

## LAST SERMON SERIES

Fr. Tom Ranzino

I have found this entire project difficult to conceive and create. Its not that I can't imagine myself giving a "*last sermon*"; that will happen and more than likely, I won't know at the time that it is the last one. Or perhaps not. It's also not that I don't have something to say; I do, and I hope these things I talk about won't be too disjointed or seem like my chance to comment on too many things. Since I understand that I am the first one to give this effort in the series, I can indulge a bit in that there is no template I can use. Since I preach based on the Scriptures, not having the Scriptures as the context made this more difficult. Thus, as I have come to experience sometimes in spiritual direction, the Scriptures I use tonight will be my life. It is not my intention to convince you that my observations are all correct or Gospel truth. You may disagree or even be bored. Yet, these observations are true for me and I think contain an element of truth which cuts across life. If any of this cuts across yours then wonderful. If not, then please consider tonight's attempt to be sincere even if it misses the mark of your expectations.

I found this project difficult because it's difficult reading the *inside of things*. What do I mean by that? I mean being able to read below the surface of life, on another level of knowing, to express what is more than singular for me- a more universal find. It's like poetry- so particular in observation but so universal in understanding. Good poetry can make a person sit up and say "*yes, that's how I see it.*" Good poetry is language so compressed that it explodes in meaning. So I have tried to compress my experience to see if it explodes like good poetry..... looking for meaning along the way as the pieces fall around me.

In my life, knowledge, experience and grace have worked together to teach me. Knowledge is what I have acquired through wonderful teachers, books [already in saying "using books" as a method of teaching I am dating myself]—these have all shown me worlds beyond me. I have happily gone along on the journey of knowledge. Knowledge's sister, "*experience*" has been the context of knowledge. Experience is, as one child said to me, "what happens to you." Much has happened to me [and to every human being alive]. Experience is the stuff of life. Unreflective experience is too often the cause of much of our human behavior. I have tried to be reflective about this experience of mine. Knowledge and experience have shown me what I know and what I don't know. Yet, these alone have not made me wise. If I claim any wisdom, it's Grace, which is God's life at work in my knowledge and experience that has led me to wisdom. Grace is the discernment of my knowledge and experience which has made me wise in some things. Not all, but *some*-- because I am after all only a man- human. In my best self, I don't pretend to be wise about all things- but I have some wisdom which has been hard fought, surprisingly beautiful, amazingly evident, and completely mysterious. What you have asked me to do is have knowledge and experience walk hand and hand with grace. This is another kind of learning called *mystagogy*. This is a big word which means *unfolding the mystery*..... Asking myself, what does my experience teach me?

Reading the inside of things. In short, a kind of contemplation. Herein lays my deepest imagination, wherein lies my hope. I do not find my hope only through rummaging around in my past, which I have certainly done enough of in my life; but by entering into the imagination of my *inside things* which, in the end, have made me more human- or at least given me the opportunity to be such. *Stories move in circles. They don't go in straight lines. So it helps if you listen in circles. There are stories inside stories and stories between stories and finding our way through them is as easy and as hard as finding your way home. And part of the finding is getting lost. And when you're lost you start to look around and listen. [Sue Bender]*

So, with this as context my knowledge, experience and grace lead me to read the inside of things in these areas:

1. God is Faithful
2. Wounds are the pearl of great price
3. Sin is real
4. Worship is hard work
5. What is most important must show up in your life
6. Its important to know what you don't know
7. People are complicated
8. Words which have shaped me
9. What I think about priesthood
10. Christian Life is not a straight line with only death at the end
11. Always we begin again; the Promise of Living.

### **GOD IS FAITHFUL**

*I remember my father holding me.....*

I mentioned earlier that there are times when I don't know and when I know I don't know. Over the course of my life, believing in God has not been particularly difficult for me. No big crises of *is there a God?* What was difficult for me was clarity. I wanted and still want to be clear about what is unclear. So often this becomes my focus in going about life, thinking that I am connecting with God in my prayer when all the while what I am want clarity about is the wrong thing. I want clarity about the next day's threat; the next month's decision; the missing part of this or the upsetting part of that. My heart is in the wrong place. What I have come to see is that my desire for clarity is not so much about the things unclear, but what I really want is to be clear that God is loving and near to me. No matter what happens, this is most important. I don't always remember that and when I don't I end up anxious and worried about many things. St. Ignatius speaks of a Foundation and Principle which says more or less that no matter what happens in life, what matters the most is to know, to truly believe that God is faithful in love for us.

To know this more deeply day by day is the whole journey. It is hard for me to imagine that this belief is difficult for many people but in truth it is most difficult. Conditions are placed on God's love for you or me so that we often walk with one eye looking over our shoulders waiting for God to strike or to forget. Yet: God is faithful.

What has helped me immensely in knowing this has been spiritual direction: And, that prayer is relationship. It is not about the ask- it is about the person. If I ask, I ask the person whom I love. Again and again in my life I have had to surrender my fear to my faith in God's faithfulness.

### WOUNDS ARE THE PEARLS OF GREAT PRICE

There is no way you or I get through life without being wounded. Some of the arrows come from outside the self, and some are very much self inflicted. However the wounds come, and by this I mean the accumulation of pain that remains hidden or is revealed more than we realize. Being wounded is part of the human condition, I think. For me this wounded-ness has affected me in a number of ways: my ability to trust another; my fear of betrayal; my workaholism; my inability to see until I see.

These wounds have come through my experience of life and I claim no special privilege because of them; but I had and have to learn to make peace with them and even befriend them if that is possible to do. My wounds have shaped but *not* determined my life. I do not wear them as badges of honor; but I embrace them as my particular understanding of suffering. Somehow, within me, when I see someone who is of a condition where I notice his/her wound, there comes from me an empathy, [and I am deeply saddened with the politicization of this word], a feeling of compassion. Simply, I am moved to see the world in a different way through my encounter with human brokenness. I have had to take many years to sort through my own wounded-ness, so that I would not see the world as victim. The insights of freedom have not come without a particular suffering which any exploration of the human journey, particularly my own, brings. It is frankly difficult to remember, and to forget. I sense it has more to do with remembering, forgetting somewhat, and then re-remembering, putting life together in a new way. It is the shape of the Paschal Mystery, the dying and rising of Christ, about which I will have more to say in a short while. *Along the way I met the boy I was and grew into the man I am*—all while being far along enough in years to no longer called myself boy or even my younger self. What do I have to say about all this? I would not direct you to hold carefully your own wounds for the sake of pity; but for the sake of peace. We carry in our body the dying of the Lord --- Casting this part of the human condition into the arena of the wounded-ness of Christ allows me to understand this part of who I am as not isolated from my whole life with Christ. The exploration of this dimension of who I am is no less daunting than moving through any other new territory, or in that new place which I am surprised to discover turns out to be the very place from where I began. Like any new territory, it can be helpful to have a guide both in the form of a spiritual director and/or a therapist.

These kinds of people practice the healing arts and can be great guides to wholeness and peace. This has been so in my life.

The Second Vatican Council urged the world and urges us to make our challenges doorways or passages for personal and communal salvation. Yes, our wounded-ness is bound in the Christ, who suffered and died for the life of the world.

Pay attention to your wounded-ness for these can be your teacher and yes, even your gift if you pay the price to see. Along the way you will also become a more graced- filled human being who better knows the meaning of being alive for more than just yourself.

**SIN IS REAL:** So much of our culture is fake. I mean this not as a cute remark but an observation about how disappointed I often am with the quality of the cultural life which is lived by many in this part of the world. Jon and Kate Plus 8 makes me gag. I see no redemptive value in something that purports to be reality while a camera is ever present. It is the cultural blindness that won't admit to the reality of fake. Or evil. I do not say that the culture is evil- but evil exists within the culture- the collective patterns of behaviors which distinguish us from other creatures. We create the culture in which we live and it recreates us. Within this culture there is sin: missing the mark.

Psalm description. There are at least three cultural challenges to our humanity:

1. There is a proud refusal to admit that we need to be saved. To be immersed in a community.
2. There is an individualism which fears the limitations and commitments that go with relationships and community.
3. There is a tendency to choose the partial over the large whole,: focusing on personal advantage over the common good; fundamentalism, rigidity and a literalism rather than an openness to what we cannot control, mystery. All of these make change difficult, which is the heart of conversion, and deepens our fear of the process of transformation. I speak of sin only to admit to you that sin is real, there are powers that move us away from the Lord God, and that there is a sin unto death. Sin is a disordering of one's desires such that what God desires is not taken into account. Like any other power, sin can shape one's life so that it becomes the matter of who one is. In other words, it is never questioned. Fish discover water last. [St. Ignatius examen There *are* deadly sins who work primarily because they come in disguise as a good. Beware of them.

**WORSHIP IS HARD WORK:** I am a liturgist. I say that as part of my humanity, with humility, and not without humor. I have often wondered about why worship seems so difficult to do. I don't mean showing up; I mean entering into worship consciously, actively, with intention. I think it has to do again with the cultural values which shape how we perceive ourselves in this world.

*Individualism, rationalism, utilitarianism, superficialism.* As worship or liturgy is primarily *communal, irrational, wasteful, mysterious* it is a difficult enterprise to enter into.

I am struck by the words of the liturgical pioneer Romano Guardini who in 1964 right after the promulgation of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy wrote: *The question is whether the wonderful opportunities now open to the liturgy will achieve their full realization ; where we shall be satisfied with just removing anomalies, taking new situations into account, given better instruction on the meaning of ceremonies and liturgical vessels or where we shall relearn a forgotten way of doing things and recapture lost attitudes.* Worship is full, conscious and active or it is not worship. It is entertainment, perhaps, but it is not worship. Worship is not also prayers, but encounter with God. Let me explain: It is good to remember what both the Jewish and Christian's ancestors know: the prayers we make together are not religion. It is good to beware of thinking that prayer is about rules or methods or even special gifts or training. The world of worship can become its own little world. Beautiful music is a norm for liturgy—yet it is not beauty alone which makes liturgy. If liturgy is solely a matter of laws, it can be emptied of prayer. Yet, true to who we are as Catholic people, we need the laws and rubrics, the forms and traditions that have been handed on to us.

The SS tell us that what is most fragile yet truly about liturgy is something *beyond* beauty and beyond law. People who do liturgy with strength are people whose lives need the rituals of liturgy.

It is possible to create a life which is more or less happy and centered, which is prosperous too, in which prayer is not needed. Such a person who lives this kind of life can put liturgy aside, or want the liturgy to be his/her own personal museum piece that comforts with nostalgic smells and bells or whose antics are indecipherable and peripheral to “*real life*”

Yet, I would think that our Catholic Tradition believes that it is more human to create a life that needs prayer and needs ritual. This prayer is private and public, repeatable patterns. We get these repeatable patterns from our Catholic Tradition. Our ritual life supports these patterns of prayer and gives a structure for doing life this way: with a liturgical year of feasts and seasons, a way of proclaiming the Scripture, a way of speaking our faith and of dealing with evil—be it personal or corporate.

Ritual and prayer are never meant to be in our lives as entertainment, obligation alone, diversion, escape or education Nothing magical here. Ritual and prayer are there because we Catholics need them. We need them to be the Church. Liturgy is all the various rituals of the Church, the assembled Church who acts. It is what we the baptized need to do ,singing the songs we need to sing, saying the words we need to say, making the gestures we need to make—because without these we could not give our lives a Gospel shape. We are formed by the liturgy again and again to be who we are to be. Always, we are to be for the life of the world. Like love unexpressed died, faith unexpressed dies as well. We need to put faith into expression. We are most who we are when we celebrate the liturgy of the Church.

### **WHAT IS MOST IMPORTANT MUST SHOW UP IN YOUR LIFE.**

In order to find your directions with a compass, what do you have to do? Stand still. Standing still is an attitude of discovery. It is paying attention. Being still is quite difficult but nonetheless a pathway to discovery and a sorting out.

If I asked you what was most important in your life, I know that all of you would say *relationships*. If I asked you how much do these important things show up in your life some of you would have trouble admitting that they seldom show up.

There is such a thing as drowning in *thin* things. Things that don't matter.

How do you decide? One of the ways is to know where you are going. To have your own personal mission or guiding path. This takes reflection. Where are you going in your life? What is most important to you? Who is most important? What is at the center of your life? You may say one thing but your behavior may prove something else. You may be too young or unformed to know the answer to this question. You say I will figure this out through my career or in my senior year. You may be too old to worry about this except for the sometimes nagging awareness that maybe, maybe, just maybe your life did not turn out the way you thought it would after all. How sad to discover that at the end of one's life your ladder was leaning against the wrong wall all those years. Take time to think about your life. It's no fun to discover that after all the effort your ladder was leaning against the wrong wall. Take opportunities to think deeply about your life; write your mission statement; pray about what spirit is leading you. Pay attention to how your calendar reveals to you what is most important. Talk with others about what are your desires for your future. This all sounds so simplistic, I know. But, how much time do you really think you have anyway? If you don't decide what is important to you, I guarantee someone or something else will.

### **IT IS IMPORTANT TO KNOW WHAT YOU DON'T KNOW**

Somehow saying this this way seems important to me. I find that often in life you

and I are measured by how much we know. We spend years learning, coming to

know. Yet, as I said earlier, *wisdom* is not exclusively the result of knowledge.

Perhaps you will say to me that by measuring how much you or I know through life

we are also taking note of what we don't know. Yes, in some way but not all. It

appears to me that far too many people operate in a world in which they are mostly

ignorant about nuance, with ill conceived opinions which are then generalized to

include the "most of" whatever or whoever; false assumptions that are rooted in

prejudice and multiple opinions which, because they belong to me, are therefore

correct and even wise. This may not be different than any other age; it only seems

that we are all too easily afflicted with this reality under the guise of freedom.

Freedom, however, is not blowing hot air.

Freedom is the sacred right to say and do all this- but it does not mean that everything said or done is worth saying, listening too, or doing.

Opinions are important; but so are facts, realities, limits, nuances, degrees, angles, and being wrong. My opinions do not make me wise; often show me to be stupid. *Knowing what I don't know and keeping my mouth shut go hand and hand in the pursuit of wisdom.*

### **PEOPLE ARE COMPLICATED**

**[My story of the teen age girl who wanted to look so in control but I could see she was on the edge of being found out that she was not in control. ]**

Over the course of years I began to notice a virtue growing in me; it was and is the virtue of compassion, often felt as empathy. I can't say exactly when this began occurring to me. Perhaps I was always generally compassionate- but I began to feel it more, particularly in certain moments: when I noticed someone who has suffered in life.

I would see a person with physical disabilities; or I would encounter someone with mental difficulties and I would look at that person and my heart would break. I thought of all the courage and sorrow that had already gone into this person's life. It was not pity but a quality of admiration, almost like love. When I was a younger person I often thought in black and white terms. I didn't know how limiting this vision was. It made for simple decisions but more often it also made for unsatisfying results. I have come to believe that people are very complicated. I know I am. The roots of my behaviors have been conditioned by so many things said and done, not said and not done; my body possesses genes and tendencies to be susceptible to this and that; my mind is able to be quick about something and slow about others; my inner life, my spirit, has been awakened to God's grace only to be enticed into sin again and grace again and sin again and grace again. I don't know if God laughs or cries when you and I live before him. I think he has great empathy for us, though-knowing that we are so complicated. We can be brilliant; we can act in a stupidity of passion; we can be creative and we can stay stuck in our "just the way I am." I do not mean to excuse all behavior in the name of being complicated; it's just that I have come to experience people as deeply complicated, gifted and wounded, and vulnerable. Instead of making me angry by their behaviors I am more likely now to grieve or even to weep. *There but for the grace of God go I* has taken on new meaning for me.

**SOME WORDS THAT HAVE SHAPED ME: *just for the pleasure of them***

**Contribution.**

**Conscious.**

**Collaboration.**

**Clarity.**

**Compassion.**

**Companion**

**Imagination.**

**Amersyth.**

**Ying-yang.**

**Mercy**

**Sky**

**Courage**

**Secrets**

**Friend**

**Compulsion.**

**Fear.**

**Anger.**

**Blinders**

**Jealousy.**

**Past.**

**Cramped.**

**Joy.**

**Rest.**

**Harmony**

**Lyrical**

**WHAT I THINK ABOUT PRIESTHOOD**

**I have been a part of the royal priesthood for almost 59 years. I have been an ordained priest for almost 32 years. I can tell you that I am very happy living the life of a priest. It has been joyous, difficult, confounding and amazing. I have come to deeply love the Church, particularly the local Church. It is here that I find meaning and purpose for ordained ministry.**

**I am most touched in personal ministry- offering the Sacrament of Reconciliation; offering Spiritual Direction; praying with the dying; celebrating the Eucharist; comforting the bereaved; enabling people to grow spiritually.**

**I consider the ministry in which I share to belong to the church which means I do not have a permanent home. This kind of transitional life is at times difficult for relationships become more temporary than permanent. This is particularly difficult for me because I find change difficult and I tend to like the familiar.**

**I have come to appreciate the Church as institution, for holding the faith generation after generation. As I mentioned earlier, I marvel at our Church having a Lectionary, a liturgical year, a Sacramentary, a canon law, a moral path, a pastoral presence throughout the world. I so admire my brother priests for their dedication, their generosity, their own woundedness which is given to heal others. Whenever I am with them I feel blessed to be a part of this presbyterate. I love them ,each one.**

**There are things in priesthood I find difficult:**

**I was trained in a Church that has changed; the center has moved. I was trained in another age with principles from the Second Vatican Council are my guideposts. I find that given the passage of years and the centralization within the Church structurally, embracing the tone and interpretation of Catholic life today is often chilly and perplexing for me.**

**I worry about clericalism- not the overt kind but the subtle kind that causes a priest to become unmoored from what is most important- to care for people's souls by a particular belonging and configuration to Jesus Christ. It is enticing for a priest to become a parish pet; to become a bachelor in attitude and practice; to be such a generalist that what should be his specialty- prayerfulness is absent; to become an administrator instead of being one who inspires.**

**I worry about we priests being lone rangers. We are expected to value cooperation and collaboration when all the bucks stop with us, and depending on our geographical location we are either blessed with resources or cursed with want.**

**To some extent we lack regular professional accountability to help us measure what "success" means. We often operate out of what we inherit. Some of us are grateful what has come before us; some of us can't wait to change it.**

**We are only human, fragile men; yet, we seek to represent Jesus Christ . We want to channel God and to channel our own foibles and personality flaws. We want to serve and be generous and we sometimes feel like contract workers.**

**I recently heard of something Walter Brueggemann wrote {Hopeful Imagination} about the difference between a Called Life and an Uncalled Life. Listen to this: A Called Life –not in the sense of a datable experience, but as a sense that one's life has a theonomous cast, is deeply referred to the purposes of God, which gives freedom and distance and perspective in relation to all other concerns. Such a call is not an event, but an ongoing dynamic of a growing and powerful claim. I am not in charge of my life. My life is focused on God to whom my life belongs. An Uncalled Life is an autonomous life. The ideology of our time is to propose that one can live an uncalled life, one not referred to any purpose beyond one's self. It can be argued that the disease of autonomy besets us all, simply because we are modern people. This kind of living says I am the meaning of my own life. A secular autonomy. We priests have to stand out- not because of our successes but because of our vulnerability, our willingness to reflect in the Called Life the deep purposes of God. There has to be something more to entice some of you to become some of us . I don't think it will be because we ran the best parish or created the best buildings. I think it will be because what you see us doing is a reflection of who we are being , a lived grace of God--mysterious, powerful, alluring, surprising handling the very things of God which are themselves dangerous, compelling, incomprehensible, and intimate. When one handles fire, it's easy to get burned. We priests juggle the fire of God for the life of the world. That's not a bad life.**

### **CHRISTIAN LIFE IS NOT A STRAIGHT LINE- WITH ONLY DEATH AT THE END**

I first encountered this idea when I was a student at Notre Dame University. This Christian belief takes its root at least from the German Philosopher Goethe. Life is not a straight line with only death at the end; rather, it is a kind of a spiral, of successive, ever - deepening experiences of the Paschal Mystery-the dying and rising of Jesus Christ. Dying and risings. I have found this to be true. In most everything I have attempted, there has been no straight line. It's always a matter of making progress and slipping back, knowing when to hold on and when to let go. This is the pattern of living and dying; it is the great pattern of Christ Jesus. We cannot escape this pattern. There is an effort to living life; we strive to advance. We make progress, we fall back. We know sinfulness, we experience grace. We practice over and over this pattern of dying and rising, and each time we do it deepens within us this configuration to Jesus. Christian life is not a straight line with only death at the end; but rather a kind of spiral, in which there are ever deepening experiences of dyings and risings until the day comes when we experience the final dying and the first rising where this pattern no longer holds- there- that experience we call heaven- there is only fullness, rest, completion, the embrace of love. I find this to be so hopeful.

### **ALWAYS WE BEGIN AGAIN: THE PROMISE OF LIVING**

There is a phrase attributed to St. Benedict which has shaped me: *Always, we begin again.* Perhaps, its because it's a different way of saying what I just spoke about, i.e., Christian life being not a straight line but a kind of spiral. Always, we begin again. Is this just another way of saying "Pick yourself, up, dust yourself off and start all over again? I don't think so. What is being implied by these four words is more than self initiative. Benedict is implying humility: the mother of all virtues. One must be humble to know that one is not complete, that one does not know all things; that one needs help. That in the midst of every success and every failure always we begin again. Nothing lasts forever. There is always hope.

I have been captured over the years by the text written by Horace Allen from Aaron Copland's The Tender Land, *The Promise of Living*. Here in these words I find somehow how I see what I am and what my hope is for my life's work. I can't explain it because it's like love.

Too much explaining makes it less than it was, never quite what it is. So I won't explain. I only offer it to you for your inspiration:

*The promise of living with hope and thanksgiving  
Is born of our loving our friends and our labor.  
The promise of growing with faith and with knowing  
Is born of our sharing our love with our neighbor.  
The promise of living, the promise of growing  
Is born of our sharing gin joy and thanksgiving.  
For many a year we've known these fields*

*And known all the work that make them yield,  
Are you ready to lend a hand?  
We're ready to work; we're ready to lend a hand.  
By working together we'll bring in the harvest, the blessing of harvest.  
We plow and plant each row with seeds of grain,  
And Providence sends us the sun and the rain,  
By lending an arm, bring in from the land,  
Bring out from the farm; bring out the blessings of harvest.  
Give thanks there was sunshine, give thanks there was rain,  
Give thanks we have hands to deliver the grain,  
O let us be joyful; O let us be grateful,  
Come join us in thanking the Lord for His blessing.  
The promise of ending in right understanding  
Is peace in our own hearts and peace with our neighbor.  
O let us sing our song, a let us be heard.  
Let's sing our song with our hearts, a promise in that song.  
The promise of living.  
The promise of growing.  
The promise of ending  
Is labor and sharing and loving.*

When the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins lay dying he said over and over to his mother "*I am so happy. I am so happy.*" What a place to be in life when these words can open the door to the next phase of living. *I am so happy.* What led Hopkins to say these words?; he whose outer eye caught the world with rhythm, images and words that explored with the inner eye the exterior and interior life with wonder and amazing grace. Were his words about what had been? Or about what he was now seeing as he crossed over? Knowing that he suffered greatly in life, I at first would have said surely his happiness was not found in what had been? Yet, because he was a poet, who saw the blear and tackle and gear of living as well as the crimson vermillion grandeur of Christ lovely in limbs and eyes not His I cannot imagine his happiness not being shaped in a good bye kiss of this experience of life he shared with you and me. Yes, he could say *I am so happy* for what was and, Yes, he could say *I am so happy* for what is opening up. What a last sermon. I can only hope that all of my words could approximate the gratitude for life thus far that he was able to say as he lay dying. *I am so happy* is not only a wish but a promised fulfilled.

I believe it's true that stories move in circles. *They don't go in straight lines.; So, it helps if you listen in circles. There are stories inside stories and stories between storied, and finding your way through them is as easy and as hard as finding your way home. And part of the finding is getting lost. And when you're lost, you start to look around and listen.*

So ends my last sermon. I hope you have been able to listen in circles and, in the process, found some of your own way home. My Amen is my thanks to you for going

**along for the journey. And, I hope this has been worth the pleasure of your time and your company.**