

Reflections for the Funeral of +Keith Steven Zawila

**First Presbyterian Church, Libertyville, Illinois
November 14, 2016**

**† Most Reverend Thomas John Paprocki
Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

My dear Friends and Family Members of Keith Zawila,

Before I offer the Final Commendation and Benediction, I wish to add my expression of sympathy to the condolences offered earlier by Pastor Brian Paulson and Deacon Tom Gryzbek. I pray that God will comfort Sara, Kevin, Pam and all of Keith's family members and friends.

Keith and I were not only classmates at Niles College of Loyola University, but we were also roommates together with Jerry Krusinski during our junior year of college. Keith, Jerry, Tom Gryzbek, John Nowinski and I became close friends in college and remained friends for years to come. We shared our Polish-American heritage, our Catholic faith and our love for sports. We played basketball and floor hockey, attended Blackhawks hockey games and vacationed together. The five of us once rented a Winnebago and drove down to Florida. It was a memorable trip, especially when the engine of the Winnebago caught fire just before we got

back home! We attended each other's special events, including weddings, ordinations and family funerals. So it seems very unreal for us to be here now at Keith's funeral.

Keith grew up in a second-floor apartment on the North Side of Chicago, and I grew up in a second-floor apartment on the South Side of Chicago, so even though we did not root for the same Chicago baseball team, I am sincerely glad that Keith got to see his Cubs win a World Series during his lifetime!

Two qualities that are especially characteristic of people of Polish heritage are hospitality and loyalty. There is a saying in Polish that translates as, "A guest in the house is God in the house." A guest in the Zawila home was always treated with heavenly hospitality! In this regard, I wish to acknowledge and say thank you to Pastor Brian Paulson and the community of faith here at First Presbyterian Church in Libertyville for your gracious hospitality. Even in death, Keith is still working to bring people together, in fulfillment of Christ's prayer that "all may be one" (John 17:21).

Keith's loyalty as a friend can be seen not only in the participation of Deacon Tom and myself in Keith's funeral so many years after we met in

college, but also by the presence of so many of his friends yesterday at the wake and here at his funeral today.

The primary purpose of a funeral liturgy is to commend the deceased to the mercy of God, and so we entrust Keith to our loving Savior. In our prayers we also to give thanks to God for the blessings of his life: the ways God blessed Keith, as well as the way Keith was a blessing to us. Keith was a real blessing to me when we were seniors in college and I tore the cartilage in my knee while playing goalie in a hockey game. This was in 1973, so I had to have knee surgery the old-fashioned way. Keith came with me to the admitting office at Resurrection Hospital. As I was getting ready to sign a stack of informed consent forms, Keith was looking over the papers when he suddenly said, "Hey Popo, isn't it your right knee that they're supposed to operate on?" I said, "Yes." To which Keith responded, "I think you want to get them to change this form: it says they're going to operate on your left knee!" Thanks, Keith, for your eagle eye and for being there when I needed you!

In the last few days of his life, many of us had the opportunity to talk with Keith one last time and share our gratitude and our love for each other. Sara says that she and Kevin were blessed to have such a special

time of sharing with Keith last weekend. After Keith and Kevin had a long talk and expressed their love and gratitude for each other, Keith concluded with some final words of advice to Kevin: "Remember to put gas in the lawn mower and gas with oil in the snow blower." It was vintage Keith, but his way of telling Kevin that he would now be the man of the house and he would have to take care of these things.

During the 1990's, it was my privilege to serve as Chancellor of the Archdiocese of Chicago when the late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin was the Archbishop. Cardinal Bernardin died twenty years ago today after his own struggle with cancer. In the last two months of his life, Cardinal Bernardin wrote a book called, *The Gift of Peace*, in which he shared his personal reflections and insights to help others dealing with terminal illness. He wrote of his diagnosis of pancreatic cancer and surgery, then the return of cancer, which spread to his liver, and his decision to discontinue chemotherapy and live his remaining days as fully as possible. Bernardin told his story openly and honestly, and shared the profound peace he found at the end of his life. He accepted his peace as a gift from God. Since their experiences were similar, Keith read *The Gift of Peace*, and through this book I believe he himself found peace.

Cardinal Bernardin concluded his book with these words:

As I conclude this book, I am both exhausted and exhilarated. Exhausted because the fatigue caused by the cancer is overwhelming. Exhilarated because I have finished a book that has been very important to me.

As I write these final words, my heart is filled with joy. I am at peace.

It is the first day of November, and fall is giving way to winter. Soon the trees will lose the vibrant colors of their leaves and snow will cover the ground. The earth will shut down, and people will race to and from their destinations bundled up for warmth. Chicago winters are harsh. It is a time of dying.

But we know that spring will soon come with all its new life and wonder.

It is quite clear that I will not be alive in the spring. But I will soon experience new life in a different way. Although I do not know what to expect in the afterlife, I do know that just as God has called me to serve him to the best of my ability throughout my life on earth, he is now calling me home.

Many people have asked me to tell them about heaven and the afterlife. I sometimes smile at the request because I do not know any more than they do. Yet, when one young man asked if I looked forward to being united with God and all those who have gone before me, I made a connection to something I said earlier in this book. The first time I traveled with my mother and sister to my parents' homeland of Tonadico di Primiero, in northern Italy, I felt as if I had been there before. After years of looking through my mother's photo albums, I knew the mountains, the land, the houses, the people. As soon as we entered the valley, I said, "My God, I know this place. I am home." Somehow I think crossing from this life into life eternal will be similar. I will be home.

Although we knew that Keith was diagnosed with cancer seventeen months ago, still the news of his death last Tuesday seemed to come far too quickly and too soon. After coming up from Springfield to Chicago early on Tuesday to be with Sara, Kevin and Pam and help make arrangements for Keith's funeral, I returned to Springfield that same day physically and emotionally quite drained. When I went to bed, it did not take me long to fall asleep, as is usually the case for me, but before falling asleep, and still feeling upset and disturbed by the events of the day, I suddenly had this sense of peace and calm come over me, as if Keith were saying to me, "Don't worry, Tommy, I'm going to be all right. Everything's going to be all right."

As a man of deep Christian faith, Keith believed in the resurrection and the promise of eternal life. We who share in that belief know that this message pretty well sums up our faith and our hope: Yes, Keith is going to be all right. Keith has gone home. He is at peace.

May God give us this grace. Amen.