

# He Spoke Truth to Power and to Anyone Else

with a Little Help from the Virgin Mary

**Deacon Gaspare (Frank) Bruno, October 12, 1929 – February 2, 2010**

**A Retrospective Homily at the *Mass for Christian Burial*, February 5, 2010**

**by Monsignor Thomas P. Sandi, Pastor, Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton Church, Shrub Oak, NY**

***Ecclesiastes 3:1-11; Revelation 14:13; John 6:48-58***

On Monday, at 3:00, Frank Bruno came to my office; he had been visiting the collection counters in the rectory dining room—a *very* important parish group. He came in and asked me, “Would you mind if I put the Eucharist back in the tabernacle today?” (He was referring to the reposition of the Blessed Sacrament which is exposed for adoration in our chapel every weekday, 12:00 noon to 3:00.) And I said, “Sure Frank, be my guest.” He went into the living room, and, parishioner Bill Lewis tells me, he told the counters, “I’m going to see ‘the Boss’.” He secured the Eucharist and afterwards left the rectory about 4:00. He returned home then and just before 8:00, Pauline tells me he was listening to the radio--as he often did--to a station where politics was being discussed--of course--Pauline said he was “yelling at the radio”--we knew this side of Frank--and then went down and entered into his long, long awaited rest.

One of the last e-mails Frank sent a parishioner concerned a GI over in Iraq singing a song about people while he was on duty. In other words, we here in the United States were safe asleep while that soldier was guarding our freedom. The song was entitled, “If I Should Die Before *You* Wake.” (You know, the original children’s night prayer this is taken from, “If I should die before *I* wake.”) And the lyrics speak about the sacrifices that are being made by men and women in uniform, while of course their families (and ours) sleep comfortably and safely in their beds. The refrain of the song is “It ain’t too high a price to pay, if I should die before you wake.” I think that’s an amazing sentiment Frank forwarded on the very night he was fatally stricken. One of many amazing things connected with Frank’s life. (By the way, the time of that email is 10:52--which is quite impossible, since he was in Putnam County Hospital by that time. Who knows how *that* happened? Certainly, Frank Bruno would not have been late with *anything*.)

What shall I call this *reflection on the Scriptures* today, especially *hearing the voice from heaven saying*, “Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord. Let them find rest from their labors; their works accompany them.” We always knew Frank was in the rectory before we’d see him; his voice preceded him! And we cherished his visits. He brought us a sense of the real, the genuine, the *truth*.

Last Saturday, after meeting the new archbishop of New York in the rectory dining room, Frank engaged Archbishop Dolan in a conversation. He said, “You know in the New Testament, first there were bishops [the Apostles] and deacons; *then* there were priests.” Curious and amused, the archbishop folded his arms and said, “Tell me more about that, Frank.” And of course, he did, *seated*--in fact he was the only one seated among the clergy, including the archbishop! (His legs were giving him trouble.)

That was Frank! He was unafraid to **speak truth to power**. When Jesus spoke about the *Bread of Life* (as we heard in the Gospel passage), he meant of course that he was the only nourishment for our souls—the only way our souls remained alive and fresh. That’s all. Frank understood that intuitively. Devoted to the Virgin Mary (specifically under the title of *Our Lady of Fatima*, to whom he contributed his conversion to a more active Catholicism many years before), and of course, the Eucharist, he understood the Real Presence of Almighty God, and today, folks, can’t we sense the very real *absence* of Frank among us? And yet perhaps we should rethink that. If Frank is with God, and God is nearby, then *Frank* is nearby . . . as usual!

I woke up today, still formulating this homily; I opened my venetian blinds and saw Frank’s SUV parked in its usual spot! I really was stunned. (Did you leave it there, Pauline? Thank God.) I thought, here I am preparing this important homily and Frank’s *nearby*! Of course. You could always identify his SUV by the original license plate lettering, THANKUPD: that is, “Thank you, NYPD [New York Police Department].” We all knew he was a policeman, didn’t we? And he reveled in the vivid memories of that part of his life! Monsignor Fogarty, our second pastor, once told Frank, “You don’t know how safe I feel with you standing in the back of the church.” (He was an usher at the time.)

Eventually, Frank became a deacon.

Recently, a choir member told me he saw Frank, years ago, sitting by himself very still one day in a rear pew. He asked him what was troubling him. Frank said, “Sit down next to me; I’m thinking of becoming a deacon; you think I could do that? I’ve seen and done such terrible things in my life, I don’t know if I’m worthy.” The choir member quietly said, “If God is calling you, Frank, God is calling you.”

Shortly thereafter, Frank made up his mind, retired early from the NYPD, and began his four-year preparation for ordination to the diaconate. His ministry was always centered around *the Eucharist, with a little help from the Virgin Mary*. This was his inspiration for his duties to the poor, the homebound, to those who needed Christian instruction, those children who served at the altar. Because of this he was motivated to do his good deeds within the priestly ranks, within the deacon ranks, with Sister and the parish school teachers, with Religious Educators—preaching by his life that the *Bread of Life* is the center of life. He had many experiences that brought him close to death as a policeman.

One amazing life experience he often spoke about, happened before he became a policeman. He was a GI assigned to Tokyo, Japan, right after the Second World War. He was attached to the famed Seventh Cavalry--can you imagine! *General Custer and the Last Stand*, and all that-- Frank wouldn’t belong to just any *ordinary* unit! He was sent home because his mother needed support. He was honorably discharged. Shortly thereafter, his unit went to Korea to fill the breach in a frontline battle, and every one of his brothers under arms gave their life for our country, except one, and of course, our Frank! [The 7<sup>th</sup> lost its regimental flag only twice: at Little Big Horn, MT, and in Korea.] That experience moved him very much. You see, the Lord obviously was holding him very close. He was spared for future service.

This is part of the unspoken background he brought to his morning scripture class made up of a dozen or so women he taught every Tuesday; he loved it and they loved him. He looked upon teaching Scripture as a privilege, and when I would walk in on the class, from time to time, saying, humorously, “If there is any heresy taught here, let me know.” There never was, of course. And he would give me a Frank “look,” and say, “Thank

you Monsignor; now where were we ladies?” And all of you know that “look.” (One of the pictures of Frank on display here on the easel has that “look.”)

He used to say to me every so many times, “Monsignor, let me tell you something.” You’d know then to sit down and listen. But it was always **truth to power and to anyone else**. (Notice, I didn’t say to anyone else *who would listen!*) He spoke the truth to any and every one; the truth being Jesus Christ, especially in *the Eucharist, with a little help from the Virgin Mary*.

We bought two stools for the sacristy some years ago because Frank used to lean against the radiator. I told him, “Frank maybe we could use a chair or two.” He said, “We don’t *need* chairs.” When we did purchase the two stools (on which the mitre and crozier bearers are now sitting), of course Frank didn’t like them until I christened them *Frankenstools*. Then he sat there and serenely surveyed the activity in the sacristy before Mass. In fact, after a while, if any of the altar servers sat on the stools, he would raise his voice and say, mischievously, “Get off those stools! Those are *my* stools!” All in fun; all in fun.

Frank was born in Italy, came to New York, and settled in the Bronx, in the Parish of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, coincidentally, in which I and Deacon Mike Wilson were also brought up. He had four brothers, two sisters, and later, eight children (one of whom, Joseph, died ten years ago), and nine grandchildren; he was so proud of them. He often told us very interesting stories about “the neighborhood,” that is Arthur Avenue; some of these stories I can’t repeat. He was a “real man,” a complete man, eventually with a wife of a similar strong will and temperament—just like dramatized in the play *A Man for All Seasons*.

In the 1966 film, *A Man for all Seasons*, Lord Chancellor, Thomas More has been condemned to die by the king whom he had offended by **telling the truth** according to his conscience; he put his life on the line for the Faith. His plain-speaking wife, Alice, visits him in jail and, frustrated finally, because he is being so unfairly treated [for what he will not say about the king’s marriage], raises her voice and bellows, “If anyone wants *my* opinion about the King [Henry VII] and his Council, they’ve only to ask for it.” (It would have been a treasonous act deserving death, of course.) More says, “Why, it’s a lion I’ve married. A lion! A lion!” Such is *Pauline* Bruno.

Pauline could play *ping-pong* with Frank very well, and match him stroke for stroke—and you *know* I’m not speaking about any *table* game here! (Am I right?) She knew exactly how to handle him, and her tenderness was always there for him.

Frank took early retirement from the police force to study for the diaconate, and he took it very seriously, spending over ten years studying at Dunwoodie and the Institute of Religious Studies. And you could see his pedigree as a Catholic educator. When Frank spoke, he *spoke*. He knew his Scripture, he knew his theology, and he knew his Faith, rooted in *the Eucharist, with a little help from the Virgin Mary*.

Frank loved Gorgonzola cheese--straight Gorgonzola--and hot pepper with his food (not many people could consume those delicacies and live!). He was especially proud of his Italian-American heritage (and why not?) and his beautiful family. Still, last night’s wake here in the church looked more like an old fashioned *Irish wake* to me (and why not?) Do you agree? He would have loved it, because he had a knack of mixing otherwise contradictory things in a beautiful and complete manner. You see, for Frank, everything was *of a piece*. He could take on anything that came his way. He knew the Truth, and spoke it!

He loved to repeat, with a flourish, his police escapades, especially the *largest, most successful hotel robbery in history* at the Hotel Pierre [in 1972], when true bravery was called for. [See: *The Guinness Book of World Records*.] He would be so *proud* to see the NYPD police presence here today--the honor guard is from the Bronx, Brooklyn and Queens. He loved to repeat the statistic. "I had more men in my squad than the entire Pleasantville Police Department"--of which our *other* deacon, Michael Wilson, is the lieutenant. And his e-mails were something else! You loved them or hated them, but you were never *unmoved*. (Am I right?) He was going to **tell you the truth** as he saw it, political or devotional--many caused you to wipe a tear from your eyes. He knew the truth and spoke it quite fearlessly.

This big, gruff, giant of a man, of course, had a magnificent, soft heart . . . for people. All he ever wanted to do was **tell the truth**, rooted in *the Eucharist with a little help from the Virgin Mary*.

Ten years ago Frank had a head-on collision on Route 6N, after leaving a Father Giandurco lecture at Seton before it was finished. Last Sunday night, he attended a Priest Panel we had here with Monsignor Giandurco among others. He told me afterwards, he wasn't likely to leave early this time! He learned his lesson. Now isn't that interesting? Frank was stricken the very next night and passed away; he went back to God. It was the *Feast of the Presentation of Our Lord in the Temple*. I anointed him just after midnight on Tuesday, February 2<sup>nd</sup>, and we called Bishop Jim McCarthy. You know what the bishop said? I think Frank is going to "go" on the feast day of Mary! And he did. Rest in peace, Frank!

Now how could anyone weave seemingly so many contradictory experiences and make a satisfactory life? I'll tell you; it was the *Bread of Life*, and **love**, of course, and nothing less: love of his family, love of his country, love of his heritage, love of the police department, love of Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton Parish, love of the children, love of the sick, love of the religious, love of the clergy. How did he put it all together? And everything in its season? I don't know. It had to be because of the *Author of Life* and his dear Mother. He went "home" on her feast.

You see, he truly believed *there is a season for everything* under the sun (as we heard proclaimed in the first Reading), *a time to be born and a time to die*. If Frank could have set his life's calendar, his death might not have been just as it was, or maybe not. Perhaps he wanted to go to resting peace with his Father and ours. (Rest in peace, Frank.)

Now, can you imagine *Frank arriving in heaven*? I want you to think of it. Just for a moment. Imagine it. I'm sure the Lord Jesus opened his arms and warmly welcomed him . . . with joy beyond measure . . . with the Virgin Mother standing just behind her Son. I'm sure of a loving embrace. And I'm *just* as sure Frank would have begun **talking** right away . . . about the love he had for Jesus, his family, his wife, his children, his grandchildren; for the church and the Archdiocese, specifically at Seton; and done so in the colorful way he always expressed himself. And of course, Jesus would say, "Frank, I already know that." "But, Frank surely would add, "Jesus, let me tell you something." and then *Jesus* would have to sit down (!), as Frank Bruno talked about the Eucharist and the Virgin Mother, and how he cobbled so much contradiction into his life here on earth. *Psalm 90* describes the span of our life as "seventy years or eighty if we are strong." He was amazed he reached eighty. And he loved every minute of it.

He told me that his wife was going to give him a special present for this special birthday.. I fell for it, and said, "What?" He said, "My wife is taking me to Disney World!!" (Look at the photo collage and see Frank, Pauline and Donald Duck. It's so "Frank.")

He was given eighty years by God to *speaking truth to power and anyone else*, and he did so very, very well. Ever since his mid-life conversion experience through the intercession of Jesus' mother at Fatima, he worked ceaselessly *to live the life of Christ* every day.

You know, some years ago, he took the *Lourdes bath*. He went in as does everyone without clothes, (picture that!), and though very cold at first, he became *warm* once immersed in the healing water. Frank would do anything for the Lord . . . anything for Jesus and Mary.

He managed to mesh everything in his life perfectly. That's why God put Frank on this earth. He responded very well, in the time he spent *under the sun*. Along with Pauline, Frank truly changed this Church here, and that of the whole world; remember, the actions of one affect the whole! He often said (and meant it) that this Christian life is not meant for the weak; being the Body of Christ requires strength—**telling truth to power and anyone else**. This is the man we were privileged to know and love.

When the sad event of his passing occurred Tuesday, so many people immediately went into action to embrace this family . . . even strangers.

On Monday, we had a planning session, with Frank in attendance, with the priest who will preach the parish mission this year. Upon hearing Frank was gone, he said he was stunned because he really enjoyed being with him for just one hour. He said he was speechless. (Frank took to him right away. It might have helped that he had an *Italian* name. Who knows?) Halfway through this priest's presentation, Frank said, "Father, let me tell you something." And right on cue, the priest sat up straighter, folded his arms and said, "Yes, Frank."

There is no doubt about it; it's as if a *hole has been put in the fabric of our parish*. We have to weave it back together again, as the Lord wills. Assisting us today are many priests and deacons, as it *should* be. Three of his best buddies could not be here today, and so I mention them with great respect: **Monsignor Joe Giandurco, Father Kieran Mandato, and our own Fr. Rajan**, who is visiting his family in India. I know it is especially painful for Fr. Rajan. Frank was like a father and best friend to him. Frank always got his jokes. He *loved* Fr. Rajan and the feeling was mutual.

There's another photograph over on the easel there with Bishop McCarthy, Fr. Rajan and Frank. It shows true friendship and love that existed here so beautifully. Look at the mischievousness in their eyes!

Frank tried to love everyone; if he didn't love you he tried harder, because he believed one could not otherwise live the truth that was Jesus, and share in *the Eucharist with a little help from the Virgin Mary*. Amazing grace, amazing grace created Frank, turned him around and flowed from him into many, many lives. Make use of his example, of his insights--what he learned and lived; this is Jesus' gift to us all. And listen carefully, very carefully; Frank Bruno, who is not far away at all, who is now as close to you as is his Lord whom he served so valiantly, is still speaking. "Listen, let me tell you something . . . something more about speaking *the truth to power*, and *the Eucharist, with a little help from the Virgin Mary*. "Listen to the soft voice of your Lord, whispering . . . love." Amen!