

Fr. Chuck's Memorial Mass

There is a poem that struggles to find words and images to measure the worth of a person. The very first verse seems a good starting point for what I want to say about Fr. Chuck. The anonymous poet suggests that if you want to know the significance of some one who passed, ask

Not...How he died... but, how he lived;

Not...What did he gain... but, what did he give?

Many people, upon hearing of Father Chuck's death did in fact ask: how did he die? It's a natural human inquiry I suppose, especially about one who was not in any apparent danger of death and not expected to expire. I'm sure that when initial curiosity was satisfied about the circumstances of Fr. Chuck's death, perhaps people did take the next step and reflect upon the poet's more significant questions: **How did he live** and **what did he give.**

When Father George offered his homiletic remarks about Fr. Chuck at the wonderful funeral liturgy at the Cathedral, he mentioned that Chuck was a big man who did every thing in a big way. This is a key insight. Chuck certainly ministered and served as a priest in a BIG way; his care and compassion on a daily basis was huge, his love for the students and for the Church was enormous, and his legacy of modeling what a faithful, self-donating and spirit-lead life should look like is gigantic. In my mind that is what we are doing here tonight: celebrating the man, the priest and his legacy. Most of us have a precious piece of Fr. Chuck to hold on to. We're hoping some will share those at the reception.

I would like to offer my own thoughts about how a person's life can be measured: I think by the quality of his /her "I DOs." When the Archbishop is ready to lay hands upon you in the rite of Priestly ordination, he first asks some questions and invites the candidate to make some promises:

- about your willingness to embrace chaste and celibate loving;
 - about your readiness for the humility of obedience so that you are free to serve God's people where needed;
 - and about your willingness to entrust your self to Christ Jesus totally.
- Father Chuck's answer to those questions was "I do."

Consecrated Religious make similar life-serving and love-offering vows to shape their commitment. And, there is a very similar stripping bare that happens before two lovers pledge themselves to each other in marriage: they make I DO vows. Do you promise to be faithful and true? Do you promise to allow your loving to reach its procreative purpose and completion by spilling over into our children? Do you promise to love and honor each other through all your days – even in sickness, misfortune and tragedy? "I DO!" they pledge.

This “I Do” willingness in a person is the critical quality of a life of faith, integrity, holiness, and joy. In Baptism, parents face some daunting I DO questions: DO you want your child baptized in the faith of the Church? Do you promise to do all in your power to help that child fulfill his baptismal commitment? “I DO.”

Immediately before conferring the sacrament of Confirmation on you, the Bishop asks you to re-affirm and choose for yourself those baptismal vows made FOR you by your parents: Do YOU reject Satan and all his works and all his empty promises? Is this what YOU want? Is this how YOU want to live YOUR life? “I DO!” replies the candidate. “I DO” seems to crop up in all the critical and formative moments where courage, commitment and sacrifice are required. “I DO” is not merely the correct answer in all these circumstances; it is a loving commitment about who you are and how you will live.

I believe that “I DO” is an important part of Death and dying also. Perhaps it seems strange to you to say: “**Death, I do.**” After all, dying is not something we choose but something we are resigned to...right? “Wrong,” says the great German theologian of the last century, Karl Rahner. He said: “Death should be an act I personally perform, not an experience I merely endure.” He meant this for those who were believers in Christ, who bear His Spirit, because Christ’s posture towards death was: “I DO.”

When Jesus was talking about giving His life for the sheep as the Good Shepherd in the 10th Chapter of John’s Gospel, He says about dying: “**I lay down My life and take it up again. No one takes it from Me. I have power to lay it down and power to take it back up again.**” [John 10:18] Death does not take from Jesus His life; He freely gives it as gift for others. In other words, for Jesus, dying is a choice; it’s an “I DO.” Living life for others is something he chooses to do; Dying for others is His choice as well. Death is His “I DO” to the Father and to all of us.

In the same vain, Pontius Pilate, enraged by Jesus’ silence, said to Christ: *What’s the matter with you. Don’t you realize I have the power to crucify you, to take your life from you?* Jesus’ response makes it clear that He holds His dying in His own hands: “You have no power whatever over Me except what is given to you by God.” Jesus’ dying is His gift of love and obedience to the Father...His final and grandest I DO, crowning a life full of many other “I DO’s” of service, sacrifice and love.

When I look at Father Chuck’s life and priestly ministry, I see clearly this Christic pattern and imprint. Chuck’s life was a life offered and surrendered in serving others. For Jesus and for His followers, Death is not a thief stealing from us our most important possession. Death cannot steal your life away from you, if your life is already freely given...lovingly...as gift.

Common wisdom would say you can never be prepared for death when it comes. Yet, if you spend your life, giving away your life to others in little increments... Such daily dying-to-self is the best preparation for death. If you give to others your time, your efforts, your goodwill, your care and compassion, your friendship, your love...your

heart... then when it comes time to give your most precious possession, your life, Death won't feel foreign or terrifying. It will be one more moment of self giving and surrender, one more "I DO." That is how Fr. Chuck defined himself all along – by saying "I DO" to opportunities to love, finding joy and meaning in dying-to-self and serving others. If you want to measure the quality of Fr. Chuck's life and presence among us,

***Ask not how he died... but how he lived;
Not - what did he gain, but what did he give.***

Please understand I am not suggesting that death is not a great and painful tragedy. Death is the destruction of a unique I, and the loss of an irreplaceable, unrepeatable thou. Fr. Chuck's departure diminishes all of us greatly. We have lost a friend, brother, mentor, a God-man, an animator of others, a wellspring of life and vitality. But for those who live and move and have our being in Christ Jesus, death is simply not an enemy. Christ's death on the cross was the destruction of death. It is a source of sorrow for us that we could not hold on to Fr. Chuck a little longer, but it is a source of great rejoicing that neither can death hold on to Fr. Chuck either, as death could not hold on to Christ. As faithful Christians, we do not look at death as much as we look through death. Death is a doorway, a threshold, a final horizon, a Homecoming beyond which lies the new and more abundant, risen life of Christ Jesus.

I would end with a parable that captures for me the Catholic understanding of death as a horizon and a homecoming, and see Father Chuck's death in light of this parable.

"I am standing on a sea shore, watching a ship depart.

She spreads her white sails in the evening breeze and starts out for the mighty, blue ocean, majestic in sail.

She is an object of great strength and beauty.

I continue to watch her, until at length, she is far off on the horizon; a mere speck of white, where the sea and sky meet.

And then someone at my side says: "she is gone!"

"Gone?" "Gone where?" I say. "Gone only from my side perhaps, that is all".

She is still as great in size and majestic in sail as when she left my side. Her diminished size is in ME, not in HER.

And just at the moment when someone at my side says:

"She is Gone!" ... There are others on the other shore - waiting on the other side and shouting joyfully: "Behold, she comes."