

Father Thomas Francis Cullen
Mass of Resurrection

If you think the Gospel peculiar for a funeral liturgy, know that Father Tom Cullen did not ask for Luke 5/1. Tom left the choice to "Quinnie", and I selected the passage for my own good reasons.

Among the reasons, might be the lake scene with boats; the fishermen; the request to cast off from shore; the further request to launch out into the deep; the willingness of Peter to "humor" Jesus; the surprise catch; the humble confession of Peter who admits he is a sinner; Jesus' invitation to fish for men, and, finally, the advice of Jesus: "Do not be afraid."

All of the above relate to the life and times of Father Tom Cullen who loved water; he fished, and hunted water fowl, he sailed and skied and swam; when water froze, he skied and skated. Tom's willingness to cast off from shore with the Lord was evident . . . after graduation from John Carroll he entered the seminary. The "surprise" in Tom's life, always, was his habitual recognition of the goodness of God. In sheer gratitude Tom often said: "God is good and getting better."

St. Peter's willingness to humor Jesus is mindful to me of Tom's compliance with all the priestly responsibilities he so willingly, and, though seldom, "guardedly", accepted.

Whatever was asked of him he did, including organizing a new parish in 90 days time, including the start of construction to satisfy an insurance clause.

Willingness to "Put out into the deep" has special significance. Tom Cullen was a man of courage. Didn't he save a severely bleeding man from an overturned box car in a train wreck when police and firemen would not dare enter the scene because of downed high voltage lines? Tom carried the man on his shoulders to safety. How often Tom said to himself, or to one of us, when it was "decision" time, "Let's launch off into the deep!" He inspired confidence and courage in the rest of us.

And, lastly, Tom Cullen was a good "fisher of men". In inclusionary terms, I add "men and women."

Character-wise I think Tom had a lot in common with St. Peter, my favorite male saint.

I won't repeat today anything I said at Tom's 40th Jubilee or at his Retirement Mass. I can't. We laughed then. The mood today is more bittersweet.

Appropriating Tom's keynote of gratitude I can paraphrase Bob Hope's theme song:

Thanks for the memory,

Of Cutty Sark and chatter on the Shannon,

For moments at the Shack,
And apré ski in Colorado.

Thanks for the memory of songs in harmony,
for trips by air to Pelee, Boyne and Middle Bass.

Thanks for the memory of duck dinners, broken bones,
the best of good times and memories I can't forget.

Many's the time we feasted
Many's the time we fasted
We just had fun ... with no harm done.

And, just as it's written toward the end of Hope's theme I can say of Tom: "At times you might have been a headache, but you never were a bore."

The memory of Father Tom leaves us with blessing upon blessing. Most of all, I'm grateful for his friendship and priesthood in my life. Tom made a difference, to me, and, I'm sure, to you.

Hilaire Belloc would have liked Tom Cullen because Belloc believed that religion ought to be limber and lighthearted. As Belloc phrased it:

"Wherever the Catholic sun doth shine,
There's plenty of laughter and good red wine,
At least I have always found it so,
Benedicamus Domino!"

Tom's spirituality didn't allow him to be solemn about little things because he enjoyed a larger view of life. Mountains shrunk to molehills before his frequent question: "Quid ad aeternitatem?"

Tom made the most of this life while striving for eternal life. Tom's advice: "Keep your feet on earth and your head in heaven." His ability to laugh at troubles balanced him amid stress and strain. Tom was a teacher worth following . . . hence so many friendships.

We all have stories to tell and anecdotes to spin about Father Tom. We enjoyed Tom. He taught us a lot about living in grateful, joyful fashion. But these last eight years have been, perhaps, among the most significant of years because Tom was asked by God to shoulder a very difficult cross. God called Tom to share intimately in Jesus' suffering for all humanity.

Of the four accounts of the death of Jesus, St. Mark's is the most austere. He pictures Jesus being systematically stripped of everything: clothes, friends, blood, dignity,

consolation, life itself. Stripped little by little, minute after minute, until nothing is left. Total abandonment.

I don't personally know anyone more vibrant, electric, outgoing, sociable and loquacious than Tom Cullen. For Tom to be asked to bear the burden of a dementia like Alzheimer's must have been a devastating reality to face.

And Tom did know! It's not a disease that caught him totally by surprise. Tom knew that such an illness touches us in unfathomable ways. He experienced the terrible feeling of something going wrong that can't be fixed. To be "losing it," to be "out of it". Not easy to accept such diminishment let alone the fears that the unknown transports.

Tom Cullen was never a patient man; prone to hyperactivity, not inactivity. How, then, to "let go" and "let God" have His way? Tom, somehow, mustered the serenity of accepting things he could not change.

Of course, Tom never lacked courage to change the things he could. He always was ready for the risk, always ready to "launch off into the deep". So, Tom mustered courage to bear the heavy cross he carried for over eight years.

Tom even mustered wisdom to know the difference between resentment and resignation, between bitterness and acceptance. "Quid ad aeternitatem?"

It must be frightening to see yourself inch away. To find yourself unable to retrieve the simplest of words, to pluck chords of memory and come up empty, to wonder what demons lurk in the shadows of memory.

Not easy for family or friends either. How soul-wrenching to leave such a victim in other's care. One wonders, then, who is the lonely one?

At first, visits call forth memories of joyful events, and fun times with friends. Trying to remember becomes a kind of ritual as memory gradually fades into the haze and confusion of dementia.

Witness the struggle by victim and visitors to surface thoughts and express emotions. Feel the hopelessness and bewilderment as to how to stay connected. It's heartache for victim, family and friends. One wonders who carries the heaviest cross.

But, thank God there is more to suffering than pain. As Father Tom often repeated: "God writes straight with our crooked lines."

Through Tom's illness, he became, for our sake, a spiritual master teaching us to gratefully live life one day at a time. He teaches us to live an attitude of gratitude with trust in a God who walks with us wherever we go.

Tom's terrible illness became a gift to us, lessons in gratitude and acceptance and in

opportunities for us to grow in patience, compassion and understanding.

We understand better now the dignity and sacredness of the lives of those who suffer with dementias. True, we are left without a roadmap to follow victims into the haze of their final passage home to God. We know only that their final days are a sacred pilgrimage.

Tom had always been quick to choose the path ahead, not afraid to make decisions, eager to venture forward. But these past eight years or more were tough, tough passage. Tom had to "leave the driving" to God's own Kindly Light.

God's Kindly Light led Tom through clouds of confusion to his pilgrim's end. His passage was shrouded, but last Friday he uttered his Nunc Dimittis Servum Tuum in Pace. Very early Friday morning Tom reached heaven's gate where the Eternal High priest greeted His priest with open arms.

Tom's last years have deepened our awareness of God's mysterious ways, ways that can burden us with weaknesses that somehow, by grace, strengthen us to walk our pilgrim way with acceptance, gratitude, patience and trust . . . qualities that are supernatural, not natural.

Tom's pilgrimage through Alzheimer's is a spirituality wherein one surrenders all to God - memory and judgment, body and soul. Alzheimer's pilgrims leave behind the security and comfort of communication and companionship. Alzheimer's submerses souls into a spiral of disconnection.

We rejoice this afternoon because Father Tom has been emancipated from such isolation. The archives of Tom's memory are fully restored. No more confusing rays from memory's lamp. Now the mind of Tom Cullen is the mind of God, in that Tom sees what God sees because Tom is what God is. The magnificent gift of grace!

By the way, if Tom were preaching, he would speak of gratitude, and forgiveness. Gratitude, surely, but Tom was very high on forgiveness. He had painted 70 x 7 across his church entrance. He preached a ten second rule. "Be angry for ten seconds, and then let go!" "Crock it" was his expression. It's a good rule because forgiveness keeps pebbles of resentment out of the furrows of our brains, pebbles that cause spiritual headaches and moral heartaches. Did you know every Holy Week, on Good Friday, Tom would go to those he felt he had hurt during the previous year. He would ask forgiveness.

Tom would coax us to be courageous, too. The advice of Jesus . . . "Do not be afraid," "Launch off into the deep". Tom would remind us we can find our way anywhere if we know where God is in our lives.

My father once said of Tom's dad. "He's a man who could make a mistake with his head, but never with his heart." I say of Tom, like father; like son.

Someone else once said: If the only prayer we ever say is "thank you", that's enough. Well, "Thank you, God", for Tom Cullen. And "thank you", Tom Cullen, for your priesthood and your friendship with all of us.

Thanks For The Memory . . . of a good priest whose passage to God went through the purgatory of Alzheimer's. The only things Tom took with him to heaven are love and friendship. So, we know we're not forgotten.

On a last personal note, to Tom: you frequently needled me . . . for always wanting to be first. Well, Tom, you beat me home; but, I'll catch up . . . and so will all of these . . . we'll all be together again on whatever lakes and slopes that heaven provides for the likes of us.

Peace, Tom, until we come!

"Quinnie"