

Homily in memory of
Thomas B Steinbugler, SJ

The funeral Mass was held on Saturday, 14 June at 8.00 a.m. in the Oratory of St. Ignatius, Loyola House of Studies, Ateneo de Manila University Campus. Interment followed at Sacred Heart Novitiate cemetery, Novaliches, Quezon City, immediately after the Funeral Mass.

Born: 27 Dec 1929; entered the Society of Jesus: 30 Jul 1948; ordained: 17 Jun 1961.
 Entered eternal life at 9.30 am on 10 June 2014 at home at the Jesuit Residence of Ateneo de Manila

Readings: 2 Timothy 4: 5-8; John 15: 9-17

“Be careful always to choose the right course; be brave under trials; make the preaching of the Good News your life’s work, in thoroughgoing service.” 2 Timothy 4: 5

“This is my commandment: love one another, as I have loved you.” John 15: 12

Thomas B Steinbugler was born on 27 December 1929 and is survived by his twin brother Richard. Tom would call Dick once a week when he could. As this morning we farewell our brother and friend, our hearts go out to Richard, and to one another. Dick will miss Tom’s calls. You will miss your talks with Tom. We come now with affection, humour and a million memories to recall his life.

Tom Stein lived a great life, a life to be celebrated with sadness perhaps, but certainly with gratitude. He spent his childhood in Long Island, New York. “You can take the boy out of the New York, but you can’t take the New York out of the boy”. Despite an incredibly gentle nature, he remained all his life the “can-do”, tough, hard drinking, heavy smoking, boy from New York. Born in 1929, his childhood was marked by the Great Depression of the thirties, and then came the austerity of the Second World War. Generous to a fault with everyone else, Tom remained frugal with himself to the end of his life, always writing his notes on the clean side of used paper. He would fold old envelopes inside out and re-use them.

Tom entered the Jesuits before his 19th birthday and lived for almost 66 years as a Jesuit, well over 50 of those here in the Philippines. After studies at Fordham University, including a Masters in Education, he arrived here in 1955 as a scholastic. Without any chance to learn Tagalog, which later embarrassed him, he was assigned to Ateneo de Manila High School, where he threw himself into everything with the fury of youth, in the classroom and in sports and extra curricula activities. On his return as a priest he spent the sixties and the seventies at Ateneo de Manila University. He was always in administration (Dean of Admissions among many other roles). He established the scholarships programme for poor students in the mid-1960s. He raised the money for the scholars and took a personal care in all who were helped especially those who became sick or in any difficulty. And he never stopped helping get scholarships until the day he died. Fr Daven Day told me that Tom had been in touch with him just weeks ago, looking for help for a student. He was, I am told, one of the co-proponents for Ateneo de Manila to go co-educational; rejected in 1968 when first proposed, it was nonetheless accepted the following year in 1969.

The late sixties and early seventies were turbulent years. Nationalist feeling entered every element, even in Jesuit communities; the American Jesuits were faced with a difficult decision: stay or leave. "Have we done what we can do?" many asked themselves. They had always run things here in the Province, but now it was time for Filipinos to take over. Some could see it clearly. Many returned to the USA where they felt their talents would be better used. Tom however made a choice to remain, despite the normal possible hurts and misunderstandings, he chose to be of service, to be a friend, to be in the background, to give a leg-up to the Filipinos who were ready to assume leadership roles. He was assistant to two Filipino AdMU Presidents, Fritz Araneta and Joe Cruz. Many of us know him in that quiet, self-effacing, yet effective role; it was already his nature to be a supporter, an encourager, a mentor. Through this choice and this period of his life, he grew into the reliable, supportive, enabling person that we have enjoyed over decades. Then and later this role demanded of him humility, patience and understanding, and he had these qualities by the truckload.

"Be careful always to choose the right course; be brave under trials; make the preaching of the Good News your life's work, in thoroughgoing service." 2 Timothy 4: 5

During the wakes of the last days, I am sure there have been many reminiscences about Tom's contributions to the Ateneo, so I should speak about his role with the Jesuit Conference and with Jesuit Refugee Service.

During the seventies, Tom had already drifted into the orbit of international cooperation because of the exchanges among universities in Asia. Fr Arrupe had in the 1960s already issued a stirring challenge that we should break down the walls between provinces; in Asia the Bureau of Asian Affairs had been formed, which later morphed into the Jesuit Conference of East Asia and Oceania, now of Asia Pacific. The vision of Ignatius, well reflected by Pedro Arrupe, to go beyond our local horizons to attend to greater needs, is the vision that inspires the Jesuit Conference. The Conference enabled Tom to offer that greater service. It matched Tom's Jesuit spirit, his affection for Fr Arrupe's vision, and matched also his interests. Moreover there was a need for his competence as an administrator. He remained on and off with the Jesuit Conference until he retired at the close of business in 2009 when he turned 80.

"I do not call you servants any more... I call you friends... I have made known to you everything that I learned from my father. ... I commissioned you to go out and to bear fruit, fruit that will last..."

In the mid-1980s he began to assist the growing Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) in Asia Pacific. Appointed as JRS representative for the Philippines, he kept an eye on the Vietnamese arrival camp in Puerto Princessa and the camp in Bataan for refugees departing for the USA, mostly supporting the JRS workers who were sent to these camps. Then in 1990 he was called to Bangkok, where he replaced me as the Regional Director for Asia Pacific. He later wrote of the context at that time:

"The Asian refugee scene was shifting. The civil war in Cambodia wearied everyone, and people longed for an end. So also the ever-increasing flow of Vietnamese refugees, arriving by land or boat, had exhausted the patience of the receiving countries. The search to find sponsors for those automatically considered to be refugees shifted to refugee status determination as both the first world countries and the UN tried to plug the pipeline. The processing was slow, the camps were miserable..."

Tom's large heart stretched out to welcome and encourage over 100 JRS workers, and many refugees in camps in Thailand, Malaysia, Philippines, Indonesia and Hong Kong. One of those workers who is now in the office of the Secretary General of the UN wrote: "I remember his welcome way back in 1991, on my way to visit Site II, that inspired me to take up this path. How many thousands of lives he must have affected in even more profound ways."

Refugees from Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Burma, and later the Bhutanese in Nepal and Rohingyas in Bangladesh knew of his care and interest. Not only his care for the workers and his kindness to the refugees, but Tom had the skills for what Fr Arrupe asked of JRS that it "act as a switchboard between offers of help ... and the needs..." He was greatly respected by the various benefactors who supported JRS. One of the workers at the time told me, when Tom was in charge we could always have the resources we needed.

One member of a European agency that supported JRS wrote these lines: "Our first encounter was, back in the early nineties, in the JRS Office in Bangkok. We had never met before but there was instant friendship. During the years that followed he became one of my most valuable counterparts in Asia. His opinion has often been decisive in my line of action. Our meetings, phone calls and mails were marked by a shared determination to get things done. Problems were seen as challenges. Solutions were never far away. Taking one step at a time and seeing how matters would subsequently develop. Asia was so fragile and unpredictable in those days. Father Tom was well-informed, loyal, transparent, down-to-earth, well-connected and extremely discrete in business matters. Above all, I will remember him as a man of great solidarity with the plight of men, women and children in sorrow, need and despair. Not one meeting with him has passed without Father Tom expressing his concern for people and organisations known to him and not being on the radar of international agencies like ours."

In his three years as JRS director, Tom set up a programme for legal assistance to refugees in Hong Kong and in the Palawan camps. In 1990 he led the way to establish a JRS footing in Cambodia: "We want to be there to welcome the refugees home," he wrote. This team became the foundations for Jesuit Service Cambodia today.

Another service also began just as Tom came to Bangkok, caring for the Burmese refugees. One of them, a Buddhist wrote to me on hearing that Tom had died. "I remember so well and vividly the kindness and caring of Fr. Tom to us, the Burmese students. He is in my prayer."

For everyone involved with JRS as also for Tom, the refugee story is about the lives and hopes of people we know personally. Knowing people personally, our understanding is transformed. Through engagement with JRS Tom helped the refugees to open the doors of people's hearts, beyond the transitory images of the media, to catch a glimpse into the inspiring lives of people struggling to defend their rights, protect their families and give their children a future.

There is more to speak about Tom's subsequent service through the Conference as assistant to Fr Zuloaga and later to Fr Nicolas: his role in the establishment of BIMBA, an MBA programme at Peking University, and also the setting up of The Beijing Center. He was for many years treasurer and a spiritual father for Arrupe International Residence. The list of his activities is huge, and of the people with whom he sustained deep friendship is countless.

Perhaps I should also speak about the very human side of Tom. We loved him because year after year he would make resolutions to give up smoking, slow down on his drinking, yet year after year those resolutions somehow slipped out of sight. He was transparently human and loveable. This also made him an attractive spiritual guide for many.

The Ignatian 'way' has three steps: start in the Spirit; give from the heart; and choose a practical path. This was Tom's way. He sought to be united with the discerning Spirit who guides each of us. He gave himself with heart and great enthusiasm. He got things done.

Tom had absorbed the "Magis" of Ignatius: For him there were no limits to the people with whom he would mix, no privileged groups, he was open to all, rich and poor, with a preference for the poor. His was a spirituality of empathy, of compassion. Magis for Tom clearly meant more love, more sharing, more service.

I conclude with the prayer found in the spiritual journal, the Memoriale of Peter Faber, our recently canonized Jesuit saint who was the first priest in the Society and with Xavier a first companion of Ignatius. This prayer could easily have been Tom's own request to his Lord who now welcomes him home.

With great devotion and new depth of feeling, I also hoped and begged for this, that it finally be given me to be the servant and minister of Christ the consoler, the minister of Christ the helper, the minister of Christ the redeemer, the minister of Christ the healer, the liberator, the enricher, the strengthener. Thus it would happen that even I might be able through him to help many – to console, liberate, and give them courage; to bring to them light not only for their spirit but also (if one may presume in the Lord) for their bodies, and bring as well other helps to the soul and body of each and every one of my neighbours whomsoever.

"The life and death of each one of us has an influence on others." (Romans 14: 7) Tom "Stein" sure had an influence on me and I dare say on many of us here through the life that he lived and the institutions he helped to build.

Mark Raper SJ
Jesuit Conference of Asia Pacific