Eulogy for Tom Nelson October 14, 2019

Special thanks to Ray Van Dorpe for his presence, along with other brothers of Tom in the Vincentian Community: Fr. Paul Golden, Fr. Prudencio Rodriguez, Fr. Hugh O'Donnell, Brother Joe Hesse, and all those serving in so many parts of the world. Thank you, Bishop Jorge Rodriguez for celebrating with us here today.

Thanks also to Fr. Scott Bailey, Jeanne, and the staff of Church of the Risen Christ. It is a blessing to be celebrating Tom here today. I would like to begin by saying that each and every person in this room has a piece of the prism of light that is Tom. Each of you has your own story to tell, and we hope you will do that throughout the coming hours, days and weeks. For now, these thoughts are shared as a result of talking with his very dear friends, who truly cared for him, Susan and Chris Lane; talking with some of his confreres, and talking with his family, and my husband Bill. This, too, is just a piece of the prism and when we bring all of those pieces together, we have a reflection of light that is beautiful.

How do you give a eulogy for a PITA. This was Tom's self-described word that he often used for himself, and he was, indeed, a PITA. But the very fact that he chose that to describe himself showed his simplicity and humility, both Vincentian virtues.

"*What we call the beginning is often the end, and to make an end is to make a beginning."*

Thomas Joseph Nelson was a man of the arts.

- He loved poetry such as this line from T. S. Eliot. He loved taking beautiful pictures, mostly of the mountains (some of his people pictures were not so good) and flowers….his beloved Botanical Gardens in St. Louis, which he claimed were so much more beautiful than ours here. (But we could continue to claim the beauty of the mountains!)
- He loved listening to Sarah Vaughn and Renee Fleming and Beethoven and Liszt and Ella Fitzgerald. I remember playing the piano for him, and he would stop me and ask to play something a little differently; that made me think he was trying to duplicate Rubenstein or Horowitz!
- Tom's sister shared that his love of art started at a very young age and when she would go to the museum with him, she had her own tour guide.

Tom was a family man. As a celibate priest, he often said when he encountered those of us who have children, "I know I chose the right vocation."

- Tom's nieces remarked about how he would sit and listen so attentively to them. He would take them and their brothers to the ballet or to a sports event. And he would always try to be there on their birthdays.
- It was so interesting to listen to his sister Pat describe Tom as they grew up together (they were just 18 months apart) and how similar his "extended" family here in Denver experienced many of the same qualities: presence, listening, cheering people on, …
- And Tom loved to tell jokes….many times…..the SAME joke…..and we would laugh again, and so would he.

Tom was a man on a mission…..or is it with a mission…..or is it for a mission. He drove us crazy with mission.

- As Chris Lane, his dear friend, shared, he was captivated by the Vincentian mission to evangelize so as to be evangelized by the poor….and his focus often challenged all of us, including his superiors and confreres.
- He embraced the mission of the Catholic Church and his vocation as a priest. I learned that this, too, started at a young age when he always volunteered to fill in for an altar server who could not be present.
- He loved the Eucharist and all that it stood for, especially in light of the Vatican II Council; he could quote by heart some of the documents. Or, let's be real….all of the documents. "The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the people of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ."
- He especially appreciated the call to ecumenism, inter-religious dialogue, and learning from other cultures, such as the Native American community here in Denver and his work in Kenya. He learned from each person and each culture, and each religious believer he encountered.

Tom was a man of empathy

- This, too, began at an early age when he would accompany his sister and her friends so that they could ride the bus late at night at a time when their parents would only allow such a thing with Tom's attentive accompaniment.
- Tom chose to unite his suffering with those who suffer with disabilities or who suffer invisibility because they are different.
- He celebrated all of our differences and discovered the richness of our various backgrounds, at times kneeling beside someone in a wheelchair, or encouraging

"music playing" with percussion instruments and delighting in the joy on the faces of the "performers." He embraced the call of Vincent to find Christ in each person he met, and he found Christ in Shari, Sal, David. He called us all to embrace ALL our brothers and sisters.

Tom was a man of the poor. Perhaps one of the most profound statements from St. Vincent DePaul is "Go to the poor and you will find God."

- Tom went to the poor. He went to the poor at the Catholic Worker house in St. Louis and then in Denver and at the soup kitchen. And he found God in Ace and Norman, Mike and Dotty, Charlie and Manuel, Susan and Michelle.
- Tom went to the poor in Kenya, working both at the seminary and in the compound where he lived. And he found God in the seminarians, the woodworkers, the women who cooked and cleaned.
- Tom went to the poor on the streets of Denver. He not only served them soup, but he befriended them, called them by name, was present to them. And he found God.
- Tom went to the poor in spirit and offered Spiritual Direction, insights from Scripture, meaning in daily experiences, true listening where we are able to step outside of our own fortress and truly dwell in the other. And in *us* he found God.

There is so much more to tell, but those of you who were here two weeks ago, heard much about his life here in Denver, not to mention his life working for NASA as an engineer on the Apollo mission (so this is where his "mission" focus began!) or as an accountant, or as a friend going on hikes or picnics in the mountains.

For me, Tom's constant questions when my interpretation of a theme for a particular mass was different from his (as was often the case) or his reminders of the mission, or his invitations to the table, no matter how much food we had or how much discussion had already past, or his encouragement of a new mission, such as he did for the Vincentian Family here in Denver, became, OVER TIME, a source of reflection and inspiration and encouragement.

And so we return to T. S. Eliot: "We (and Tom) shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time."