

Funeral Mass of Father Rene W. Robert
Homily by Father Timothy M. Lindenfesler
San Sebastian Catholic Church, St. Augustine
April 26, 2016

Gospel: Luke 14:13-35

Brian and Debbie, thank you! Thank you for sharing Dicky with us. More importantly thank you for helping to form Dicky to be the man and priest he became. You held an essential place in Dicky's life. God formed you as a family. Dicky loved you and needed you. He needed your love and support, teasing and pushing of his buttons, challenges and forgiveness. You lifted Dicky up when he was down. You brought him down to Earth when he became cocky, especially when he moved to Florida and decided to start pronouncing your surname in French instead of in English. I know you harassed him to no end about trying to pass himself off as someone he was not. You would also rile him up when he was complacent, and you never let him forget that just because he was the oldest he didn't know everything and he had to listen to you. Thank you for being good siblings and allowing God to work through you in Dicky's life.

For those of you who do not know, Father Rene's birth name is Richard and he has always been Dicky to his family. Father took the name of Rene upon his profession as a Conventual Franciscan in 1962.

Upon arriving this morning one could not escape noticing that there were cars and law enforcement everywhere, media trucks abound, and many were talking, hugging and crying. Those driving down the highway outside for a visit to our historic city are asking themselves "what is going on?" Why all the commotion?

Like the disciples in the Gospel, that was just proclaimed, we are taken aback that not everyone has heard about the murder of Father Rene. We cannot imagine that not everyone knows of our beautiful Father Rene and his great love for God and for God's children. How can people be unaware of our pain, suffering, anger and grief? The disciples tried to explain to the stranger their feelings as we do today.

We have been sharing for a couple of weeks, to all who will listen, that Father Rene was a good man and priest who we love and miss. We treasure his laugh. I do not think that I ever heard him complete a joke without mumbling the punch line because he started laughing during it. We celebrate his love of food and life. How many homes did he visit and how many meals did he eat just a few weeks ago on Easter Sunday? It was not just on holidays but almost every day that he would appear at a family's home and invited himself to eat.

We are challenged by his concern for the environment. Father Rene dumped the Cathedral trash cans out on the floor looking for things to recycle, driving the housekeeper up a wall, long before recycling became acceptable. He never stopped.

Now for his lack of organization. Father was always leaving things behind, misplacing things, and jumping into something that came before him forgetting that there were other things he was supposed to be doing. We treasure these things about Father Rene and we are furious and heartbroken that he was suddenly and violently taken from us.

In our sharing with strangers among us we have tried to convey that Father Rene believed with his whole heart, soul and being that every human being is a child of God. Father Rene taught in both word and action that the life of every human being is to be respected from conception until natural death. God loves every one of us. He wants us to experience that love and share it.

Father Rene sought out anyone who was neglected, marginalized, and felt unloved or abandoned. Father wanted to provide them with an experience of God's love knowing that once they had an experience of being loved by him and God their lives would be forever changed. Father Rene fed and clothed the needy both at soup kitchens and shelters as well as people he met along the road. He protested, either on street corners or at a prison, every time there was to be an execution. To those lost in the depression of grief he offered a shoulder. To those with addictions he tried to make connections with others who could help. To those with disabilities he was a supporter of various summer camp opportunities. To the Hispanic community he arranged to have Mass every week instead of once a month. He even roped me, who while being able to read Spanish cannot speak it, into celebrating the Mass once a month.

Most important of all are his best friends who are deaf or blind. You he loved above all others. To you he devoted the bulk of his life and priestly ministry. You are created in the image and likeness of God. You are a child of God and the divine spark is within you. God loves you and has given each of you a gift and talent. Father Rene expects that you will use these God given gifts to change the world and build the kingdom of God.

Finally, Father Rene sought to offer love, healing, reconciliation, and new hope to those recently released from jail. Many who are released have been abandoned by their families, are unable to obtain work and have no place to live leading them to commit new crimes. These people have been abandoned. Our local law enforcement community has, on more than one occasion, set up transitional housing for those released only to be forced to shut the operation down by the community's fear. Father Rene tried to help one individual at a time start over in life when few others were willing to give them a chance. Father Rene was well aware of the risks, but he believed that the love of God could melt the hardest of hearts. If Father Rene had a chance to go back in time, with full knowledge of how he died, and choose between reaching out to Mr. Murray and avoiding him, I can say with complete confidence he would still reach out to offer his love and a helping hand to Mr. Murray.

This is the child of God, the man and priest who we remember and have been sharing with the strangers in our midst. He was violently and suddenly taken from us and we are lost. We do not know what to say or do. We are walking around in a daze. In our emotional turmoil the spirit of God leads us to cry out "Abba, Father." Lord, hear our prayer! Come and save us!

As we cry out to our Father to come and save us, Father Rene himself cries out “Abba, Father!” Lord, come and save me! I trust that Father Rene called upon the Lord for salvation as he faced death. I trust in this because I know that Father Rene was not perfect. He was well aware of his sins and failings. Father regularly made use of the sacrament of reconciliation. He spent many years in counseling and spiritual direction. Father Rene repeatedly called upon our loving and merciful Father to come and save him from his sins.

Despite all of his hard work and effort Father Rene, like all of us, was unable to overcome his sins on his own. He frequently asked God to save him because he could hurt people despite his good intentions. Father Rene occasionally told offensive jokes. He might antagonize a fellow priest. I remember when he hung his Christmas cards in front of another priest’s bedroom and kept them up until Easter despite the man’s repeated pleas. Father sometimes went into a convent to raid the refrigerator. He might show a lack of concern for others by bringing guests with when he arrived for dinner. Once he brought a bishop to the unprepared family’s home. Occasionally he ignored the instructions of his family and superiors. Father Rene was well aware that, despite trying to share the love of God with others, his words and actions sometimes backfired. Father Rene knew his sins, he tried to overcome them on his own and, like us, frequently failed.

He knew that he could not save himself and so called out Abba, Father, come and save me, forgive me my sins. If Father Rene, because of his sins, hurt you in any way I am sorry.

Together we, with Father Rene, and millions of people throughout the ages cry Abba, Father! Come and save us! We groan in agony as we wait for the redemption of our bodies.

Hearing our cries, pain and agony Jesus says to us I love you! I forgive you! I want you in my life! Come and follow me. Remember that I led you out of Egypt; from slavery to freedom. For 40 years I led you safely through the desert and fed you with manna from heaven bringing you to a land of plenty. When I walked among you I healed the sick, gave sight to the blind, made the deaf hear and the mute speak. I forgave the sinner, sought out the lost and forsaken. I cried and mourned at the deaths of loved ones and I raised the dead to life. I raised you to the height of majesty. I gave you my very life. I give you the Spirit of God, a spirit of adoption. You are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with me. Neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor present things, nor future things, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature will be able to separate you from my love.

When Peter stepped out of the boat to come toward me on the water he became frightened and began to sink. I stretched out my hand and saved him. Be not afraid. I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. You are the Father’s gift to me. I wish that where I am you also may be with me, that you may see the glory that the Father gave me. I go to prepare a place for you, I will come back again and take you to myself, so that where I am you also may be. Your current sufferings are as nothing compared with the glory to be revealed for you.

There is a multitude from every nation, race, people and tongue standing before my Father's throne waiting for me to bring you to them. My Father will shelter you and you will not hunger or thirst anymore, nor will the sun or heat strike you, for I will shepherd you and lead you to springs of life-giving water and my Father and I will wipe away every tear from your eyes.

It is getting late and I have gone on too long. Will you stay with me a little longer? Will you join me for a meal? Will you share in the Eucharistic banquet? These past few weeks have been emotionally draining and I am exhausted. My feelings and emotions have run all over the universe. It is in the celebration of the Eucharist that my eyes are always opened and I recognize that Jesus is with me. That He has been with me, holding me, hugging me, and carrying me at every moment of the past few weeks. He is the living bread that came down from heaven. It is in eating His flesh and drinking His blood that He remains in me and I in Him and that He will raise me and Father Rene on the last day. On that day we shall cry out together "to the one who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor, glory and might, forever and ever. Amen.

Father Timothy Lindenfelser is the pastor of St. Anastasia Catholic Church in St. Augustine.