

Funeral Sermon for Fr. Joe Scerbo *by Fr. Dave Heney, March 25, 2015*

We all remember those remarkable moments at the end of Mass when Fr. Joe would walk to the front of the altar and offer beautiful spontaneous comments. They were little poems of prayer that were so inspiring and peaceful.

He would always end his prayer by saying ...***And the people of God said ...AMEN!***

When I give a talk, it is never spontaneous, but I don't use notes either, so I use an easy to remember sequence of ideas that flow logically from one idea to the other. When I say something, I know exactly what idea is next. Not so with Fr. Joe! When Fr. Joe spoke ...he *had no idea what the next idea would be! He spoke directly from his very big heart.*

While he might not know what idea was next, we all knew for sure it would be wonderful, prayerful, peaceful, encouraging, compassionate, and loving. It would be just what you needed to hear in your life right now. How did Fr. Joe get this way?

He was a Franciscan priest and he loved all things Francis.

Francis is the most famous and beloved of all saints by everyone everywhere. He loved the statue just outside the Church, and was deeply grateful that a St. Francis statue was donated to his home town of Mechanicsville, New York by the Hogan Family Foundation.

St. Francis never saw an "enemy," in the world around him; only brothers and sisters, who sometimes needed to be reconciled. Fr. Joe joined the Franciscan Friars of the Atonement, an order of priests especially focused on the reconciliation style of St. Francis.

He especially liked the Pope Francis

St. Francis died 800 years ago and yet no Pope has ever taken his name. We have had 23 Johns and 16 Benedicts, but not a single Francis! That name and reputation was just too big. Yet, When Cardinal Bergoglio took his name; everyone looked at Bergoglio's life in Argentina, which was so much about love for all people, and said, "Well, yes! ...*His life fits that name!*" ...So we have Francis ...*the First!*

Fr. Joe knew it was *not enough to admire* St. Francis, but to *live like him*, just as Francis lived like Jesus. Like St. Francis, Fr. Joe loved people and animals so much. In fact, his last official Mass here was on the Feast of St. Francis, and afterwards, he blessed the animals. He was so happy, joyful, and fulfilled that day ...just like St. Francis.

Joe was a serious student of Padre Serra.

Serra had a PH.D in philosophy and came to California to establish a string of Missions up and down the California coast. The impact of 18th Century European culture on the California Indians and the impact of Indians on the Spaniards has also been a source of intense study.

Fr. Joe knew that Padre Serra *loved* the Indians, *unlike* some of the Spanish soldiers and settlers. Padre Serra even walked from San Diego to Mexico City to plead for the lives of several Indians who going to be executed, and was successful in sparing their lives.

Fr. Joe initiated several projects about Padre Serra and the Indians; including a five hour TV movie for EWTN, and a series of well attended University Series lectures. I am glad that he is on the cover of our University Catalog this year.

Fr. Joe worked for many years on those projects. It is amazing that the final and biggest one, the five hour TV drama, was completed in the same month that he received his diagnosis. That echoed the Gospel verse of the laborer who successfully finishes a project, "Well done good and faithful servant!"

Fr. Joe knew something important about Padre Serra that many people do not. On the very day that Padre Serra arrived in Mexico from Spain he was bitten on his leg by a poisonous insect. His wound became seriously infected and from which he never recovered. From that point on *he walked with a limp!*

Amazingly, the person who is most famous for walking up and down the coast of California did so with a limp! His motto was simply "*Always Forward!*" What amazing courage he had! Yet nothing would stop Padre Serra from reconciling both Indians and settlers together.

Fr. Joe was "bitten" by a cancer more than a year and a half ago, yet, just like Padre Serra, nothing would stop his ministry here. *He always moved forward.*

Fr. Joe never saw his sickness as an "enemy" but rather a "door that God opened for him." It was another place where Fr. Joe could place himself within God's abundant heart.

There is one more name to mention, which is St. Joseph.

Earlier in the week, I spoke with Joe and Lori Sikorra, in whose house Fr. Joe enjoyed several weeks of wonderful love and affection and companionship, and heard from them that he was in his final days. I said, "I will bet Fr. Joe has his eyes on last Thursday, the Feast of St. Joseph." Sure enough, on his Feast Day on March 19th he returned to God.

(Fr. Joe was born on Valentine's Day and he died on St. Joseph's day ...*was he dramatic, or what!*)

St. Joseph was carpenter. He knew how to build things. He cared for the Holy Family, not so much with his carpentry skills, but by his courage, loyalty, devotion, and faith. Fr. Joe was no carpenter, but he sure knew how to build up a soul and care for all of us.

Fr. Joe was determined to build us up despite his own illness. He was determined to be happy and joyful throughout his final days. He *prepared and planned for that carefully*, making sure he prayed regularly and meditated and stayed in a peaceful mind.

Ironically, the most spontaneous man in the world suddenly adopted the careful planning methods of a good carpenter, just like St. Joseph. Fr. Joe did that for us.

I remember one day we were meeting for lunch. I said I will pick you up by the Adoration Chapel. Sure enough when I arrived he was sitting at the bench, and I could see someone with him in intense conversation. Fr. Joe listened closely, and then proceeded to offer his counsel. (I waited for an extra 20 minutes during this, but would not interrupt) I knew Fr. Joe was using his wisdom for others all the way to the end.

Fr. Joe lived his final months with amazing courage, but especially amazing joy. He tried as much as possible to be visible to you all, either sitting at Mass, or by his beloved Adoration Chapel. That was his special source of strength, and the real medicine for the soul that he took every day.

He carried within himself the spirit of St. Francis, Pope Francis, Padre Serra, and St. Joseph. We saw those spirits in Fr. Joe every time we saw him, and heard it every time he spoke.

...And the people of God said ...AMEN!