

***Funeral Homily for
Thomas F. Martin, O.S.A.***

*February 23, 2009
St. Thomas of Villanova Church
Villanova University*

Readings:

Job 19:1, 23-27a

2 Cor 12: 7-10

Mt 5: 1-12a.

"You saved my life O Lord. I shall not die." This line from King Hezekiah's hymn of thanksgiving, recorded in Isaiah 38, meant nothing in particular to Tom Martin before Friday, July 18th, 2008. He had just received the results of his yearly check up: stage four colon cancer, metastacized to the lymph nodes and liver. This line from the thanksgiving hymn of Hezikaiah, was the response to the reading at Mass that day. Tom wrote this line down on a piece of paper and kept it in his pocket and at his bedside for the next seven months as it served as his anchor of hope and trust.

Those of us who were with Tom or in contact with him in late summer, know this was really the roughest time for him, when he did most of his thrashing in the inscrutable tangles of Providence. But by the time of the surgery, he had attained a peace with this turn of events, peace that never left him, and indeed grew and grew luminously the more his body weakened.

In this gospel we have just heard, Jesus teaches. He teaches how to be happy, how to live a life that is both blessed and a blessing for others. This is precisely what Tom did throughout his life but especially in these last seven months. Tom

thought he had taken medical leave from teaching. But in fact he did not stop teaching. He simply taught a class had never taught before.

As Fr. Brian Lowery, prior of the Augustinian community in San Gimignano in Tuscany, put it: "Tom is teaching us all how to die." Our colleague and friend Paul Danove said last week, on hearing of Tom's peace in the midst of all this: "The greatest gift we can give someone is how we die." When I mentioned these things to Tom, he said, "This is not a class I want to teach."

But his teaching started right during his recovery from the surgery. As people visited him in the hospital in order to console him, they found themselves deeply moved and consoled. I'm sure a number of you here could speak to this. His friend and colleague Tony Godzieba put it this way: "I believe that all the time with his illness was a grace -- a rare, special grace of resting in the bosom of God that I have never witnessed before and find extremely difficult to articulate. When he was at Bryn Mawr Hospital at the beginning, I went to see him, and one of the things we talked about was praying the office and his desire to be one with his Augustinian brothers, as far as he was able at that time, by praying with them while they were praying. The whole conversation, in fact, was prayer, even while we joked about trivia. His upbeat attitude, his peaceful acceptance of his condition. Words fail me here, because what I experienced was Tom somehow revealing an aspect of the depths of our rootedness in God, life lived as an ever-present divine gift, the intensity of the presence of grace that I can only deem sacramental." Tony went to console Tom but instead *received* from Tom something that Tom wasn't especially trying to teach: God's depths saturating even the surface trivia of life.

Tom had a simplicity, humor, humility and depth that were all very much of a piece. And an ability to relate to all sorts of people. He could move among confreres, conference goers, or colleagues, who among themselves might not be able to agree on the color of an orange, but who would all want to have a visit with Tom and catch up on things. Where did this simplicity, humor and depth come from? Well it's actually bound up with the way in which he thrived in the Order of St. Augustine.

Once Tom and I were talking, and I asked him what helped him put down roots in the Order. Without having to stop to think, he said "It's all how Augustine talks about divine presence." And he quoted various texts of Augustine (as only Tom could do—at any given meal!): "You were within me Lord, but I was outside myself." "You are closer to me than I am to myself." He said, "I was shocked by my response. It was as though I said to God, 'How dare you.' It was St. Paul who opened me up so that I can now say to God's interior presence, "how gracious of you." And then Tom mentioned 2 Cor 12, which is why we decided on this for the second reading: Paul speaks of some sort of interior struggle and how he begged the Lord to rid him of this, but the Lord said, " 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.' ... Now I am content with weakness, ... for when I am weak, then I am strong."

Do you see what Tom had worked his way to? He is speaking of one the fundamental thresholds of the spiritual life. Without crossing it our own practice of religion will keep us riveted to merely the surface of life, to our SUV career paths, to our botoxed CVs, to a highly caffeinated cultural distraction. Distraction from

precisely what? That this “thorn in the flesh”, this wound, this in ourselves that we would rather not see, is what in fact is embraced in the redemptive Incarnation of God in Christ. And so Tom, in a season of years, ceased resenting in himself what God graciously embraces. In doing this he became one of a cloud of witnesses, part of living tradition of saints and sages who see in their flaws, not their own face, but Christ’s.

Tom would be very uncomfortable with any talk of spiritual breakthroughs or accomplishments. He was more routinely aware of his own weaknesses and shortcomings--all the crucially right kinds of struggles; more aware of wrestling with himself and resting in God, then wrestling with himself and resting in God. He was much more at home with Walker Percy’s observation in *The Thanatos Syndrome*, “Life is fits and starts, but mainly fits.” But in the midst of this was an unshakeable trust in God’s loving, indwelling presence *no matter what*. This is what changed Tom’s reaction to God’s intimate presence from “How dare you” to “How gracious of you.” And when we learn to live with this simplest of truths, how the God we seek is graciously woven into the fabric of our flaws, we live more peaceably with other people’s flaws, and we walk more gently in this jostling world.

Tom was completely unaware of something he began to teach in the final weeks of his life: the luminous peace in his face that grew as his body weakened. A number of us noticed this over the last couple of weeks. Another friend and colleague, Tim Horner, tried to see Tom the morning of the day he died. Tom had had a rough night, mercifully the only one in this last phase. One of the nurses in the monastery infirmary had been posted at the door as chief bouncer. But Tim said, “I

ducked under the arm of the nurse to get a better view of him, and he smiled as only Tom could and waived. His body looked as close to death as I have seen in my short life, but his eyes were so incredibly bright, even sparkling. But in that moment, I think I saw what we all know of Tom. He was illuminated from within. No matter what happened to Tom's body, his spirit remained intact, perhaps even made brighter by the immanence of his death. I will never forget the look of eternal life that shown through his failing body."

A couple of weeks earlier I had begun to notice what Tim Horner saw last Friday morning. Tom and I were having dinner over at Burns Hall on February 2nd. Tom was very up beat, very much himself as always. But the physical deterioration had really begun to show in his face, frame and voice. Yet at the same time there was this luminous quality about him, as though he were starting to move beyond this life.

Just over a week later, the doctors told him that he was not a candidate for the experimental chemo and that he had days or weeks. I went over to have dinner with the community in Rosemont, and afterwards Tom and I were talking. I asked him, "What is it like to die?" He said, "It's exactly same as living. You let go of what's going, and you stay with what each moment brings. And you just trust in God." And then he spoke of the peace he felt with the whole situation. God was very present to him, and he spoke of the tremendous gratitude he felt to his community in Rosemont, Bill Donnelly and Rich O'Leary, "who have been wonderful through all this." How Don Reilly had been as much a Provincial to him as his own Provincial, his gratitude for his spiritual director Fr Ted Antry at Daylesford Abbey. The only

wrinkle that would not stay ironed down was worry about his family and how they would take it. But there was no thought about himself. Not the remotest concern or worry. All trust. All gratitude. So this is an important lesson. Apparently dying is a lot like being alive: letting go, living what the moment brings, trusting in God. Self-forgetful gratitude.

The Thursday morning before he died I was in his room, now in the monastery infirmary. I was taken aback by the bright peace in his face, in his countenance. I said, "Tom, you look beautiful." He said, "Why thank you." Don't get me wrong. He was a jaundiced, bloated wreck. But the luminous peace was notably stronger than when I'd seen him 48 hours previous. We talked about practical things that would need seeing to, and then I asked, "Tom what is your prayer like now?" He said, "Well I can't really concentrate to say many prayers," and gestured to his breviary. He was searching for words, and said, "I am and God is. It's awareness of His presence. God just gives."

This luminous peace and state of prayer in the face of death is not at all unknown. A lot of hospice workers see this, and many Early Christian writers speak of this, calling it the light of our baptism or the light of eternity manifesting itself. But it is one thing to snore through writings of the Church Fathers on this topic. It is quite another to see it with your own eyes under the arm of the nurse blocking the door, to see this gentle, luminous peace emanating from a wasting, bloating frame, a peace that seems untouched by it all, that seems to be growing more alive. Surely what some of us glimpsed is what Hesikiah meant when he spoke of that life that is saved, that will not die, which Tom kept in his pocket.

The hospice doctor had told Tom that he would gradually slip into a coma and quietly die. Tom said, "Oh good, it'll be like Woody Allen—"I don't mind dying. I just don't want to be there when it happens.'" This is just what happened the afternoon and evening of last Friday. As Tom lay unconscious, his sister Diane read him a passage from Augustine's *Confessions*. It was the reading *Augustine Day by Day* a couple of days before. "I entered my inmost self with you, Lord, as my guide.... I entered in and saw with the eye of my soul, the unchangeable Light.... Those who know the truth know this Light, and those who know it know eternity; it is love that knows it" (*Confessions* 7,10). Death was bringing Tom into this inmost self indwelled by God's own Light, from which he could reach out to us.

So what do we learn from what Tom has been teaching for a semester and a half? Through the death and resurrection of Christ, there a simplifying unity of living and dying. The spiritual skills are the same. If you want to live in peace with God and others, make prayer your anchor. Live in the knowledge that simple human kindness trumps fear, anxiety, and competitiveness.

Tom's teaching us how to live in such a way that we die well was his Sermon on the Mount of his cancer, something he would rather not have taught just now. Teacher that he was, however, he has set the essay topic for the exam. And leave it to the Augustinians to find out ahead of time what the exam question is. Just last night, Tom's prior, Fr. Bill Donnelly, found out where Tom had hidden it.

Tom wore a ring. The ring was removed before his body was given to the undertakers. Fr. Donnelly noticed what must surely be the essay topic: Written on inside of this ring, it reads: "Love one another as I have loved you." John's Gospel

says it as simply as it can be put. Now who of us will pass?

Tom's body in death was simply beautiful. Joyful, restful, repose, surrounded by his family and his Augustinian brothers. A repose that his spiritual father St. Augustine spoke of often but perhaps no place more movingly than in the final lines of the *City of God*: "*Ibi vacabimus et videbimus, videbimus et amabimus, amabimus et laudabimus.*" "There, [in the eternal sabbath of heaven] we shall rest and we shall see, we shall see and we shall love, we shall love and we shall praise. Behold what will be in that end that is without end! For what is our end but to reach that kingdom which has no end" (*City of God*, XXII, 30).

Tom Martin, our brother, confrere, colleague, a Nebridius, an Alypius, a mentor, a friend, and in all matters concerning how to live in such a way that we die in peace, peace that both gives and receives, peace that becomes more alive as we enter death, he is our teacher and our fellow pilgrim. This is our brother, Tom Martin.

Rev. Martin S. Laird, O.S.A.
February 23, 2009

