



Homily 10/9/2021

Very Rev. J. David Carter, JCL, JV

*Funeral Mass of Deacon Tom McConnell*

[Tom McConnell Obituary \(read here\)](#)

Un saludo cordial a todos los amigos del Diácono Tom de la Comunidad Hispana. Los amaba mucho y tenía el deseo de servirles lo mejor que pudiera. Su español no era el mejor, pero deseaba anunciar a Jesús a todos. Lo que hizo, habló con más elocuencia que sus palabras. Se sentiría muy edificado al saber que han venido a orar por él y a ofrecerles su respeto. Les extiendo el agradecimiento de Brenda y la familia McConnell.

We are here today to grieve the loss of a great man, a man of service, a man of beatitude, a loving husband, father, and friend.

He was a man of service. He served God and Country. He was a man who followed his orders, and gave a few in his day. He believed that God's commandments were not given to constrain but to free, and if they are lived fully, they lead to beatitude.

He was a family man. It started when he was young and caught the eye of the beautiful Brenda Hart. They were high school friends and sweethearts. Eventually Brenda exchanged her 'Hart' for his name, and the two became one flesh. They had two children and then felt called, while in Korea, to the loving option of adoption and raised up two more children for a total of four arrows in the quiver of this man who now stands at the gates of heaven. (Psalm 127:5). He loved and cherished his grandchildren and was supremely proud of them.

He was a man of friendship. Tom and Brenda knew how to make - and keep - lifelong friends, still keeping in touch with people the world over who have crossed their lives. Many of them are here today. I'm privileged to be one of them. 16 years ago, I came to Saint Jude parish as a greenhorn, newbie, rookie. They took me in and showed me hospitality. That developed into a deep and lasting friendship. I have been privileged to be there with them through many joys, but also many sorrows. Some very low times indeed. But these were only passing shadows in God's mysterious plan for our lives. Those things, and better things, we spoke about and laughed about and sang about on that beautiful back porch made to enrich the lives of friends and family alike. He even inspired an Angel to make sure that back porch will serve its purpose still. Heaven's got a back porch like that one. Let's pray that Thomas is sitting on it now.

He died peacefully in his sleep. "The death of his faithful ones is precious in the eyes of the Lord." (Psalm 116:15) He died in his prime. Maybe he had grown weak physically and his body was wracked by diseases, ailments and the stresses of life. His prime was not his physical prowess but his wisdom. His wisdom was strong and his witness compelling. A man of long-suffering who had been there and back again and whose faith was strong. This was a man you could trust. He was still active in many things, dedicating himself to service, like he had all his life. In his latter days he went from serving our nation and community to serving more directly the Lord and His people by his ordination and ministry as a deacon of the Catholic Church. After a lifetime of serving and forming the citizens of our land, he was preparing himself for eternal citizenship. Our citizenship is in heaven and from it also we await a savior. (Philippians 3:20) Like a good soldier, now fully in the Lord's service, he died with his proverbial boots on, still active and doing what he loved best, telling people about Jesus His savior through his preaching and leading them along the many paths of life towards him through his ministry.

While still sad, his manner of death brings us great comfort. He had received the Anointing of the Sick from Fr. Nick Tran just a few days before his death. He wanted to be prepared. His was a provided-for death. Shortly after he had died, I was privileged to pray over and bless his body before he was taken away. In that moment I was able to speak the words of the Apostolic Pardon to a merciful God on Tom's behalf. He died lying beside the love of his



life. Thank you, Brenda, for your faithful watching over him these many years. He died peacefully at your side. What more loving tribute can a widow have? They have known and loved each other for 66 years, 53 of them in the loving embrace of Holy Matrimony. Thank you for your beautiful witness of committed and sacrificial love for one another. Your marriage truly reflected the faithful love of God for us. As I looked upon his body that morning, all I could think was, “he is in peace.” Just like the Book of Wisdom we heard read moments ago. The souls of the just are, indeed, in the hand of God. What better place to be? And yet we resist it most our lives. We resist the gentle call to leave the body and go to the Lord (2 Cor 5:8). This human proclivity to wrestle against the divine has been the source of great suffering in this world since the beginning of time, but it also gained for us so great a redeemer. O Happy Fault! O Necessary sin of Adam, that gained for us so great a redeemer! (Exsultet - Easter Proclamation) God came in the flesh that we might trust the way of suffering He shows as the way to salvation. God is a gentle but firm lover of our souls, and He persists in His call and approaches us with tender mercy. We all must die, but God does not desire the death of the sinner, but rather that he be converted and live (Ezekiel 18:23). We must listen and respond to this invitation. “Behold, I stand at the door and knock” (Revelation 3:20) Wisdom would have us prepared for this moment, because at an hour we least expect it, the Lord will come to gather us to himself. Wisdom exhorts us many times in Sacred Scripture to keep watch, for we know not the day nor the hour (Matthew 24:42; Matthew 25:13; Luke 12:40).

That day will come upon us like a thief in the night. Unexpected. We are called to be a vigilant people. “That day” is the subject of the beautiful and classic Dies Irae that is traditionally sung as the Sequence for the Funeral Mass and which Deacon Tom asked to be sung at his. There is an abiding and driving message to this haunting sequence: Death is inevitable. “That day” is pending for all of us. Death comes for us all. And on “that day” we will stand before the judge and our faces will blush as our life and its imperfections sweep before us. Wisdom, be attentive. God has given us a way through, but we must open the door to the Way, the Truth and the Life who is Jesus Christ. We have a choice to make. We can ignore that day like little children who stick their fingers in their ears and hum to drown out the unwanted word. When death comes, we are unprepared and deaf and fail to hear the knocking at the door for our rescue. We can run away from it in fear, like those hopelessly fleeing a tsunami. When death comes, we have fled and have our backs turned and miss the one who would snatch us up and out of harm’s way. Or we can embrace that day with courage, setting our face like flint, embracing the cross of suffering, walking the way of the cross to meet the Lord on Calvary Hill and there attend to him at his feet, kissing the wood of the cross upon which is hung our salvation. This is the Christian way. The motivation for Christian courage is found in the Sequence we just heard sung. Jesus forgave the woman caught in adultery and the dying thief who, through faith in Christ, stole heaven. Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom. (Luke 23:42). Jesus, remember Tom when he comes into your Kingdom. Our hope is Jesus Christ and the Blood he shed on the cross. And Jesus alone is our hope, our courage, and our justice. There is no other who can promise anything beyond this life and actually deliver. To die without Jesus Christ is to face that terrible day alone. To die in friendship with Jesus Christ is to face that day with confidence and hope. *Pie Iesu Domine, dona eis requiem!*

The very meaning of life is to die in friendship with Jesus Christ. He is the only one who can do something definitive and positive about death. But just like all things, we are imperfect, and our friendship with Christ is imperfect. For all our protestations and claims of fidelity to Him, we are sinners still. Jesus’ friendship with us is perfect. But we can’t say the same about our friendship with him. These imperfections need to be judged as such in our particular judgement, and then burned away in the cleansing fire of God’s mercy. We wear black to emphasize that we don’t presume on Tom’s sanctity. White is the color we wear when people have risen from the dead or been declared saints. Deacon Tom did not want you to presume where he will be, though he of course left this world with hope in the resurrection and trust in the mercy of God. The black we wear at his request symbolizes this death to presumption on our own merits. Heaven is not a forgone conclusion for him, or for you, or for me. Hear the words of our savior who soberly declared, “Not everyone who says, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my father.” (Matthew 7:21) Jesus Christ is the one who has perfectly done the Father’s will, and so we graft ourselves onto Him for our salvation. We throw ourselves upon the great and proven



mercy of God in Jesus Christ. We hide in his wounds for safety. We are wedded to him for our posterity. And this is what gives us hope. But we don't presume. It is for this reason we are offering the funeral rites today. In these holy mysteries we offer to God the only, true and acceptable sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins, the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ. We associate our beloved Thomas with this most holy mystery and entrust him to its saving power. These funeral rites, then, are primarily our supplication to God on His behalf: "Have mercy on him, Lord", "forgive his sins and in your gracious will, grant him eternal rest." These are the very texts that Mother Church bids us sing that we may grieve, but not as the pagans do who have no hope. (1 Thessalonians 4:13) And so we offer him today with that same hope and trust, even if through tears. We dare not presume upon our own merits nor his, but we do dare to hope. Inside his coffin, Tom is vested in his alb, his white garment, mystically received at his baptism. Now, his rebirth, begun on that day, has come to fruition. By God's Grace, he will bear good fruit on the day of resurrection, when the trumpet sounds and the dead arise (1 Thessalonians 4:16). We have dressed his body in that hope.

Deacon Tom died on September 28. This is significant. The Christian is marked in life not solely by his birthdate, but more significantly by the date of his passing from this world to the next. We recall not the birth day but the death date of the great saints of our faith as their feast day. Deacon Tom significantly died on the same day as the Servant of God Fr. Patrick Ryan, whose mortal remains are entombed just over there underneath the fourteenth station of the Cross. Fr. Ryan was the hero of the Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1878, serving the sick and the suffering of Chattanooga, even when everyone else had fled. And his memory and offering of life in imitation of Christ the Good Shepherd inspires us still to this day. How fitting, then, that this servant of the Lord, Thomas Craig McConnell, when he passed from this life to the next, shares Fr. Ryan's death date. This is another cause for us to ponder God's mighty mercy revealed to us in many signs and wonders. We must attend with wisdom when the Lord speaks to us in these ways.

On "that day" of his death, as I stood over his body, the last thing I said to Tom, as I gently patted his arm, was, "Well done, good and faithful servant." It is my firm hope and trust that Thomas Craig McConnell, on account of the saving mercy of Jesus Christ, his friend, heard those very words addressed to him, now that his eternal day has begun.

May Jesus Christ be praised!