



June 2006

The Franciscan Legionnaire

Newsletter of the Friars Legion of St. Peter's Church in the Loop
110 W. Madison St., Chicago, IL 60602 ❖ E-mail: FriarsLegion@aol.com
Phone: 312-372-5111, Ext. 338 ❖ Web Site: www.stpetersloop.org

DECLINING YEARS

Tuesday, May 9, here at St. Peter's we had the funeral mass for Fr. Tom Fratus, O.F.M. He had died the preceding Thursday, May 4, only a couple of days after his eightieth birthday. He died at St. Joseph Village on the north side. For well over thirty years he had been a vital part of the life and work of St. Peter's: he spent innumerable hours in the confessional, offered mass both here during the week and at other parishes on the weekends, and provided spiritual direction and counseling to many. His death, when it came, was no surprise. His health had been failing well before the episode that convinced him and others that it was time for him to leave St. Peter's for a place where he could get more of the care that he had come to need. At St Joseph Village he had his good days and his bad days, the latter so outnumbering the former that death's approach was unmistakable. When at last it came it was, as they say, a blessing. We miss him, but we would not have wished a longer life for him, not as he was in March and April.

Father Tom was the third member of the St. Peter's community to die in a bit more than two years. In January 2004, Fr. Clement Leahy died, and did so very quickly; throughout the day he was fine, that night he suffered pulmonary arrest, and he was gone the next day. Scarcely a month before him, Fr. Francis Jerome Gray died at Warren Barr Pavilion, after a long, slow decline, one much slower and much longer than the one endured by Fr. Tom.

Most of us, I suspect, if we were given the choice, would prefer our dying to be more like that of Fr. Clem than like that of Fr. Tom or Fr. Francis Jerome. Here today, gone tomorrow at least sounds like it must be a lot easier, both for the person dying and for the living. And perhaps it is, at least in some ways. And yet I wonder if there isn't something learned in being a part of an old person's declining years, something not available, or at least not as available, in the case of one who is hale and healthy and vigorous until the last moment. Perhaps the long, lingering death is not an unalloyed evil. It may well be that even as the many ways of living are an adornment to the beauty of creation, so also the different ways of dying enrich the world. None of us would choose a slow death, either for ourselves or for one we loved, but maybe there is something in a death like Fr. Tom's or Fr. Francis Jerome's, something that we need to see. If so, it would seem to be a most bitter lesson, but the deeper wisdom is seldom easy or pleasant.

Wisdom as it is found in the biblical book of *Ecclesiastes* has a lot of that same bitter taste, and it is redolent with the themes and images of decline, decay and death. It is not a long book, and if you choose to read it all in one sitting, you may want to have your favorite antidepressant ready to hand. The author creates the literary persona of an old and wise king of Israel, a veritable Solomon. He has spent his life in the pursuit of truth and wisdom. It has been a long and lonely quest, and he summarizes his findings in the opening verses: "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity." The Hebrew word translated by the English *vanity* literally means a breath or a bit of vapor, something that is utterly fleeting and

insubstantial. In human terms, there is nothing that we gain or can gain by all our work and effort. It is all vanity, it all slips away, and if anyone thinks that he has really and finally latched on to something, then he is badly deceived and most likely self-deceived.

The book begins with a poem that points to the things of the earth as symbols for the futility of the universe. Generations come and go, but the earth remains as it is. The sun rises and the sun sets, never getting beyond its endless circle. The wind blows all around the earth, and can only return to its starting point. The rivers flow into the sea, but the sea is not filled and the rivers never stop flowing. “All things are full of weariness,” including the human creature: “the eye is not satisfied with seeing nor the ear filled with hearing.” You may think that you have found something that is truly new, but if you make inquiry you are sure to learn that it is an old thing, although perhaps over the passage of time it had dropped out of man’s memory. The speaker ends the first chapter by stating that he has learned a great deal, including how to differentiate wisdom and folly, but none of it is more than a chasing after the wind. Wisdom, it turns out, only brings perplexity, and knowledge but increases one’s sorrow.

In the following chapters, the speaker details how he has gone about his search and what he has focused on. His first attempt was in the things of the world. He strove after wealth and the pleasures that wealth can bring. He built himself a comfortable world, full of delights and entertainments, and then when he looked at what he had created, he knew it was all vanity and a chasing after the wind.

He then turned to the pursuit of wisdom, and he saw that it is indeed better to be wise than to be stupid. It’s better... but not that much better. In the end, everybody dies, and the wise man is no better than the fool in this respect.

So he moved on to work and to the achievement of great things, but this could not bring any satisfaction either, since eventually and inevitably he would have to leave all these accomplishments to someone else. In the end, he is simply piling up an inheritance that he will have to pass on to another. God has made us to work in the world, and this is a good thing, for in work and in the enjoyment of work one receives many blessings. Yet our work is not like God’s, and so it ends up a disappointment and an emptiness to us. God’s work endures forever, but ours does not, however much we wish that it would. Everything is beautiful in its season, and there is a time for everything, but the seasons pass swiftly and time never stops flowing. We want more than this, for God has put eternity into man’s mind, but done it so that we cannot find out what God has done from beginning to end. We see and grasp bits and pieces as they flow into the present from out of the future, before they flow out of the present into the past, but we do not see the whole of what God does.

In the later chapters, 7-11, the speaker will return to this theme, reflecting on it in a variety of ways. We cannot know what is the right thing to do, we cannot be sure of making the right choice, because we cannot know the future. Things seldom turn out as we might have predicted that they would – the race is not always to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise – for we do not know our time, especially the time of our dissolution. We are like fish caught in a net, or birds in a snare, and that is really the only thing that we know, the only thing that makes us better off than those who are already dead. A live dog, he says, is better than a dead lion, “for the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing.”

As one approaches the end of the book, passing in and out of chapter 10, the weight of the thought and the images begins to drag the reader down. The speaker has not denied the beauty and goodness of God’s creation, nor has he allowed that the vanity of it all has left us free to spend our time in idle pleasures or cruel injustices. God made the world, including mankind, to be good and to do good, and what satisfaction there is to be gained in this universe in which all is vanity and a chasing of the wind is to be found precisely in living well in obedience to God’s law. And yet the overall effect of his speaking of this wisdom is so very heavy, much like anyone feels who has had to visit a nursing home week after week, and watch a loved one weaken and fail before their very eyes. The similarity of effect

is actually quite striking, as is the final section of the book, which is an address to a young man about the onslaught of old age and death.

The speaker begins by urging the young man to rejoice in his youth, but to remember that he is always under the judgment of God. He should try to keep his mind free from anxiety and his body free from all ailments. And of course, he must know that youth, like everything else, is all vanity. In the days



of youth he should remember his Creator, before the evil days come, as they surely will, days that will have no pleasure. The speaker then launches into a series of emblems for the declining years. *The light of the sun, moon and stars is all darkened, and clouds return after the rain*, for old age often feels dark and cloudy, regardless of what the weather is actually doing. *The keepers of the house tremble and shake, the strong men are bent double*, as one in decline tends not to be either steady on his feet or straight-backed and upright. *The grinders cease because they are few* (death has already carried away so many of the old one's friends and contemporaries), *and those who look through the windows are dimmed, and the doors of the street are shut* – an almost modern image of elderly shut-ins who are leery of going out in the bustling and now dangerous streets. *The sound of the grinding is low, and*

one rises up at the sound of a bird, and all the daughters of song are brought low; loss of hearing sets in, and one seldom can hear the birds singing, those “daughters of song,” and so when the sound of a bird does pierce through the muted fog, the one in decline rises up, startled at what is heard.

They are afraid also of what is high, the speaker says, *and terrors are in the street*, perhaps a reference to fear of heights or of not being able to get at things stored on the top shelves, together with another reference to being afraid to go out. *The almond tree blossoms, the grasshopper drags itself along and desire fails; because man goes to his eternal home, and the mourners go about the streets* – almond tree blossoms are white, as white as the hairs of the aged; the jerky movements of a grasshopper mimic the halting gait of the old man struggling with cane or crutches or wheel chair; sexual desire flags and fades, and out come those who make it their business to attend everyone's funeral. *Before the silver cord is snapped, or the golden bowl is broken, or the pitcher is broken at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern, and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it. Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, all is vanity.* He ends with pictures of disintegration and dryness, snapped cords and broken bowls, and pitchers and wheels that can no longer bring up the water. The body dries and withers, dies and returns to dust. The breath returns to God, who gave it in the first place, and a man's life is vanity, a puff of vapor that lingers a moment on the air and then is gone. It is an amazing assembly of images for an old man in his declining years, slowly creeping towards death, and the old man himself becomes the speaker's symbol for all of creation. For ours, as the old writers of the Church put it, is a *saeculum senescens*, an age that grows old and weary, a universe that will eventually spin out and fall apart, a world that winds down. If all this is vanity, and it is, then there must be something, or Some One, beyond this, the One to whom this passing world always points and by whom it always orients itself.

Harsh as it is, we need to know this. All years are declining years, and sticking with a loved one as he endures his personal share of such years shows us this, and teaches us to hope in the one St. Augustine addressed as “O Beauty ever ancient and ever new!”

—Fr. Bob Sprott, O.F.M.