

“If You or I Should Cease to Be/ He Would Die of Sadness”

A Homily for the Retirement Mass for Fr. Paul Murray, OP

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By Bishop Robert Barron

It is a very particular joy for me to preach this homily on the occasion of Fr. Paul Murray’s retirement from the Angelicum. It has been said that there are two types of people: those who suck air out of a room and those who breathe life into a room. In all of my years, I have never known anyone who breathes life into a room more thoroughly than Paul Murray. Winston Churchill commented upon meeting Franklin Roosevelt for the first time: “It was like opening a bottle of champagne.” I would say much the same thing about every meeting I’ve had with Paul Murray over the years.

If I might illustrate the effect Fr. Paul has on people with a short but representative anecdote. I was in Rome many years ago, journeying on foot from the North American College to the Angelicum to have pranzo with Paul. On my way, I stopped in the church of Santa Maria Sopra Minerva and there I encountered a young lady who recognized me: “You’re Fr. Barron, aren’t you?” I didn’t deny it. Then she continued, “I’ve read a number of your books and have liked several of them.” “Not exactly a ringing endorsement,” I thought, but fair enough. Then she asked what had brought me to Rome. I told her of my appointment at the Angelicum with a member of the faculty. “Oh, I’ve taken some courses there,” she replied, “I might know the professor.” “Are you familiar with Fr. Paul Murray?” I asked. At which point, she went into a convulsion of joy, threw her hands in the air, and said, “Oh, I *love* him!” Well, put

me in my place. I can't really blame her, though; that's the effect that Fr. Paul tends to have on people.

Some of the appeal has to do, of course, with his bottomless reserves of charm and good humor. When you're with Paul Murray, you laugh a lot. I could write a book containing the jokes and stories he has told me over the last twenty-five years. I remember one concerning a certain English Dominican. It seems that the priest had a cat called Squeaky of whom he was very fond. The animal's tail was injured one night, and the good father rushed him to the veterinary hospital. The lady at the desk said, "Name, please," to which Father responded, "Squeaky." Without missing a beat, the lady replied, "and your address, Mr. Squeaky?" One of my favorite Paul Murray stories has to do with his mother. When young Brendan Murray joined the Order of Preachers, his mother was somewhat less than enthusiastic, yet she went along, agreeing to come to the ceremony of investiture. But when her son appeared for the first time, fully clothed in the elaborate white Dominican habit, she asked, "Is all of that really necessary?"

I would say it was, for the key to understanding Fr. Paul's life, spirituality, theology, and ministry is his identity as a Dominican. He has become, of course, perhaps the greatest singer of the Dominican song on the world stage today; so I hesitate to comment on a subject so large, especially in his presence. But I might make bold to emphasize two characteristics of the Dominican way that Fr. Paul exemplifies so fully and beautifully. The first and most important is the primacy of grace. We recall that in the great *de auxiliis* controversies of the late 16th century, Dominicans threw at Jesuits the charge of Pelagianism, and the Jesuits hurled back to the Dominicans the

charge of Lutheranism or Calvinism. This was because the Dominican tradition placed such a premium on the initiative that God takes in both the metaphysical and spiritual orders. Long before we even feel the urge to come to God, God has always already acted in us. The contemporary Dominican theologian Herbert McCabe commented that whatever is good and right in our prayer is the fruit of God “already praying in us.”

Fr. Paul has consistently over the years expressed to me an impatience with “willful” spiritualities, that is to say, those predicated upon our own achievement or moral prowess. For all of his affection for John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila, Fr. Paul has always remained a bit suspicious of levels and degrees of spiritual attainment, mountains to climb and various castles to inhabit, not because those metaphors do not contain great truths, but in the measure that they might convince us that the spiritual life is our project. He is much more at home with the Little Flower who said that she had nothing of the intelligence and spiritual energy of her great Carmelite forebears and that she was, accordingly, able only like a child to lift her arms to her Father, trusting that he would raise her up. She adds, with a wink, that she finds herself getting thereby higher up than either John or Teresa! This focus on the priority of grace makes Fr. Paul happy to embrace “the way of imperfection” touted by his Dominican colleague Simon Tugwell.

In his marvelous book on St. Catherine of Siena, Fr. Paul draws upon Thomas Merton’s distinction between “a rigid, authoritarian, self-righteous” religiosity which “delivers itself from the world by sheer effort, and then feels qualified to call down curses upon it” and “a kind, compassionate” religiosity that identifies itself “with the sinful and suffering world in order to call down God’s blessing upon it.” Catherine, typically Dominican, embodies that second path, which explains her devotion,

scandalizing to her contemporaries, to “lepers, prisoners, public sinners, and prostitutes—people regarded by most of society as outcasts.” In what is perhaps the most popular of his spiritual writings, his penetrating study of the book of Jonah, Fr. Paul says that the prophet was, of course, put off initially by the difficulty of the mission that God had given him, but that the ultimate source of his aggravation was the extravagant mercy of the Lord, who was willing to forgive even that capital city of sin, Nineveh. One might conclude that the prophet was insufficiently formed in the Dominican tradition. How wonderful, too, that God reaches out to Jonah, even chasing him all the way to the depths, showing his tender compassion even when the prophet was resisting God with all his might. Once again, grace comes first.

To be sure, the Dominicans did not invent this doctrine out of whole cloth. Listen to the ecstatic words of Paul to the Ephesians in our second reading: “God, who is rich in mercy, because of the great love he had for us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, brought us to life with Christ—by grace you have been saved.” Lest even a trace of “willfulness” creep in, the Apostle adds, “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not from you; it is the gift of God.” Who knew that St. Paul was a Dominican?

The second great characteristic that Fr. Paul has taken from his religious family is joy. I have already hinted at this quality in his personality, but in his studies, he has plumbed the depths of this motif. Dominic himself was described by a contemporary as follows: “he always appeared cheerful and happy,” and once the saint worked a miracle, unmasking the devil who had flown into church disguised as a bird. The reaction of the people was not astonishment, but deliciously enough, raucous

laughter—which must have annoyed the devil immensely. This joy among the brethren flowed ultimately from the delight that God himself experiences. Meister Eckhart, master to Suso and disciple of Aquinas, said simply enough: “God enjoys himself. His own enjoyment is such that it includes his enjoyment of all creatures.” The theme of joy runs through the entire length and breadth of the teaching of Thomas Aquinas. The entire moral doctrine of the Angelic Doctor is predicated, not upon law, but upon *beatitudo* (happiness), and the goal of the contemplative life is joy. In fact, Thomas says, “those who devote themselves to the contemplation of truth are the happiest anyone can be in this life.” How splendid that Fr. Paul found this text buried within the *secunda secundae*: “Those who are lacking in fun, and who never say anything funny or humorous, but instead give grief to those who make jokes, not accepting even the modest fun of others, are morally unsound.” And the teaching reflected the man. In his famous biography of Aquinas, Bernardo Gui frequently names him “the happy teacher,” and William of Tocco, another early biographer says, “Thomas inspired joy in all those who saw him, for he always had a joyous countenance.” Does that remind you of a certain Dominican of our time?

Both Paul Murray and I have a deep devotion to Aquinas, and some of the best memories I have are of times Paul and I spent together in connection with Thomas. One of the happiest days of my life—and I say that without hesitation—was in the early spring of 2006. I had given the Carl Peter Lecture at the North American College, and the day after the talk, I went, in the company of Fr. Jim Quigley, Fr. Roger Roench, and Paul Murray, on a journey to both Roccasecca, where Thomas was born, and Fossanova, where he died. I will never forget our climb to the top of the hill where the

castle of Roccasecca is located. It was a splendidly beautiful day, and we had a commanding view of the surrounding countryside. I turned to Paul and said, "I can see now why Thomas thought that wisdom is the view the hilltop, from the standpoint of the highest cause." Some years later, Fr. Paul and I visited the Vatican library and were allowed to hold in our hands autographs of Aquinas on vellum. It was one of the most moving experiences of my life. And just a few months ago, while I was in Rome for the Synod, I played hooky one day and went with Paul and some others to Naples, where we visited the Dominican church and convent that Aquinas knew in the 1270's. We said Mass in the chapel where Thomas had the mystical experience of hearing the Lord speak to him, "Thomas, you have written well of me. What would have as a reward?" To which the friar responded—and I've taken it as my episcopal motto—"Non nisi te, Domine." Even recalling these events fills me with joy.

How could I bring this homily to a conclusion and not talk about Fr. Paul Murray's poetry. It was always a special quality of our dinners together, either in Rome or Chicago or Santa Barbara that Fr. Paul would typically, in the course of the meal, recite some of his poetry. Who can forget that voice—which always seemed to my ear a combination of Northern Ireland and Oxford—as it articulated the words? Though they are variegated in language and style, I would argue that his poems bring together the two themes I've been exploring. They are usually about the breakthrough of grace that carries with it intense joy.

From his most recent collection, we have *A Wound*: "What other name to call it? Beauty, when it hits, pierces like a spear/ That day I had gone alone to the glen/ When, towards evening, the moment came to turn back, I looked up and saw what seemed/

like a vision: the mountains, blood-red, and the clouds above them, great/ scrolls of moving light./ I fell at once to my knees.” And here is a passage from *A Strange Mercy*: “So when He seized hold of me, I was startled,/ first by the humbling, purifying flame/ I felt in that embrace,/ the stark illumination, the dawning shame of self uncovered./ But then, lit by that first fire/ of a strange mercy/ there came a second fire, impossible to name or to explain/ a fire now all-consuming, an intimacy, a wound of joy.” And my favorite from this collection, *Lightning*: “in the fissure of the moment/ in the sudden lightning of God’s mercy/ the saint is indistinguishable from the sinner/ and the flowers of earth and the flowers of heaven are the same.” In all three of these poems, the divine grace comes unbidden, as a surprise, even a shock. It is always first, opening a door that we could never have opened on our own, shedding light that we ourselves could never have produced. And once that grace is seen and accepted, joy comes, as surely as day follows night.

How fully and how beautifully all of this is summed up in the passage that stands at the heart of our Gospel. Articulating the matrix out of which our salvation comes, St. John says, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.” Grace upon grace upon grace. In what is perhaps his best-loved poem, Fr. Paul Murray expresses what it feels like to be in the grip of such grace. I’ll give him the last word: “To be, for weeks, the glad/ disciple of a single thought/ has left me dazed yet happy as a thrush./ It is the thought that He, giver of the gifts we bring,/ He who needs

nothing/ has need of us, and that/ if you or I should cease to be,/ He would die of sadness.”

God bless you, Fr. Paul, and thank you for the grace that you have been to so many.