

A tribute to Monsignor Art Valenzano

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By Archbishop William E. Lori

I'm grateful for the invitation to offer you a few reflections meant to be an aid your own prayer and reflection during this evening set aside for prayer.

And let me begin with the beginning of my ministry in Baltimore. Just over four years ago, I celebrated my last Confirmation in Connecticut and then drove down to Baltimore ... and wouldn't you know it, the traffic was terrific. I arrived in front of what would be my residence about 5:30 in the afternoon. It is a large gray house, then clad in what we Baltimoreans call "form stone," a type of stucco common to many older houses in the city, and in this case, the form stone was a dark gray, "haunted-house" hue. The house also has a formidable flight of steps that lead to a set of doors with iron bars. Truth to tell, my heart was in my mouth going up those steps. "What's waiting for me on the other side of those doors?" I wondered.

Actually, I am still learning what was awaiting me on that memorable day, but I can tell you for certain who was waiting for me on the other side of those doors. He was a wonderful priest by the name of Monsignor Arthur Valenzano.

I had not met Father Art before that moment; I knew nothing of his reputation, but took an instant liking to him. In a matter minutes, he had welcomed me, told me he was happy I'd be his bishop, and, without telling me that I looked like I needed to reassured, he reassured me. It was the beginning of a beautiful priestly friendship.

I soon learned that Art was one of the most beloved priests in the archdiocese. He was loved by his brother priests and parishioners alike – he was loved not because he was a high-powered overachiever (though he achieved much as a priest) or because he preached like Bousset (though he was an excellent homilist), or because he was politically astute (though he knew the score). Everyone loved Art because he was the soul of kindness and the soul of humility. He wasn't needy in his charity, or self-effacing in his humility, or showy in his piety. He was about as normal as a human being could be. But beneath his disarming smile, his wonderful sense of humor, and his passionate love for golf and the Orioles – was a priest who loved the

Lord, prayed to the Lord, relied on the Lord – and radiated the Lord’s love in just about every circumstance, even the golf course.

There was something else I soon learned about Father Art: he was terminally ill. Some years before he was assigned to the Basilica in Baltimore, he was diagnosed with leukemia and was being treated at Johns Hopkins. Thus far he was beating the odds but the long-term prognosis wasn’t good. In the meantime, however, Art was taking his treatments and living life to the fullest. If you didn’t know he was ill, you would never have guessed it.

Art had a remarkable capacity for friendship. I noticed the many people he remembered from his childhood years, the seminary, the early days of his ministry, and his prior parishes. Many people sought him out for advice and spiritual direction, and many commented that in his daily homilies he said just what they needed to hear. Pretty soon his medical team from Johns Hopkins started coming to Sunday Mass, including the nurses that usually took of him (one of whom I had confirmed in CT). By and by, his fellow patients from Hopkins came to Mass on Sunday, people to whom he had quietly ministered as they were waiting for chemo. People really loved Father Art and sought him out ... but Art never made himself the center of his ministry... it wasn’t all about him... He never led people to believe that he was the only priest who could help them or that they should abandon their current parish to follow him around. He used his friendship with people to firm up their relationship with the Lord and their involvement in their own parishes and communities.

So, long before Pope Francis taught us about “encounter” and “accompaniment”, Father Art was encountering and accompanying an awful lot of people...including me. A native of Western Maryland (Eckhart Mines to be exact), Art really knew the Archdiocese of Baltimore inside out and without being a gossip or a busybody knew the pulse of the priests. Art generously shared with me not only his knowledge of the archdiocese but also his love for it, and he did this, I might add, without a trace of presumption. As a result, he really helped to break me in.

And this is the way he did it. I lived at one end of second floor hallway and he lived at the other end. In between is a little chapel where the Blessed Sacrament is reserved. I’d do my best to get to the chapel by about 6:15 in the morning and I knew that he was saying his prayers about the same time in his room. I’d purposefully leave the door to the chapel ajar so that when Art was on his way to the Basilica for the 7:30 Mass we could greet each other. He’d stop at the chapel door and on the hottest, gloomiest day of the year he’d say, “It’s a beautiful morning in Baltimore!” or “the boys” (meaning the Orioles) came in second last night. Nothing profound or even overly spiritual ... just a daily morning dose of friendship from a man who was a friend of Jesus.

Pretty soon, I was asking him to review my homilies and talking over with him some of the challenges I knew I'd be facing. When the first few big challenges came my way, he didn't behave like an advisor or a consultant but like a wise and loving friend. When he faced challenges - whether it was his own health challenges or challenges in running a downtown parish - he could be vexed - but I marveled how quickly and constructively he re-channeled any anger he felt. With Art, you could talk about anything and laugh about almost anything... and pray about everything... he was humble, joyful, and very normal.

Why was Art so good for me? Well, it's time for true confessions, I guess. I hope you won't think me a heretic, but I can be "semi-pelagian". Most of you know that Pelagius lived in the 4th and 5th centuries and is remembered for teaching that we can do good works, and even attain to our salvation without God's grace. Today theologians give us a better understanding of what Pelagius actually taught but the fact remains it's kind of silly to assert or assume that we can go it alone. Of course, in anything I say or write or pray, I'm sure to acknowledge the thoroughgoing role of God's grace in my life and in the lives of those I serve... including the role of grace in the difficult, repetitive work of growing in virtue. But when I'm faced with a project, a problem, or a pile of work, then sometimes I succumb to a particular form of "semi-pelagianism" - that is to say - I think of myself as the engine and God as an additive to make the engine run smoother.

My way of addressing the problem, the project or the work, sometimes seems to say, "Well, a little God in this mix couldn't hurt!" Of course, I don't consciously limit God's role that way and I don't pray as if God were merely a help and not the all in all - it's only that I sometimes act as if I'm the primary agent and God is secondary. When that happens, the results are never good. My barely-aided efforts produce grass that withers and fades, not the good and lasting fruit of the Gospel. And you know, even at this late stage in my life, I still sometimes fall into that way of acting.

That's why Art was so good for me. Because he was genuinely and cheerfully humble, he was in touch with God's mercy and could dispense God's mercy in a seemingly effortless way ... at least a very low key way. He never gave me a talk on humility, he simply was humble. And when I would get on my high horse about something or another, Art had a way of chopping it all down to size, mostly with humor and common sense. He didn't quote Scripture or spiritual authors, chapter and verse; he just sent the signal that humble reliance on God is the key to fruitful ministry and the key to facing any problem that life and ministry can throw at us.

As time went by, Art's health began to decline visibly. It seems he nearly beat leukemia only to come down with a rare form of lung cancer, an aggressive cancer that eventually also invaded his bones. I noticed he was coughing a lot and he would tell me it was only a cold but one night when we were going out to dinner, he came to my room and said, simply, "Plans have changed..." and then shared with me his new diagnosis.

Art by no means gave up and in the months that followed he did amazing work; but it became more and more clear that time was running out. It began to dawn on me that it was now my turn to accompany Art - this time, to the threshold of eternity. I was not the only one to do so, of course, there were many who made this journey with Art - life-long priest friends, classmates, his medical team, parishioners, co-workers - but in God's Providence I was privileged to live down the hall from him.

Soon he had an oxygen pack, then home nursing assistance, and then began the long vigil before his death ... but through it all, Art was the same person he had always been. I've never felt closer to a priest in my whole life... especially when we celebrated Mass, sometimes in my little chapel, sometimes in his sitting room, and at the end at his bedside, depending on how he felt. I was there when this good and holy priest said the words of consecration for the last time, on the day before he died. Whenever I say Mass, I often think of that profoundly moving moment.

In the end, Art did not pluck up his courage to die. He had his "agony in the garden" moment followed by the peace that comes when one says, "thy kingdom come, thy will be done," and really means it. Like Jesus, whose sacrifice he offered each day, Art offered himself to God for us. Now, when I say the Our Father, the words "art in heaven" have new meaning for me. I pray to my old neighbor, asking that he accompany me, asking that he pray for me, asking that he give me that humility which opens the door of mercy in my life and in the lives of those I've been called to serve. And I ask him to intercede for the local church of Baltimore he loved so much and served so well.

During his wake and funeral, thousands of people came through the Basilica and so many of them told me about the impact he made on their lives: "He saved my marriage." "He helped me with an addiction". "He found me a job." "He was with us when our child died." On it went. Every story was a miracle of God's grace and a priest humble enough to be the instrument of his grace. Testimonies I need to remember when I have my semi-pelagian flare ups!

I suspect it's not only bishops that have semi-pelagian flare ups. You might have them too. It's been an awfully long time since I was a seminarian but I do remember it was busy and there was pressure. Still true? I thought so! It's easy to fall into the

trap of praying as though everything depended on God and working as though everything depends on us. Let us instead see ourselves as useless servants whom the Lord in his wisdom uses to accomplish more than we ever could. Formation is a great time to lick the semi-pelagian monster with humility and to tame the unbridled ego with God's grace so that you may indeed be a bridge to Christ and not merely to oneself.

A few days ago in Magnificat I ran across something written by Dominican Father Bernard Bro that sums all this up for me and, I hope, for you. Writing about the triumph of the Cross, a triumph in which we hope to share, he said: "So we shan't reach the goal by gritting our teeth, since, if we are capable of gritting our teeth, this means that we are strong - with this kind of strength - we still don't know what the cross is all about. Christ didn't grit his teeth to go to his Passion, he didn't pluck up his courage, he knew very well that he couldn't. He merely said, "Father, your will be done, not mine," which is something of a different order, of a different world, the world of love. And not merely love of the human sort, but a love commensurate with God, of God's sort, that is to say, love of a sort we can never produce for ourselves. This sort of love isn't ours to give. God has to breathe it into us, he has to come into us to love himself.

God bless you, brothers, on your journey toward the priesthood! May the Lord bless you and keep you always in his love!

Also see:

Amen: Jesus misses you

'Art in Heaven:' Archdiocese bids farewell to Monsignor Valenzano

Praise Jesus for Monsignor Valenzano: A personal remembrance of 'Father Art'

Remembering Monsignor Valenzano

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