

Melvin Koechner moved the earth for a living. God did a fine job making the world, but Melvin remade it time and again. His personality resembled his earth-moving equipment. He was someone you stepped aside for, someone who could enter your life, reshape it and move on, and you'd never be able to forget what he did.

He used to call me his "soul-saver." He called every priest here his soul-saver. I think he meant he had done all he could to save his soul, but he needed a little assistance. My job was to bulldoze his path toward heaven.

I don't think Melvin should have worried about this. He was very loyal to our church. He's been with the Knights of Columbus over 50 years. He worshiped here faithfully with his wife of 52 years, Irene, and shared his beliefs with his children, Debbie, Diane, Jerry & Linda; his 8 grandchildren and his 4 great-granddaughters. He loved little kids. He gave them Tootsie Rolls; he taught them to wiggle their ears. I'm sure when Melvin appears at those pearly gates and sees St. Peter, Melvin, hat twisted to one side, is going to say those magic words, "Don't you know who I am?" Then he'll look that startled saint square in the eyes and ask, "Are you listening to me?"

Melvin worked hard throughout his life. He couldn't understand why anyone would take a day off. He liked things neat and kept his shop spotless. He retired earlier this year, and I foolishly thought that after the auction, he would slow down. But no, he went to more auctions and started buying equipment. He always, always stayed busy. "I've got places to go, people to see, things to do," he'd say. "I'm on a very tight schedule."

He loved people. He loved being part of the action, but he also loved his time alone - on his land, where he could fish with traps or ride his tractor. He died doing what he loved.

This huge man died suddenly. We wish we had more time with him to talk, to end discussions we left open, to say and hear things that would make his death easier. The Book of Lamentations, written during Israel's exile, says "My soul is deprived of peace; I have forgotten what happiness is; all that I hoped for is lost." But nothing separates us from the love of Christ, says St. Paul - not even death. If Melvin's death at age 74 leaves people feeling cheated, our faith tells us it isn't over. Melvin's spirit lives on, and even more strongly the love of Christ lives on. It is Christ who moves the earth, and Melvin would be the first to say that. It is Christ who saves souls, more than any priest can do. It is Christ who holds families together in love more than any father can do. The favors of the Lord are not exhausted. God's mercies are not spent. They are renewed each morning in Christ.