

Ralph Dwan: 'He brought the Beatitudes to life'

Thomas C. Fox | Mar. 16, 2012 NCR Today

Imagine having lived a life that truly reflected the Beatitudes. Now imagine a friend, a spiritual companion, understood this, and was called upon to reflect on your life in a homily at your funeral.

What would this sound like?

Let me share with you one possibility. First, some brief background.

On Dec. 18, a very good man, Ralph Dwan, died after a short illness. Four days later Fr. Peter Daly, Dwan's good friend and pastor, celebrated Dwan's Mass of Christian Burial at St. John Vianney Church in Prince Frederick, Md.

It was only three days before Christmas.



Dwan was a long time supporter of the parish -- and of the *National Catholic Reporter*. I

spoke with him from time to time, the last time last May 31 at the funeral Mass of former *NCR* publisher Joe Feuerherd.

Ralph and his wife Mary sat two rows behind me. Ralph had long admired Joe, watched him grow up from being a young Washington bureau intern to *NCR* publisher over the decades. Dwan was always encouraging. Feuerherd was always attentive and grateful.

NCR was only one of a number of Catholic groups to benefit from Ralph's uncommon generosity. Dwan was as generous as he was simple and unassuming.

Not long after Christmas I traveled to Africa and Europe, away for nearly two months, and did not catch up with the news of Ralph's death until after I returned only two weeks ago.

I called Mary to offer my condolences. She shared with me the homily Fr. Daly preached at Ralph's funeral Mass. The Dwans long ago adopted St. John Vianney as their parish and a good part of that decision was the admiration they have held for Fr. Daly, by all measures a warm pastor, an accomplished writer, and a regular contributor to Catholic News Service.

Fr. Daly's ability with words quickly becomes clear in the homily.

Personally, I feel much gratitude for having known and associated with Ralph over the years. Like so many others, I feel a deep loss in the wake of his death. However, it pleases me he was loved by so many, that he is

home again, and that our church had so shaped his life.

Fr. Daly's homily:

If there is a template for Ralph Dwan's life it is the Beatitudes of Jesus from Matthew's gospel, chosen by Mary for today's reading.

They are the Magna Carta of the Christian life. They tell us how to live and give us a path to felicity, happiness, in this life and in the life to come. If there ever was anyone who lived the Beatitudes it was Ralph.

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

Ralph had money, but definitely "poor in spirit."

He was completely detached from "material" things.

He wore the same blue jeans and jacket until they wore out.

He hardly ever wore a tie or a suit. He didn't like formal dinners and banquets.

He was the polar opposite of today's consumer culture that knows the price of everything and the value of nothing.

Ralph knew that the value of things is what they could do for the human spirit.

So he gave away everything, for others and for God.

Together with Mary they

- Built up many young people by paying for their educations
- Preserved God's creation as good stewards by supporting the ACLT
- Built up the Body of Christ by teaching in our adult education and converts program, helping people to get annulments in the church so they could be married in the church
- Remembering the poor of our community by paying mortgages, rent, utilities, and medicine for many people.
- Building up the Church by supporting its charities and their parishes, here at St. John Vianney and at St. Joseph's on Capitol Hill.

Ralph was poor in spirit but rich in love which is the Kingdom of Heaven.

I have to tell you one story about Ralph's generosity. He would not want me to tell it if he was alive, but he might not mind it now.

When we announced that we were going to build this church, Ralph came to see me one Saturday morning in the kitchen at the rectory.

It was about this time of year. He said it was for confession.

After confession he told me that he and Mary wanted to help build the church.

He said he would pay for all those things that you could not get anyone to give money for because they were just not "sexy" enough, like the parking lot, the utility connections, the storm water management and the curb and guttering.

I said, "That would be wonderful."

Then he handed me a check --- for a million dollars.

What do you say when somebody hands you a check for a million dollars.
It never happened to me before.

I was having breakfast when Ralph came and there was a piece of coffee cake on the table, so I said to him, "Do you want a piece of coffee cake?"
He said, "I'll split it with you."

That was Ralph, poor in spirit, rich in kindness.

"Blessed are they who mourn, for they shall be comforted."

It is right that there are so many here today for Ralph, because this is where he would have been.

Maybe it was his Irish side, but he and Mary were always going to funerals and wakes. It is Irish recreation.

Ralph was always helping to pay for people's funerals.

He often paid for others, but forgot to pay for his own.

He wasn't just close to people who when they were mourning death. He was close to people in their suffering, even from his youngest days as a priest on Capitol Hill and in Anacostia. When he started the Catholic Center on 8th Street, S.E., he listened to people's troubles. Often he helped them with practical help, usually from his own pocket.

He was in solidarity with those who suffered.

One of Ralph's heroes, Dorothy Day, the founder of the Catholic Worker movement, said in her biography,

"The only answer in this life, to the loneliness we all are bound to feel is community. The living together, working together, sharing together, loving God and loving our brother and living close to him in community so we can show our love for Him."

Ralph was in solidarity with those who mourned, and he was comforted by it.

"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth."

Ralph loved the beauty of creation. He recognized its spiritual value. He like walking in the woods and along the bay near Scientist Cliffs where he had been coming with his family since 1948.

He recognized that we are only stewards of this earth. We are only passing through. That the arrogance of the proud who just want to exploit it for momentary advantage is a foolish arrogance. So together with Peter Voght, and others from Scientist Cliffs he organized the ACLT and supported it over more than 25 years.

If we want to have an earth to pass on to generations to come, we have to be meek enough to restrain ourselves. Others will inherit the earth because Ralph took this seriously.

?Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for justice, for they will be satisfied.?

That was Ralph. His life was a concern for justice, in the biblical sense. That is a concern to defend the widow and the orphan, the weak and defenseless.

I doubt he ever made any money in his law practice, because he was always doing free service for people who needed it.

Earlier in his life he was involved in civil rights, keenly aware of the racial injustice in our country. He went to Birmingham, Alabama, to march for civil rights.

Despite all Ralph's disagreement later in life with Cardinal O'Boyle over birth control and *Humanae Vitae*, he always defended O'Boyle for desegregating the Catholic schools in Washington and for his support for racial equality.

Ralph's life was a gentle quest for justice. Even his disagreement with O'Boyle over birth control was a sign of Ralph's compassion for the poor women he worked with every day who were overburdened.

Ralph's law practice was like that. His law office was no fancy K Street suite. It was a second floor walk-up over a liquor store on 6th Street. Ralph helped anybody who came to him, often for free. What was important to Ralph was that they be treated fairly.

It was a hunger and a thirst for justice.

?Blessed are the merciful, for they shall be shown mercy.?

I never heard Ralph say a bad word about anybody, not even the hierarchy. He always saw the good in people.

Even when he disagreed, he spoke well of others. He was, as the Irish say, an example and reproach to us all in his mercy.

I think that is why Ralph helped so many people over 17 years to get their annulments and work through the thicket of canon law. He wanted to see their marriages blessed in the church. He wanted to see them affirmed by the church. He wanted to cut them some slack and show them some mercy.

He knew that the church was a fraud if it did not show mercy to people.

?Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God.?

Ralph was an honest man. He was truly pure of heart. His love of God was seen in his love for Mary, for the church, for people.

He was a great priest. Loved by his people.

At St. Augustine's and St. Joseph's and St. Theresa of Avila, the people loved him. And he loved them in return. He was still in contact with some.

Purity of heart also has to do with devotion to God.

Ralph and Mary went to Mass almost every day of their adult lives. They were more devoted to the

liturgy of the hours than most priests. He said the morning and evening prayer every day. Sometimes when they missed prayer he would say to Mary, "We didn't pray." He was focused on prayer.

He taught others to pray in RCIA and Adult Education.

Marijka Ulanowicz wrote a wonderful testimony to Ralph in an e-mail to Mary.

"For us, Ralph was the epitome of all that was good in the Church in the wake of Vatican II -- prayerfulness, fellowship, intellect, commitment to social justice and a definite mellowness of spirit. All those things that define what it is to be a Catholic, Ralph showed the world in abundance. We couldn't have asked for a better spiritual role model!"

Any rational church would have found a way to use Ralph's considerable spiritual gifts more fully. He was undeterred by the short sightedness of our church.

He still supported its mission. Together with Mary he kept the Lay Centre in Rome going for the last decade or more. I asked Mary to help out the Lay Centre, but Ralph was always coming to the meetings, so he was put on the Board too. They made a way for lay people to give their talents to the church.

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God."

The only time Ralph ever voiced any criticism of one of my homilies is when I said that Jesus was not a pacifist. Ralph was.

He made peace. He wanted peace in the world, in the church, and in his family. He was always bringing people together and trying to see ways to work things out.

He did not approve of pre-emptive war. He did not think we should be at war with Islam. He was a peacemaker. He was a child of God for sure.

"Blessed are they who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

Ralph was a blessed man. But the church did not always treat him fairly. Never the less he did not harbor resentment.

When Cardinal O'Boyle refused to grant him a dispensation from his vow of celibacy, despite the fact more than 100 other priests were dispensed in the catastrophic year of 1969, Ralph confronted O'Boyle. The cardinal relented.

The kingdom of heaven doubtless has a place for Ralph, even though the Church did not make full use of his talents.

The most endearing thing about Ralph was his love.

Love for Mary.

Love for his family.

Love for his friends.

Love for the poor.

Love for his church.

Love of the land and the earth.

Love for God.

Everyone who knew Ralph loved him back.

And now, the God who loved him into this life has loved Ralph back to himself.

In the final prayers of the funeral Mass we will commend Ralph to God and we will ask that Lazarus, the poor man of the gospels, welcome him into the joys of heaven.

In Catholic theology we believe that the poor, those we have helped in this life, will welcome us into heaven.

If that it true, and I think it is, Ralph will have a crowd to welcome him.

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