

HOMILY FOR MEMORIAL MASS FOR FR. TONY PEREZ

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The exchange between Jesus and Martha in the gospel reading (John 11:20-26) is one of the most moving and well-known passages in John's gospel. To understand it well, it is important to look carefully at what is said. The first part of their conversation is what most Jews of that time would say to each other at the death of a loved one: "Your brother will rise," "Yes, I know he will rise . . ." Martha actually says, "I know that he will rise *at the resurrection* on the last day." Like us today, the Jews in Jesus' day believed that the resurrection was an event that would occur at the end of time. But when Jesus responds to Martha by saying "I am *the resurrection*," he is actually saying that all that Martha hoped for in that far-off event called "the resurrection" is *already present* in Jesus himself.

Jesus words "I am . . . (the) life" express a similar idea. In John's Gospel "life" *always* means *eternal life*, never ordinary human life. So Jesus' claim to *be* "life" means that eternal life, which people of that day again thought was something in the distant future, can be experienced in Jesus. And it can be experience in this life. Jesus says in John 5:24: "The one who hears my word and believes in the one who sent me . . . does not come to judgment but *has (already) crossed over* from death into life" (my translation).

John's gospel is the only book in the Bible to give a definition of eternal life: "And this is eternal life: to know you, the only true God, and the one you have sent, Jesus Christ" (John 17:3). This too shows that "eternal life" is something present to the believer in this life. Although our knowledge of God and Jesus in this life is partial compared to the after-life, it is nonetheless real and is what we might call the first stage of eternal life. In other words, we don't have to wait till the next life to know Jesus. We can begin to know him in this life, which means we can begin eternal life here and now.

How do we "know" Jesus in this life? There are perhaps various answers to this question but surely one could say that we know him best through the lives of people who radiate Christ in their daily living. To manifest this eternal life in one's life is the duty of all Christians, but especially of the priest. And we see it perhaps most clearly in very *ordinary* things, in the simple human virtues of extraordinarily good priests.

One of the great contributions of our late Holy Father Pope John Paul II's encyclical on priestly formation, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, was to stress what the majority of earlier works on the priesthood had not emphasized: the importance of the *human foundations* of priesthood (the first of the "four pillars"). "Grace builds on nature" and priestly spirituality builds on basic human goodness and human virtues.

Fr. Tony's Christ-like goodness was self-evident to everyone who knew him. Through his simple human goodness he showed us how eternal life truly begins on earth.

I have been a close friend of Tony's for close to 15 years and I have been the recipient of so much of his goodness. In the last few days I have spoken to a number of seminarians that were close to him who told me what impressed them most about him. Here are some of these Christ-like human qualities I and they have noticed about him:

Generosity

With his money: Whenever Tony and I went out to dinner, he always insisted on paying the bill. Several times, on his birthday, I tried to insist on paying, but he wouldn't let me get the bill!

With his time: Students have told me that if you knocked at Tony's door he stopped whatever he was doing. His close friend of 30 years, Fr. Leo Larrivee, tells that if he was on the phone with Tony and someone came to his door, Tony would immediately attend to the student who came to see him. Students knew that if you were struggling you could come to him at any time for any reason. He never had a "hidden agenda"; he always assumed the best about those he counseled.

Attentiveness

Fr. Tony was quick to see when people were in pain or struggling with something; when you were with him he was totally focused on your need. At that moment he gave you his undivided attention. You clearly felt that you were the most important concern in the world to him when you were talking with him. And he would always fit himself into *your* schedule.

Tony was also able to see people's talents, talents that they themselves didn't see and help them develop them. He always looked for the *deep qualities* in people and helped them to bring them out.

Gratitude

Fr. Tony always expressed appreciation when anyone did anything for him or when students did some task for St. Mary's. Recently he went to the door of each student on the orientation team, personally gave them a thank-you card, and told them how much he appreciated what they had done.

True Humility

I believe that true humility is a rare virtue in this world. True humility is not self-conscious. You hardly notice it when you're with someone who has this virtue. But it is a great gift, and one of the things that helped Fr. Tony relate so well to everyone. He never related to anyone as if he were above them. He always spoke to people as equals. He was someone you could be completely yourself with in all circumstances.

For example. Tony always got up very early in the morning. I found out in the last few days that he had the practice of making a pot of coffee between 3:00 and 4:00 a.m. every morning and having a cup with Mel, the security guard. A few hours later he would have coffee with Betty Moore, the head of our cleaning staff, in the refectory.

Loyalty

Fr. Tony was a Sulpician who never forgot his native diocese. He flew to Guam every Christmas vacation and every summer, and not just for relaxing and visiting his family. While he was there he *worked* for the diocese, giving classes, workshops, retreats, etc.

Sense of Humor

Some people might not think of a sense of humor as a virtue. But without it there is no joy. And if there's no joy in everlasting life—why bother? Fr. Tony had a *great* sense of humor—it has been my experience in life that great people always do. He could get you laughing so easily, and he could laugh when the joke was on him. Below I give some examples of his humor.

Tony loved to tease me (and others). One thing he would do about once a month took place in the sacristy as we were vesting for the community liturgy. When I came into the sacristy I would head toward the vesting closet where my alb was kept. From across the room he would say to me, “Doctor! You have the liturgy today!” I would respond, “No, Tony. You must be mistaken.” Then he would say, “Yes! You’re up today!” If I showed any sign of doubt about what I had said, he would break into his famous laugh.

Fr. Tony's car has become a legend at St. Mary's. Some years ago I was walking the driveways around the property and I came upon one car parked in the back parking lot by itself. It looked like it hadn't been driven in a long time. I thought someone had just abandoned it there. The car had California license plates. I said to myself, “This can only be Tony's car, which he drove from San Jose out here 12 years ago.” It was. For some reason Tony never drove it once he got here. But he was sort of self-conscious about his car. People teased him, saying that the tires had melted into the asphalt and trees were growing up through the hood—which he always vehemently denied! Once when he and Fr. Larrivee were planning to go out to dinner, he told Tony that he would go on the condition that—for once!—Tony would drive his car. Tony told him that he couldn't because his car was “in the shop.” Of course, it wasn't. It was still sitting undriven in the parking lot!

The funniest story I ever heard about Tony was told to me by his dear friend Fr. Leo Larrivee. Some years back Leo went with Tony to Guam for the summer a number of times, to give talks and classes on Church History, etc. One summer they planned to fly to Australia for a vacation after they finished their teaching in Guam. But before their plane left, a typhoon hit Guam. Now ask yourself: After liturgy, what did Tony love best in the world — that's right, AIR-CONDITIONING! The typhoon knocked out all the power on the island — in other words, NO AIR-CONDITIONING! After about a day, Tony told Leo that he couldn't stand it any longer. He got tickets for a flight to Saipan, where they planned to wait until the typhoon left Guam. But no sooner had they gotten to Saipan that it was hit by a different typhoon! Again, no air-conditioning! Meanwhile the typhoon left Guam, but because of this second typhoon they couldn't get back there to catch their flight to Australia! You can just imagine how put out Tony was about all this!

This funny story has a touching ending. Some years ago Fr. Larrivee had told Tony that although he appreciated being invited to go with him to Guam in the summer, the 18-flight was getting to be too much for him. So he told Tony that he would fly to Guam with him just once more. Tomorrow Leo will board a plane for Guam, the same plane that will take Fr. Tony's body back to his homeland. He will fulfill his promise to his best friend, to go to Guam with him one last time.

Fr. Tony, you were never more of a priest to us than when you showed us the way to eternal life by living it yourself while you were among us. As you stand with those saints and angels whom you venerated at liturgy on earth, remember us whom you had to leave behind when the Father called you to His home. And from your place in glory intercede for us before the throne of God, whose face, which you sought so earnestly in life, you now behold evermore.