinds, often deaths. But just as Catholics believe that death contains the spark of a fire that will burn eternally, so every ending in *Ever* suggests a spark of beginning a little like the twinkle in the poet's eye.

- Patrick Query

Ever is available at www.finishinglinepress.com or Finishing Line Press, P.O. Box 1626, Georgetown, KY 40324

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This is a sample poem By Fr. Bob about Poetry...

Poetry
There's a hunger
that lives in the pores of the skin,
to hear what cannot be heard;
to speak beyond words,
past meaning and into
a communion not understood
but longed for,
and embossed as a brand
on every bone and sinew.

And so we write...



Fr. Robert Phelps, is a Capuchin Franciscan Friar who has been serving the Province of St. Mary for 57 years. He is currently stationed at St Joachim Friary in Beacon, NY