

Homily and Eulogy for the Funeral of Frank Gasztonyi - 3 April 2018

Homily

(Mt11:25-30) They say that nobody truly appreciates life like the man who has narrowly escaped from the clutches of certain death. Nobody appreciates his eyesight like the blind man who has recently regained it. "When you have your health," they say, "you have everything." Whoever coined this saying must have been ill. All this conventional wisdom points to one truth in particular: we tend to take things for granted until they're taken away. Put more forcefully, we might say that mankind is perennially plagued by ingratitude – ingratitude towards God and our fellowman. Along with pride, ingratitude is one of those fundamental vices that underlies every other sin. Every evil deed, thought, word or omission of ours boils down in some way to a sin of ingratitude.

Ingratitude seems as prevalent as gravity. Some, unfortunately, surrender to it. The other option is to fight manfully. Our war against ingratitude is called conversion. This conversion is the work of a lifetime. It is the proverbial journey of 10,000 miles that is completed one step at a time. Conversion, therefore, is an ongoing process. However, when we hear the word 'conversion,' we often think of a sudden, dramatic event in someone's life, like Saul on the road to Damascus. Someone who experiences this dramatic conversion is actually called a 'convert.' You sometimes hear it said that nobody truly appreciates our Catholic faith like a convert. Why? Because we cradle Catholics can easily grow complacent. We can take our faith for granted especially in a culture that trivializes or ridicules it. Converts, on the other hand, are on fire with gratitude.

There are in the end two kinds of conversion: ongoing or dramatic. Regardless of which one we experience, conversion always involves a turning away from creatures and a turning toward God. It's easy to devote all our time and attention to created things while giving little or no thought to God. This is because we love the world impulsively with the disordered affections of an addict. To combat addictions, everyone knows that abstinence works much better than moderation. Unfortunately, complete abstinence isn't always possible. If we're addicted to food, we can't simply stop eating. Since it is God's will that we love creatures – among whom number family members and friends – we must also practice moderation in our war against our inordinate affection for creatures. We must 'die to self' so as to live for God.

While they are profoundly transformative, dramatic conversions have two shortcomings. First, they aren't ordinarily of our own making. They often happen in a flash like a bolt to lightning. Secondly, after we abstain from grave sin, they usually involve more moderation than abstinence – which, as we said, is less effective in our battle against creature addiction. There is, however, one dramatic conversion that bypasses both these shortcomings. First, we can actually choose it. Secondly, it involves more abstinence than moderation. People who choose this dramatic conversion are said to leave the world behind. In a very real way, they close the door on their former life and open up another door leading to a new beginning. Short of martyrdom, there is nothing more transforming. You might have already guessed that these individuals in the Church are called 'religious.' By taking vows to live a life of poverty, chastity and obedience they in some real way die to this world.

Even though Frank was twice a married man, I consider him an honorary religious. Back in 1971, he had a loving wife and two children, a nice home and a warm family life. Frank enjoyed a successful career as Chief Engineer at the Hungarian Power Company (EDASZ). He was well respected by peers and subordinates alike. In many respects, Frank was at the top of life's game. But all was not well. These were the days of communism and Frank wanted to practice his Catholic faith. About once a year, he was called in and reminded what the practical consequences could be for this decision. Despite these regular threats, Frank enrolled his son in the Catholic high school in Gyor. He was then told that in retaliation, neither of his children would be accepted into a university. It was then that Frank made a radical choice – one that transformed his life. Sure, there were other reasons, but ultimately it boiled down to a choice for Christ. This decision wasn't moderate in any way, shape or form! Frank literally closed the door for good on the only life he ever knew, parting with his friends and family, his homeland and culture, his house, his career and all his possessions. He embarked with his wife, Jolan, his daughter Ildiko and his son, Frank Jr. into the great unknown. When religious give up everything, they don't normally risk prison as well. In a very real way, Frank died to this world. So when death called on 22 March, it wasn't a complete stranger. Frank already had some practice at dying. This is very significant, since the spiritual masters remind us that our entire life here on earth is simply a preparation for the moment of our death, which determines our eternal destiny.

Although not a convert in the strict sense of the word, Frank emerged from this virtual death with a much stronger faith in God. He is remembered for always attending Sunday mass. In later years, this was in no small part due to the loving support of his children who accompanied him here to St. Stephen's. No one remembers Frank's ever missing Sunday mass through his own negligence. And why would he when he gave up everything for the opportunity to do so without reprisals? What kind of dividends did this sacrifice pay? Those closest to Frank testify that he taught them honesty and integrity. That is quite a legacy to leave behind you in today's world. Virtues like honesty and integrity are some of the things – alluded to in today's Gospel – that God the Father often hides from the wise and the learned. Instead, He reveals these virtues to the childlike. We also heard our Lord exhort us, saying: "Come to me all you who labor and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart; and you will find rest for yourselves. For my yoke is easy and my burden light." Twice in this short gospel our Lord promises his faithful followers rest – rest from the cares and anxieties of life even amid 10,000 difficulties. When we give up everything for God, then we're naturally confident that He won't withhold anything from us either. This brings us great peace and satisfaction.

Knowing Frank in his later years, the virtue that stood out most for me was gratitude. Even during shorter conversations, Frank would often confess to me, "Meg vagyok elégedve." Loosely translated, it means: "I'm a happy man." This is the peace that Christ promised. This is the fruit of a good conscience. These are the dividends that honesty and integrity pay in the long run. Frank knew how to be especially grateful for life because he had lived through a virtual death when he fled Communist Hungary only to end up in a refugee camp. Frank would never confess his gratitude to me without mentioning his children and grandchildren. When we sacrifice everything for our family – so that our children might have the same opportunities we enjoyed – our family will in the end become our great reward. More importantly, when we sacrifice everything for our faith, our faith will become our great reward. These are the two lessons that we can learn from Frank's life. On the other hand, when we take faith and family for granted, then both tend to become an unsupportable burden for us.

Frank fought the good fight; He finished the race; He kept the faith. He left us a legacy that is worthy of admiration and imitation. Nevertheless, Frank would be the last one to canonize himself. Scripture says the just man sins seven times a day. We do well, therefore, to offer this requiem mass for the repose of Frank's dear soul. Please remember 'Feri bacsi' in your prayers! Don't forget to have masses said for the repose of his soul – especially on the anniversary of his death but at other times as well! May his faith here below be his great reward hereafter! May his gentle soul rest in peace, together with the souls of Jolan and Elizabeth, until the day of the resurrection! May we all keep the faith and so be found worthy to rise with them in glory when this brief span of days has ended! Amen!

Eulogy

Papa 1925 2018

Our Papa, Gasztonyi Ferenc, was born on September 26, 1925 in Vág. Vág was, and still is a small farming village in the County of Győr-Sopron in North West Hungary.

Our Father was the middle of three sons who survived infancy. His father, Gasztonyi József was from Vág and his mother, Szabo Rozália came from the neighboring village of Szany.

As a child, Papa was like the rest of the boys from his village. He helped out around the farm: feeding the animals, weeding, collecting the harvest, and tending to the pigs and cows in the fields.

But Papa's interest in crafts and machinery and his abilities in the classroom showed early. Recognizing this, his Mother decided that this aptitude could not be wasted and made the decision that set the course for the rest of Papa's life. She decided to enroll him at the school run by the priests and monks of the Benedictine Order in the nearest town of Pápa. This was by far the best school in the region. The Benedictine Order is still well known for their dedication to God and excellence in education.

Going to school in Pápa 20 miles away required a major commitment. For the next 8 years his daily commute from Vág started before dawn with a 5 mile trek to Szany on an un-paved road by bicycle or on foot, depending on rain, mud, and snow. From Szany he caught the train to Pápa. Then, after school was over, he reversed the course and arrived home, mostly after sunset, meaning homework was done by candle light. Of course the commitment and challenges extended to his entire family. In addition to the financial burden, the family lost his availability to share in the chores around the farm. Undeterred, Papa and his family pressed on.

It turns out that it was all worth the effort. Papa received a classic education in Math, science, history, and the

languages Hungarian, German, French, and of course Latin. After graduation from the Bences Gymnasium in Pápa, he was accepted to the Eotvos Lóránt Technical University of Hungary in Budapest.

His circumstances did not get any easier. Hungary was pulled into World War II. Papa was living in a rented room in the Pest-side, sharing the bed with his younger brother Jóska. The bed was Jóska's during the day while Papa was at lectures, and it was Papa's while Jóska worked the night shift in a factory as a machinist to support themselves. His older brother, Pista, regularly made the 100 mile trip to Budapest bringing food from the farm which was part of the negotiated rent during the heavy rationing due to the war. (Papa and Jóska dried out the bread first because dry bread lasted longer). As children, we have heard many first hand stories of those times.

With the unwavering support and resolve of his family, the story finally improves. He completed his studies and received his diploma as an Electro-Mechanical Engineer, becoming the first university degreed person from his village.

As he was completing his studies, he attended a social event hosted by a cousin. Through a somewhat complicated thread of relations, it so happened that the same social event was attended by a young lady from the same region of Hungary who was living with her sister in Szentendre, just outside Budapest. Their meeting was the start of a romance novel like courtship. We heard stories of her seeing him take the single stem yellow rose out of this briefcase as he got off the local train to meet her. We also heard that she left that rose at the feet of a statue of the Virgin Mary near their meeting place because she was afraid to let her sister see that she received a flower. ♪ The courtship progressed and led to a proposal, then to a wedding, then us, but that's jumping too far ahead.

Papa did not see their life in the Capital. They agreed to move to Győr, much closer to the home of their families. He took a position with EDASZ, the North-West division of Hungary's electric utility company. He was responsible for running the power grid installation and maintenance crew, as well as for managing the transformer repair operation for the region.

When he arrived, the available facility was being converted from a shop that manufactured cannons during the war. During the next 20 years, Papa ended up designing and directing the creation of many of the required tools and machines that eventually turned that operation into the largest and most productive facility of its kind in all of Hungary, and eventually in all of Central Europe. He oversaw the extension of the electrical grid to small towns and villages, including Vág.

We have visited that shop recently, and we saw that some of the original machinery is still in use today. The workers are still well aware of the legacy of Papa's contribution.

We grew up living on the grounds of EDASZ. As a small child, I regularly brought the morning coffee and rolls to Papa, walking through the shop past large transformers and high voltage test cages and up the stairs to Papa's office. Along the way I met many of the people. From all of our memories from our years in EDASZ, the part that stands out the most is the way all the people at the shop related to Papa. Though they always addressed him with the formal "Mérnök Úr" --- Mr. Engineer --- their interaction was based on mutual respect. Fathers provide many things to their children, but none more valuable than by living a life that serves as an example for generations. By local standards, we were better positioned than most. But seeing that my Father always treated people fairly and with respect regardless of background or corporate status stayed with me and has served me well throughout my life and my career.

A few words about Papa as a family man and a husband. His dedication to his family started by always loving and supporting my Mother. I have memories of them always parting with a kiss as he headed off to work each morning. Growing up in a harmonious and supportive environment is a gift whose real value takes many years to truly appreciate.

Our Mom, my sister, and I spent the summer months by the Lake Balaton in a small vacation house built by Papa with the help of friends and relatives. Papa split his vacation days to extend weekends so that he could spend more time with us. Some of our best memories together are from those days.

[As a young man our grandfather was a group of young men who signed up by a recruiter to come to work in America. So he boarded a ship in Amsterdam and arrived at Ellis Island in 1903. My father heard stories on life in Ohio. He returned for a visit in 1910, but was not able to return. He was wounded in WWI, but eventually settled down and lived back in his village.]

The four of us left Hungary in the summer of 1971 with the official plan to travel through Austria and Italy for three weeks, going by car from campground to campground. For reasons already addressed by Fr. Theodore, the family came to a unanimous agreement to come to California, provided we can secure sponsorship. That support came immediately from our relatives who moved to California in 1956. As fate would have it, they were the same relatives who introduced my parents to each other 20 some years earlier! Three months later we arrived in Los Angeles bringing only our suitcases.

The Miklosy and Voros families helped us settle in near them in the city of South Gate and guided us through the essentials. One of which was bringing us to Saint Stephen's Hungarian Church. With the help of our

extended family and with the help and advice of many kind friends we met at Saint Stephen's, we quickly settled in.

Papa's first job was a draftsman, but as his English improved, he quickly returned to electrical engineering. He defended his diploma by passing the Boards in English and earning his Professional Electrical Engineer (PEE) License while he worked at Bechtel and Fluor Corporations on various power plant design projects, including San Onofre Nuclear Unit-2. He finished his career by going back to his roots at Lindsey Manufacturing Corporation in Azusa designing parts supporting electric utility grids.

I wanted to talk about Papa's early years to show what made the man you got to know. The way he loved his grandchildren, how he enjoyed meeting our friends, how he helped friends and neighbors, and how he was looking forward to his time at Saint Stephens to worship and to help the community, and to spend time with friends is what allowed us to develop our own special relationship with him and to build our own memories that will live on in our hearts forever.

He never forgot his roots, and was always proud to help anyone who needed help, and encouragement. He guided and advised young people into the field. He was one of the founding instructors of the electrical power distribution branch at a technical trade school in Gyor. Students there remember him to this day. A few years back in Gyor I meet a young man and as we were talking it came up that he attended this technicum. I mentioned that my father used to teach there. He was said he was honored to have met the daughter of THE Gasztonyi Ferenc, whom his instructors mentioned from time to time with admiration and respect.

Papa came a long way from a boy without shoes to the man he became. In his quiet way he created a life for himself, for his family, and for the people of his village that we will never forget.

He was steadfast in living an honest life, keeping promises, never give up in spite of seemingly unsurmountable odds, keeping faith and family as an anchor.

When you have that, you can honestly say, as he many times had:

"I lived a good life without regrets.

I am happy and satisfied.

I would not change a thing."

So, when the time came, he had moved from this world into the next with a clean heart, and no regrets.

If I could leave all of you with this: live a life of honesty, hard work and integrity, as he did, so that we could all say we have lived a good life without any regrets, using stumbling blocks as stepping stones, and at the end we could say "I would not change a thing".