

# Homily: Funeral Mass of Bishop Thomas J. O'Brien

St. Mary's Basilica • 31 August 2018

Rev. Charles G. Kieffer

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## *Scriptures:*

First Reading: Wisdom 3: 1-9 ("The souls of the just are in the hand of God")

Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 27 ("The Lord is my light and my salvation, of whom should I be afraid?")

Second Reading: Romans 8:31b-35, 37-39 ("If God is for us, who can be against us?")

Gospel: Luke 24: 13-35 (*story of disciples on road to Emmaus:* ("Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer and so enter into his glory?")

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It seems appropriate that we're here today in St. Mary's Basilica to celebrate Bishop Thomas O'Brien's life with us – and even more importantly, to celebrate his new birth into eternal life. It's appropriate that we gather *here* to pray, because in many ways, St. Mary's is the "mother church" of Catholic Phoenix. This church is in the core of the downtown that Bishop Tom was committed to maintaining a Diocesan presence in – at a time when downtown Phoenix was a run-down shadow of what it is today. It's appropriate that we're here today, since some 31 years ago, Bishop O'Brien stood in this basilica at the side of the now-Saint John Paul II as the Holy Father began his Pastoral Visit to our Diocese of Phoenix.

For those I've not had the privilege to meet, my name is Fr. Charles Kieffer; I currently serve as Pastor of St. Theresa Parish in Phoenix (where the then-Father Tom O'Brien served as parochial vicar from 1964 through 1966)... and am deeply honored to have been asked by Bishop O'Brien to be the homilist at his Funeral Mass. Why me? Well, maybe it's because Bishop Tom and I shared quite a journey as fellow-disciples of Jesus Christ in ministry and friendship over the past four decades. Others here today have shared a similar journey with him.

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*We just heard the story of those two disciples on the road to Emmaus on that first Easter Sunday. It was no ordinary journey – but one filled with *crushing disappointment, questioning, insight, wonder, joy and amazement*. It was a journey in the presence of the Risen Christ, though sometimes he was unrecognizable.*

If we're honest with ourselves, each of us can probably relate at least somewhat to those two disciples in our own life's journey as individuals. It was a journey that Bishop O'Brien took as well. A journey that we continue to take collectively, as the People of God of the Diocese of Phoenix. A journey of highs and lows, joy and pain, a journey of

questions and hope... a journey that – if we allow it – is ultimately sustained by the power of a loving and merciful God.

Bishop Tom accompanied many people on their journey of life, helping them to grow as disciples on the journey of Building Up the Body of Christ here in our Diocese. I was among those blest by having him as a “companion on the journey.”

My first encounter with Fr. Tom O’Brien was in 1979 at the old Autom Company store at 7<sup>th</sup> Street and Virginia. As a seminarian freshly arrived in my newly-adopted Phoenix Diocese, when I saw a man in a Roman collar shopping there as well, I decided to introduce myself to him. Fr. O’Brien, then serving as pastor of St. Catherine’s in South Phoenix, warmly welcomed me into the Diocese with a genuineness that I had rarely encountered. He invited me to call him Tom – and offered to be assistance to me in any way that he could. Little did I know that this man would come to be – in so many ways – the older brother I never had (*I won’t use the term “big brother” for obvious reasons of size...*).

The June following our initial meeting at the religious goods store, Thomas O’Brien served as the emcee for my ordination to the priesthood by Bishop James Rausch – our second bishop. Again, Fr. Tom was encouraging and helpful to all four of us being ordained that day as we dealt with our pre-ordination jitters.

A few months later as a freshly-ordained priest, I was at St. Catherine’s parish for the ceremony at which Bishop Rausch invested Fr. Tom as a Monsignor. The new Msgr. Tom seemed a little sheepish as he put on his cassock with red piping. I believe he was the first priest to be named monsignor in the Diocese of Phoenix (the couple of others of our Diocese had come over from Tucson). It just wasn’t a custom in our post-Vatican II diocese, and it was clear that he was a bit uncomfortable to be receiving this honor. One could tell that he was a person who preferred to minister quietly and really didn’t want to be in the spotlight. Nevertheless, Msgr. O’Brien was warmly gracious as he greeted people individually at the end of the ceremony.

The following May 18<sup>th</sup> at the age of 52, Bishop Jim Rausch dropped dead of a massive heart attack at the check-out counter in a local supermarket. Within hours, Msgr. O’Brien was elected by the Diocesan College of Consultors to become Administrator of the Diocese – and, with my placement as Associate Pastor and coordinator of bishop’s liturgies at the Cathedral, my journey with Thomas O’Brien became closer as we planned for the funeral of Bishop Rausch.

In months that followed, it felt like our Diocese was in a state of suspended animation. As the shock of Bishop Rausch’s death began to settle, Catholics naturally began to

speculate about who might be sent to the Diocese become our next bishop, confident that it would be someone who would continue to build on the momentum of the Diocese established by Bishop McCarthy and carried on by Bishop Rausch. Since our two prior bishops had come from outside the diocese, most of us had no reason to think that our third bishop wouldn't also "come from afar."

Many of us, then, were stunned to wake up one morning to the news that Msgr. Tom O'Brien had been chosen by Pope John Paul II to serve as the Third Bishop of Phoenix. Later that same day at Fr. Joe Hurtado's funeral in Immaculate Heart Church, it seemed surreal to see the principal celebrant of the Mass, our Diocesan Administrator, come down the aisle with a zucchetto on his head.

The next couple of months were a blur: Tom O'Brien was ordained bishop in St. Peter's Basilica by Pope John Paul II on Epiphany 1982 and subsequently installed as our bishop in a packed Wells Fargo Arena at ASU, taking as his episcopal motto a verse from the 4<sup>th</sup> chapter of Paul's Letter to the Ephesians, "To Build Up the Body of Christ."

He came FROM the Body of Christ of the Church of Phoenix, and dedicated himself from that day forward TO the Body of Christ of our Diocese. I'll never forget the final 9 words of his homily at that installation Mass, addressed to all the people he would serve across the five counties of our Diocese: "I love you, I love you, I love you."

Due to my assignments at the Cathedral, my ministry and that of now-Bishop O'Brien's began to intersect on a deeper and more frequent level. Many of those in ministry in our Diocese began to experience our new Bishop in fresh ways as he began leading the Diocese of Phoenix forward.

I'm certain that I'm just one of many who can say that my journey of discipleship, my journey of priesthood and my journey of life as a human being would be forever changed under the guidance of the Third Bishop of Phoenix.

Bishop Tom was part of – and had inherited the shepherd's care for – a vibrant, progressive Vatican II Diocese, which was actually only established in 1969, following the Second Vatican Council. Fr. O'Brien had incardinated from the "mother Diocese of Tucson" into our newly created Diocese, becoming one of the first priests of the Phoenix Diocese. Bishops McCarthy and Rausch, our first two bishops, had capitalized on our being a post-conciliar diocese establishing fresh traditions, and that reputation was well-known across the country. Along with a critical need for priests in a growing Church, this reputation was a great part of what brought me out here from Washington, DC... and, over the years, continued to bring a number of others from various parts of the US and the world. In many ways, our Diocese was a liturgical center for the country: North

American Liturgy Resources was based in Glendale, bringing lots of liturgical and musical talent into our area. The young Church of Phoenix was an exciting place to serve in ministry. Arizona was only beginning its booming population growth; in those days 99% of the priests – both religious and diocesan – knew one another by sight and by name, since there were fewer than 100 of us... yet we covered the same 44,000 miles that we do today. Bishop Tom set the tone by knowing all the priests by their first name.

*Pause...*

In 1985, Bishop asked me to serve as Diocesan Vocation Director, so I joined the staff at the old Diocesan Center building and became even more familiar with our far-flung diocese and its bishop, often driving him on out-of-town trips. I began to learn about Bishop Tom's faith in God and his love for the Blessed Mother. I saw first-hand his tremendous compassion toward people who were experiencing trials in their lives, the way that he'd make surprise visits to hospital patients, his love for his sister Jeanne and the rest of his family, the special fraternal love he had for his brother priests and that certain "hard-headed stubbornness" (on a positive side, you could say tenaciousness) that can sometimes be associated with people of Irish extraction.

Bishop O'Brien was a strong supporter of vocations ministry – at every opportunity possible, he would actively invite both men and women to consider a call to the priesthood or religious life. His care for the diocesan and religious priests extended to his care for our seminarians, joining in seminarian retreats and always having time for them... his door was always open to priests, religious and seminarians.

Bishop had a special love and respect for the women religious of our Diocese, those "pioneers" who migrated from Ireland and from all over our country to staff our schools, St. Joseph's Hospital and to lead a number of Diocesan departments and ministries. He believed firmly in the role of the laity and the role of consensus in the Church and would typically consult (sometimes, it seemed endlessly!) with various advisory groups – including the Presbyteral, or Priest's, Council, the Diocesan Finance Council and the Diocesan Pastoral Council – made up of lay and religious representatives from parishes across the Diocese. Some major decisions would even include the vote of every priest. For Bishop Tom O'Brien, the Church was indeed the People of God – and it was our call (priests, religious, along with all women and men of faith) to join with our Bishop in "Building Up the Body of Christ."

As the journey of our friendship evolved, opportunities unfolded that I never imagined possible. Tom loved the adventure of exploring new places and going on various trips with friends and family members, and he and I frequently ended up travelling together – not only around the Diocese but beyond as well, whether it be to a meeting of bishops and vocation directors in California, up to the White Mountains for vacation, a few days

with the Presbyteral Council in Rocky Point each May or an *ad limina* visit to Rome. These trips were unique opportunities for me to truly come to know and appreciate on a whole new level the mentor and friend I had in Bishop Tom. I'm sure those here who have also been on trips with him know *exactly* what I mean... and can tell *lots* of stories about those journeys!

Our final two trips had some very memorable moments:

In April of 2014, Bishop O'Brien asked me to accompany him to Vatican City, to participate in the canonization of Pope John XXIII and Pope John Paul II. Shortly after our arrival, Bishop Tom asked Cardinal O'Malley to pass on the gift of a compact disc of opera music to the Holy Father, knowing that Pope Francis was a fellow-fan of opera. A few days later, we were at the Canonization Mass (which was incredible), and was especially moving for Bishop Tom – who was participating in the canonization of the man who ordained him a Bishop. It was extraordinary – during the ceremony, we were seated 8 rows directly behind Pope Emeritus Benedict as we concelebrated a Mass with two Popes who were canonizing two Popes. Absolutely mind-boggling. Following the Sunday Canonization Mass, we had a few more days to enjoy Italy. The day before we flew back to Phoenix, we had the opportunity to attend the Wednesday Papal Audience and, along with multitudes of bishops and cardinals, walked up to the Holy Father afterwards for the personal greeting, photographs and handshake. I was at Bishop Tom's side as the Holy Father signed the cross on the bishop's forehead, took his hand in his and said "Thank you for the music." *It had been nearly a week (a very busy one) since the disc had been conveyed to the Pope through Cardinal O'Malley – and the Holy Father just remembered and made the connection.* "Thank you for the music." No one prompted the Pope to say "thank you" at that moment. Bishop Tom was deeply moved. Shortly after our return home, Bishop Tom received a thank you note on papal stationery signed simply "Francis." It still amazes me to think back on those events.

On slightly a different note was an experience we had several months later while enroute to Ireland to celebrate the funeral Mass and burial there of Msgr. John McMahon, my predecessor at St. Theresa. The Parkinson's disease began to take its toll on the Bishop's mobility, so we had a fold-up portable walker with us that could also double as a wheel chair when needed. British Airways was very accommodating, even to the point of scrambling to arrange for handicap accessible ground transportation that could get us to a completely different terminal at London's Heathrow Airport in time to board our connecting flight, when they realized that it would be impossible for us to do by ourselves. As soon as we cleared customs, the British Airways agent hustled us out of our arrival terminal to a pull-up area where there was waiting for us the wheelchair-accessible vehicle: *an airport food-catering truck*; the kind that the entire box part of truck elevates up on a scissor lift to mate with the side of the aircraft in order to load the meal carts on board. It was the only vehicle there.

Bishop looked at the truck, then back at me with this "You've got to be kidding" look and started to laugh. Sometimes, once he started laughing, he'd have a hard time stopping. This was one of those times, and it was infectious. Well, sure enough, they loaded us into the back end of the truck with a mechanical lift and off we went across the tarmac to the other terminal. We arrived next to the plane and the cargo box – with us in it – ascended to the galley door on the side of the airliner, and were off-loaded into the galley where we made our way past the food carts to our seats... as the truck lowered its box and drove away. The ground agents and flight crew took all of this in stride, like it was standard protocol. All was done with proper British efficiency and formality, which made it all the more absurd. We were still snickering as the plane pushed off for Dublin about forty seconds after we were seated. Too bad neither of us thought to take a video.

Those are just two of hundreds of such stories many of us could tell. *Bishop Tom touched the lives of so many with his gentleness, his joy for living, his faith and his quick wit.* He gave us all a wonderful example by his devotion to his large family, particularly his sister Jeanne – in turn, they loved him unconditionally – "through thick and thin."

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During the 21 years between 1982 and 2003 that he ministered as Bishop of Phoenix, Bishop Tom worked tirelessly to serve and guide our Diocese, leaving quite a legacy to the Church in Arizona and beyond.

Bishop O'Brien led the Diocesan Primavera planning process, involving laity, clergy and religious across the diocese. He established the Catholic Community Foundation, the *Catholic Sun* newspaper and designed and built the new Diocesan Pastoral Center. In guiding the Church, he believed in empowering the gifts of a wide spectrum of people... building up the Body of Christ.

These were years of unprecedented, explosive growth in our Diocese – hundreds of thousands of Catholics were added to the Diocese. The Diocese of Phoenix shepherded by Bishop O'Brien continued to enjoy a national as well as international reputation as a vibrant, joyful Diocese rooted in the teaching of the Second Vatican Council – strengthening the role of the laity in the Church, opening the Church to welcome all (no matter what their backgrounds or personal circumstances were), accepting the fact that the Catholic Church was continuing to evolve in its ability to "Build up the Body of Christ" in many different ways.

Ecumenical and interfaith relationships were a high priority for Bishop O'Brien – he maintained and nurtured friendships with leaders in the Jewish Community as well as Protestant Christian Communities. He had a special place for the Spanish speaking of

the Diocese – for quite a while, he had weekly meetings with a tutor just so that he could strengthen his ability to speak the Spanish language.

In the years when many bishops across the country were closing parishes and consolidating other facilities, 18 new parishes were founded in the Diocese of Phoenix, Notre Dame College Prep was built and 7 elementary schools were established by Bishop O'Brien. One of our diocesan high schools, Gerard, had to be closed in the mid 1980's after a few years of declining enrollment and budgets in the red – I remember Bishop Tom sitting at his office desk at the end of the day the closure was announced and telling me, with tears in his eyes, "this has been the most difficult decision I've had to make in my entire priesthood..."

Bishop O'Brien invited Pope John Paul II and then, two years later, Mother Teresa of Calcutta to visit our Diocese. Each warmly accepted his invitation and enjoyed their time here as well, inspired by the faith of the Diocesan Church. John Paul II was amazed – and especially touched – by the full, active, conscious participation of thousands of people attending the papal Mass at Sun Devil Stadium who spontaneously joined hands as we sang the Our Father.

In 1995 Bishop O'Brien convened a 22-member commission made up of clergy, religious and laity from a variety of professions to issue our first *Diocesan Policy on Sexual Misconduct by Diocesan Personnel*. This was one of the first such policies promulgated by any bishop in our country, seven years prior to the "Charter for the Protection of Young People" drafted by the US Bishops at their meeting in Dallas in the summer of 2002. The Dallas Charter extended norms similar to our diocesan policy to all dioceses and eparchies of the United States

Bishop O'Brien, at various times, chaired or sat on 12 different committees of the US Conference of Catholic Bishops, influencing Catholic communities across the country. One of the committees he chaired was the Bishops' Committee on Marriage and Family Life, which under his leadership in 1997 authored *Always Our Children, A Pastoral Message to Parents of Homosexual Children and Suggestions for Pastoral Ministers* that was published by the USCCB. It was basically a call for parents and pastoral ministers to care for our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters with Christ-like compassion and respect – rather than disowning or vilifying them. He served on various non-profit Boards locally and nationally, and issued five Pastoral Letters to the people of the Diocese during his years of service as the Third Bishop of Phoenix.

Those are just a few of the accomplishments of Thomas O'Brien that made me proud to call him my bishop and my friend... his full list of accomplishments can go on and on. During my ministry as Vocation Director, on more than one occasion at national

conferences and on seminary visits, it was not unusual for me to hear from other Vocation Directors that I was very fortunate to have such a "boss."

In many ways Bishop O'Brien was ahead of his time in his insightful leadership and his approach to inclusion, outreach and pastoral ministry... he was quite successful in building up the Body of Christ in the Diocese of Phoenix and was well-loved by a great many people.

To me, he seemed to embody those wonderful words of St. Teresa of Calcutta:

*"Let no one ever come to you without leaving better and happier.  
Be the living expression of God's kindness: kindness in your face,  
kindness in your eyes, kindness in your smile."*

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Our first reading from the Book of Wisdom tells us that "The souls of the just are in the hand of God, where no torment shall touch them... as gold in the furnace he tested them, and as sacrificial offerings he took them to himself."

*Like many of us* whose faith has been tried and shaken – but never lost – Bishop Tom was one of those who was tested by fire, "as gold in the furnace."

Fifteen years ago, Bishop O'Brien was, I believe, the first bishop in the US to reluctantly but courageously admit publically that he had mishandled past cases of priests accused of sexual abuse. A flood of negative publicity resulted, the Bishop even received death threats. I remember that at one Confirmation, the police issued him a bullet proof vest to wear under his vestments.

Under all that pressure, when returning home from a Confirmation one night along a dark stretch of Glendale Avenue, a jaywalking pedestrian dressed in black stumbled onto the right fender of the Bishop's moving car, glancing off the passenger-side windshield. Later at the trial, accident re-constructionists testified that all this happened in less than a second – as I recall, the actual quote was one-tenth of a second. Bishop Tom, thinking that something had been thrown at his car, kept going at the speed limit and proceeded home. Another driver noted his license plate. The pedestrian, meanwhile, was struck by a second car and killed. For the next two days, over the weekend, Bishop O'Brien openly drove the car with the broken windshield to Masses and public events, carrying on normally – intending to have the windshield replaced on Monday. *He had absolutely no idea that his car had been involved in an incident that led to a fatality – when he finally learned this, Bishop Tom was devastated.* He was charged and brought to trial – I was present with him each day

of the trial. Facts like the death threats the Bishop had received and his state of mind at the time of the accident were excluded from the trial at the advice of legal counsel. Ultimately, he was found guilty of leaving the scene of a fatal accident and received probation. The charge had an interesting “footnote” to it: noting that “a reasonable person” should have stopped the car to check out what broke the windshield. Unfortunately, the jury was never told of Tom’s depressed state of mind at the time of the accident. As all of these events unfolded, he resigned the leadership and pastoral care of the Diocese of Phoenix, becoming our Bishop Emeritus and entering retirement.

Bishop O’Brien was a shattered man, as these were defining moments in his life... but his faith was not lost. In his retirement, he gradually began to recover from what had happened – but was never the same. His recovery from the trauma associated with his resignation was helped immensely by the fact that Bishop Olmsted graciously allowed Bishop Tom to remain in the Bishop’s House where he had lived for over 20 years, with our new Bishop taking up quarters at the Cathedral rectory. Thank you, Bishop Olmsted, for that kindness.

The next major hurdle on his journey of life was his diagnosis with Parkinson’s Disease. More testing “like gold in the furnace,” but it was *this* testing that seemed to bring him an added resolve to participate in and enjoy life as much as he was able... at least for as long as he could.

Brothers and sisters, I know beyond the shadow of a doubt that today we are laying to rest a good human being, a faithful priest and bishop, who allowed God to work through him and did his level best to “Build Up the Body of Christ.” My journey of life has been blessed by Bishop Tom’s friendship and guidance over the years, as has the journey that he has taken with so many others. I’m glad that Tom O’Brien and I were able to walk the road of discipleship together – through great times and tough times - and I’m confident that many of us here today feel the same way.

Bishop Thomas O’Brien was sensitive, he was stubborn, he was insightful, he was quick-witted, he loved the Lord and the people he served, he occasionally was a pain in the neck and he could let loose with a fierce Irish temper when he had reason to.

Was Tom O’Brien perfect? Of course not – he was human, he knew that he made mistakes and he was sorry for them. Perhaps just like you and me... after all, only God is perfect.

*Bishop Tom's journey on that road of discipleship was particularly difficult as he reached the last period of his living with Parkinson's Disease. Like many other people facing terminal illness, this final stage was the *ultimate* trial by fire, the *ultimate* testing "like gold in the furnace" – but his faith in the presence of the Risen Christ in the breaking of the bread continued to sustain him as it always had. His trust in God's mercy and love never left him.*

*His faith in the midst of suffering built up my faith... as I know it built up the faith of countless others.*

In our Gospel, Jesus reminds those disciples on the Road to Emmaus: "*Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer and so enter into his glory?*"

As for Jesus, so too for those who follow him.

Like the two disciples discovered on their way to Emmaus, the journey of discipleship is anything BUT what we expected it to be.

The last understandable words that Tom was able to whisper to me, not too many days before he died, were: "Chuck, I tried to do my best to build up the Body of Christ.... Please tell the priests I love them. Lord Jesus, bring me to you; Lord Jesus, bring me home."

And so we pray that the Lord Jesus has indeed brought Bishop Tom to himself... and *has* led him home to our Father's house... experiencing the glory of the Risen Christ, where he will be wrapped in light and love forever.

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