

‘Merrily shall we meet in heaven’

By now, most of you have heard that Father Tom Walsh, the wonderful Conventual Franciscan priest and pastor of Annunciation Parish in Rosedale, died last month.

I have been a weekend celebrant at Annunciation for about 35 years. I would like to share a story about my final conversation with Father Tom.

I had just finished celebrating the 9 a.m. Mass, and I was making some phone calls and having a cup of coffee as I waited to celebrate the 11 a.m. Mass.

Shortly before I was ready to return to the church, Father Tom walked into the office. We chatted for a while. I then noticed that time was getting away from me, and I had to celebrate the next Mass. I said to Tom: “Well, Tom, pray for me and I for thee. Merrily we shall meet in heaven.” It was an old English blessing that I had used many times before.

Tom paused and asked: “What did you just say?” I repeated what I had said. He then said that it reminded him of something his mother always said. After I left, he continued to talk about it with Sister Sue Engel, a Mission Helper of the Sacred Heart and pastoral associate at Annunciation.

The following weekend I was away from the parish, giving a men’s retreat in Malvern, Pennsylvania. The next weekend, I was away giving a women’s retreat at the Dominican Retreat House in McLean, Virginia. The Monday after I returned from that retreat, I got a message that Father Tom had died.

“Pray for me and I for thee. Merrily we shall meet in heaven.”

Those had been the last words I spoke. I had no idea then that the next time I would see Tom would be in heaven.

We begin Lent with the reminder: “Remember that you are dust, and unto dust you shall return.” We never quite know when the return will be. As the Scriptures remind us, it does sometimes come “like a thief in the night.”

I celebrated Ash Wednesday with the retired School Sisters of Notre Dame at Villa Assumpta in Baltimore. Knowing that I was grieving, both for Father Tom and Father Joe Cote, who had died just a few weeks earlier, the good Sister Virginia put ashes on my forehead and said: “Father Joe, remember that you are dust and unto dust you shall return.”

She then added: “But not now!”

The day after Father Tom’s funeral, there were funerals for Monsignor Dick Parks, a wonderful and much-loved diocesan priest and former pastor of Sacred Heart of

Mary in Graceland Park, and Father Bill Lee, a Sulpician priest, teacher and former rector.

Keep all these wonderful men in your prayers during the days ahead. And don't be afraid to pray to them. It never hurts to have friends in high places.

They have all returned to dust – but not really. Yes, their bodies will indeed return to the dust from which they came, but who they really are returns to the God from whom they came.

There's a little story I like to tell. It's a true story of a little girl returning from the Ash Wednesday service, and asking her mother: "Is it true what Father Joe said today?" Her mother asked: "What did he say?" The girl replied: "He said: 'Remember that you are dust and unto dust you shall return.'"

The mother replied: "Yes, that's true." The little girl then said: "Well, Mommy, there's somebody under my bed, and I can't tell if they're coming or going."

Lent reminds us of where we come from and where we go to. We come from God. We go back to God. It really is that simple. As they say: "Life is fragile. Handle with prayer."

For more on Father Walsh, click here: Father Walsh, lover of creation, dies