

Remembering Fr. Tom

Dear Mission Friends:

We are postponing until next month the continuation of our story on Fr. David O'Rourke's documentary, "Red Terror on the Amber Coast," about terrorism in Lithuania. Instead, this month's newsletter will be devoted to remembering our beloved Father Thomas Kraft, O.P., who died on January 22 at the priory of the Blessed Sacrament in Seattle, WA. I had the honor of giving the eulogy at a vigil held for him at St. Albert's Priory in Oakland, and I would like to share with you some excerpts, along with a few pictures showing Fr. Tom in service over the years.

In Christ's Peace,
Fr. Martin de Porres Walsh, O.P.

Because of your prayers and those of so many ever touched by him, and through the intercession of Blessed Teresa of Calcutta, Fr. Tom was able to remain vigorous and active for almost a year following his diagnosis, but his struggle with cancer is now over. While our hearts are deeply saddened by his death, we also have a great sense of peace and joy, for our



Father Thomas Dominic Kraft, O.P.

prayers are now accompanying him into the very presence of God.

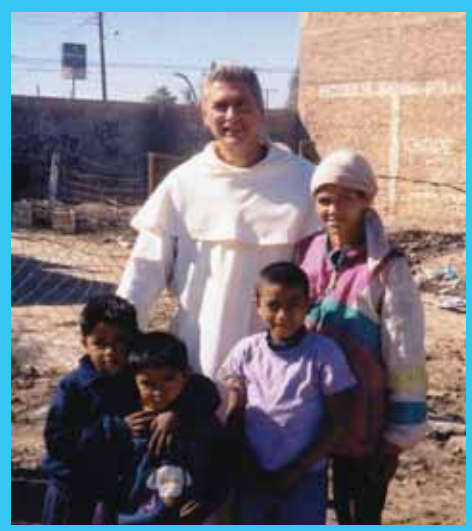
Luke tells us that after Jesus' birth and circumcision, "The time came for Joseph and Mary to do what the Law of Moses commanded and perform the ceremony of purification. So they took the child to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord, as it is written in the law of the Lord, 'Every firstborn male shall be dedicated to the Lord.' They also went to offer a sacrifice of a pair of doves or two young pigeons, as required by the Lord.

Now there was a man living in Jerusalem whose name was

Simeon. He was just and pious and was waiting for Israel to be saved. The Holy Spirit was with him, and he had been assured by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's promised Messiah. Led by the Spirit, Simeon went into the temple. When the parents brought the child Jesus into the temple to do for him what the Law required, Simeon took the child in his arms, and gave thanks to God:

'Now, Lord, you have kept your promise, and you may let your servant go in peace. With my own eyes I have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples: a light to reveal your way to the Gentiles, and bring glory to your people Israel.' The child's father and mother were amazed by the things Simeon said about him. Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother, 'This child is chosen by God for the destruction and the salvation of many in Israel. He will be a sign from God which many people will speak against, and so reveal their secret thoughts. And sorrow, like a sharp sword, will pierce your own heart.'"
(Luke 2: 22-35)

Youth naturally flocked to Fr. Tom.



Now unlike Simeon, an elderly man waiting to die, Fr. Tom was always full of youthful energy and vitality. But both were “*just and pious*” men who spent their lives seeking to see the Christ. Plans for Fr. Tom’s seeking Christ through his vocations to the Kraft-Valentine families as well as to the Dominican family were begun even before he was born!

Back in the early 1950’s, Fr. Lawrence Banfield, O.P., the oldest friar today in our province, was in the hospital for an appendectomy. One day his nurse Julia told him of her plans to marry a “*wonderful man named Gene Kraft,*” and that she would like to have a son who would become a priest. Fr. Banfield told Julia how lucky she was to have such a fine fiancé, and that he would pray for her family and for a priest son, “*but preferably a Dominican.*”

So Gene and Julia had four marvelous children, Tom, Steve, Mike, and Christina, and

although they were all very loyal to the Franciscan Order—the Kraft boys served daily Mass for the Franciscan Poor Clare nuns—I had the privilege, as novice master at the time, of welcoming Tom, along with his classmates Fr. Vincent Benoit, Fr. Ken Gumbert, and Fr. Augustine Thompson, into our Dominican novitiate in 1977.

Following Fr. Tom’s ordination and studies at our Dominican School of Philosophy and Theology in Berkeley, and later Oxford University and the Javeriana University in Bogota, he served at our campus ministry centers at Arizona State University in Tempe and the University of Utah. Then began his long years of faithfully and joyfully serving at our mission in Mexicali.

Fr. Tom is still beloved by the college students he ministered; indeed wherever he was assigned, all the young people naturally flocked to him for spiritual guidance and loving support. Villa Zapata is one of

the windswept and arid desert colonies of our parish in Mexicali, consisting of humble homes with no electricity or running water. How well the people there remember their beloved *Padre Tomas* in his white habit sweeping into the local school while the kids went wild, greeting and hugging him. Recently I visited with a wealthy family in Mexicali who told the story of offering *Padre Tomas* the use of their swimming pool, and they were shocked the next day when he showed up with his *pickupcito* filled to the brim with all the teenagers of the parish. The pool served as a bathtub that day for those poor desert kids!

Like Simeon, who recognized Jesus in the arms of the humble couple from the hill country of Galilee coming to the temple to make the offering required of the poor—two doves or two pigeons—Fr. Tom recognized Jesus in the poor and lowly of his ministry, choosing to serve them and continuously acknowledging their great



Fr. Tom was especially loved by the people of Mexicali.



Fr. Tom in Mexicali preaching his last homily.

dignity before God. After daily Mass in Mexicali he would be delayed sometimes for hours, listening to unscheduled confessions from the swarm of devout women who poured all their troubles onto him. More than a confessor, they just wanted a sympathetic listener, which they found in Fr. Tom, and they would always leave relieved and uplifted.

Fr. Tom also recognized Jesus in the Eucharist. The Perpetual Adoration Nuns in Mexicali tell us that the few hours in the day he found himself alone, he could be found praying before the Blessed Sacrament in their chapel.

After Fr. Tom was weakened with cancer, he was cared for lovingly by the Dominican community in Seattle, and particularly Fr. Daniel Syverstad, O.P. and Jesson Mata. Like Simeon, who had been promised by God that he would not see death until he had

seen the Christ, Fr. Tom had one last request before death: to return to his beloved parishioners of Santa Maria Guadalupe in Mexicali to celebrate with them one last time the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe. What an experience! Along with his brother Steve and me, Fr. Tom covered four churches in one day, preaching his message of faith and farewell, with crowds of the poor weeping as they saw

and heard him for the last time in this life. Then he prayed, as did Simeon, *“Now, Lord, ...you may let your servant go in peace.”*

Simeon’s last words to Mary, *“And sorrow, like a sharp sword, will pierce your own heart,”* call to mind her accompanying her Son Jesus to His death on Calvary. And while it is also with sorrow in our hearts that we accompany Fr. Tom to his death with our prayers, it is indeed into the presence of God that he goes.

In our last conversation, I thanked Fr. Tom for the honor he bestowed when he invited Fr. Anthony Rosevear and me to preach at his services, and I asked him, *“What do you want me to say?”* In an almost inaudible voice, he replied, *“Say that even with my defects, I always tried to be a good priest, serving God and others.”* Fr. Tom, you succeeded. Now I ask, *“Do we pray for you or to you?”*



Fr. Martin with Fr. Tom in December 2008 during his last visit to Mexicali.



Fr. Tom's last photo.

Prayer for Canonization of Mother Teresa

*Jesus, you made Blessed Teresa of Calcutta an inspiring
example of firm faith and burning charity,
an extraordinary witness to the way of spiritual childhood,
and a great and esteemed
teacher of the value and dignity of every human life.
Grant that she may be venerated and
imitated as one of the Church's canonized saints.
Hear the requests of all those who seek her intercession.
May we follow her example in heeding Your cry of thirst from
the Cross and joyfully loving You in
the distressing disguise of the poorest of the poor,
especially those most unloved and unwanted.
We ask this in Your name and through the intercession of
Mary, Your Mother and the Mother of us all.
Amen.*

**Contributions in memory of Fr. Tom Kraft,
O.P. will be used toward the construction of a
chapel in Villa Zapata, the poorest area of our
mission in Mexicali.**