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Mirror for Teddy

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Texts and Documents

MIRROR FOR TEDDY*

C. G. Arévalo, S.J.

On Teddy's death anniversary — the sixteenth — those of you who have memories of him need only to recall them, in order to recall him. And to those of you who did not know him, how can we tell you, really tell you, what he was like, what he meant to us, why for us his memory remains living, and himself — more alive than ever . . . ?

Teddy will not mind, I think, if about himself I will this afternoon recall only two things, a fragment from a diary, a picture from memory. And he will not mind if at the end I will make a small confession, which may yet say something about him.

Those of us who lived with Teddy interacted differently with him, according to the chemistry, I guess, of our characters, and other factors like age, and hangups of the moment — and all the rest. Those of us who entered the novitiate from High School, as I did, terribly young and immature and naively idealistic and all that sort of thing, tended (I think) to hero-worship him most times, to be somewhat annoyed with him at others. But as the years wore on and the levelling process that they bring on worked its way, we began to see more and more clearly, I think, the genuineness of his holiness: his love of the Lord, his love then of us. In the later years all the signs we had been told to look for were there: very deep prayer, an unselfishness that was sweeping and radiant, great suffering, seriousness and gentleness both, and — perhaps peculiar to Teddy — an intensity that was sometimes overdramatic (and very Filipino) — something at times really fierce; intensity like flame: even, in the end, dim but steady, hard blue flame.

Let that be the background, and these the two things.

Fragment from a diary: after his death Superiors let me see Teddy's diary, and the entries just before and shortly after ordination were for me really moving passages. There is one, written sometime during the week

*Homily delivered on the occasion of the sixteenth death anniversary of Rev. Teodoro Arvisu, S.J., Arvisu House (Loyola Heights, Quezon City), 18 March 1973.

after ordination. I don't remember the exact words; I reconstruct content from memory. He tells of Masses he celebrates, in Brooklyn, I think. Some members of his family are there, and some members of Fr. John Delaney's family, and some friends. In the midst of this he notes that for him the grace of the priesthood is something almost tangible, a surge of desire to be holy, to be "given" like Jesus, to yield, yield himself to the sacrifice, the self-giving of the Lord. That all this is intense, powerful, in his soul; experienced in the still and silent depths. And he says, this is the time to yield to this grace — this new grace of the priesthood — before we get the chance to get accustomed to it, before familiarity allows us to build resistance to this summoning and challenging grace.

I read that passage after his death, when I was a priest, too, already. When I had experienced a little bit of that power of desire, and had learned to domesticate it, in myself, to learn how to be hard of hearing, occupied with other things, or to be preoccupied with my little problems, — when it summoned, challenged, said, "Come, be at my side, die a little, be more like me."

But we know, you and I, that Teddy never learned to get accustomed to that grace. That he let it work its way in him, that he yielded to it; that he said, "I come, I want to be at your side, die — even more than a little. Let me be like you."

That is the difference, you see, between the genuine article and the poor imitations like the rest of us. Between the diamond and cheap glass, between hard and gleaming steel, and sorry lead like some of us, like myself.

The picture from memory: I was a fourth year Father then, preparing for the final examinations in theology and philosophy. (The ad grad it was then called, and I took it, preparing for it, with perhaps exaggerated seriousness.) At night, before turning in, I would sometimes make a visit to the chapel from the third floor loft.

Teddy was staying with us at Weston College for about two weeks. He was preparing to be UP chaplain; he came to consult John Ford, the moral theologian, who had been his tertian master for some months. One night I went into the chapel to look for him after recreation, and he was at the loft, in prayer. I wanted to speak with him, but he was rapt in prayer, head turned a bit — those of you who knew him will remember. Absolutely immobile, in great and serene prayer. I didn't disturb him, I went back to my room to study, and forgot about him. Nearly two hours later I went back to the chapel, and he was still in the identical position. I thought perhaps he had fallen asleep, but I didn't think so And my own spiritual father at Weston (whom Teddy saw too when he was there) later spoke to me of Teddy's gifts of prayer. Jokingly, that he was glad to know that some Filipino Jesuits knew how to pray.

I could develop this, instead I leave it to you to fill it in. To me it was a moment of epiphany of something very beautiful and also very terrible going on in the depths. This prayer joined to great suffering, to anguish even, and the kindness, the sweetness, the joyousness, the utter selflessness he manifested all through the last few years, when God showed him something of the shadows in the Garden, and the hurt of the nails and abandonment of His own bitter death.

In the last few years I was in a true sense afraid whenever I saw Teddy or spoke with him. Afraid of what God could ask of those who loved him, afraid of what love meant, what holiness meant, what being a priest meant. What being God's man can quite possibly mean, if you let God have his way with you.

But after knowing Teddy, one can never take seriously the people who preach a faith conformed to "the world", an easy and pleasant and undemanding faith, the "secularized Christianity" that is taught in our theology classrooms and asks no price and instead makes money for those who write sensational books about it. For Teddy the faith was something very real and hard, sharp and searing and intense, nothing bland and comfortable and "conformed to the world". It was Bethlehem and Gethsemane, Calvary and Easter, not the kind of thing it has become for many of us. And that is why we pray *to him* this afternoon, and chances are nobody will remember many of us, much, when we shall have been sixteen years dead.

I end with a confession. For some of you older ones there is St. Jude of the hopeless cases, or St. Anthony of Padua, or Therese of Lisieux — people you turn to in prayer, for help, for assistance, when you really "need heaven's help". In my case, when I run into problems, when problems run into me, not always, but very often, I turn to Teddy. Just these last few days I have been wanting some grace, some help, in some very deep part of me. And so I ask him to help me obtain it from God. Usually, he gets my prayers answered. Not always, but then, neither do St. Jude or St. Anthony or St. Therese.

Once, when we were Juniors, just before the silence bell rang for a tridium, Teddy said to me: "Pray God for what you really need, for what you really want. God is too good to turn you down, if you really pray for it." Let this be our last word: through him whom we honor, in memory, in affection, in a veneration of love, pray God for what you really need, what you really want. Ask the big things too: holiness, closeness to Him, genuineness in faith, in hope, in love, in service, in sacrifice. And God, Teddy's terrible, powerful God, will be too good to turn you down.

Teddy, pray for us. Because you love us, pray for us.