



MARYMOUNT HERMITAGE NEWSLETTER

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THE SHADOW OF DEATH

By Sister Mary Beverly, HSM

"All the way to heaven is heaven" may sound hollow in the face of so much uncertainty and fear, disease and death, evil and violence. These are very much realities of our world and our lives. These are the causes of so much suffering. No human being escapes the "shadow of death," which we say in Zechariah's Canticle (Lk. 1:79) each morning at Lauds. I have been meditating on this seriously and want to address this aspect also. Ash Weds. is on Feb. 17. If you will forgive me the delay, I will save Part II of this meditation for the season of Lent...

This is the closing paragraph of the feature article for the last newsletter, which I posted on January 15, 2021. On January 17, my brother, Tom Greger, died at age 61. When I was writing those original words, "the shadow of death" was very much over me and my family. Tom lived in the shadow of death in very dramatic ways in his short lifetime. In 1976 at age 16, he was diagnosed with spinal cancer and the doctors told my parents he would not live more than a year.

I believe that, even more than surgery, radiation and chemotherapy which were not projected to heal him, my brother was completely healed of cancer through the Anointing of the Sick, which he received on July 1, the feast of the Precious Blood of Jesus. After that, I never saw a person more grateful to be alive than Tom. Every subsequent birthday was like a triumph. He was deeply grateful for every card, greeting and gift, which helped him to celebrate every year. That's when having "a party" became such an important ritual for my brother.

By 2007, Tom was married to Leslie and they were parents of five-year-old twins, Liana and Logan. It was then that he was diagnosed again with spinal cancer. He and we, his family, were devastated, as you can imagine. The shadow of death seemed more ominous. Again, with the care of great doctors and the grace of the Sacrament of the Sick, Tom was healed of spinal cancer, but had to endure increasing disability, which confined his mobility to a wheelchair and a specialized van. Doctors told him that his case was so rare, not only nationally but worldwide, that they should write him up in a medical journal!

Tom was an extrovert and never knew a stranger. You were a friend he had not yet met. His smile was his distinguishing feature along with his *joie de vivre*. Tom exemplified the saying of his favorite saint, Mother Teresa

of Calcutta, "A smile is a gift you give someone." He loved flowers, delighted when a hummingbird appeared at their patio feeder, and treasured the weekend Oregon beach trips, which they made often as a family. He, for years, remained physically active. He got breakfast for his wife and kids, packed their school lunches, did the dishes and family laundry, cleaned out and organized the garage on a semi-regular basis. Tom could always see the good and the beautiful and was happy and grateful for every-

thing.
When Tom's 60th birthday was approaching, he wanted to plan a big party at a nice restaurant. 60 seemed an especially great milestone to him, which now in hindsight we realize was prescient. I was very touched that Tom knew



exactly what gift he wanted from me. He asked me to write something about my life of prayer. I share here what I wrote then for him:

TOM'S BIRTHDAY GIFT 9/15/2019

One day I was telling Jesus how much I loved him. I said, "I love you more than anyone or anything."

He does not usually speak to me in words, but that day, he said, "No, you don't."

I was so shocked! I replied, "What do you mean?"

He said, "Would you leave the community for love of me?"

I said, "This is a rhetorical question. Right?"

He said, "Would you give up teaching for love of me?"

*I said, "I think I am beginning to understand what you mean."
He said finally, "Do you love me more than the Sisters and your friends?"*

Then I replied, "Maybe I do love all these more than you." I

Continued on page 2

THE SHADOW OF DEATH

(Continued from page one)

felt stricken. My heart was laid bare and purified. This did not happen in a day, but over a period of time.

In 1976, when the Lord was leading me into a life of silence and solitude for the sake of prayer as a hermit, I had a lot of objections. First, I was a professed religious with final vows. How could I leave my community when I had solemnly promised to be faithful to my commitment? I was a teacher. I could not imagine being anything else. I had a passion for teaching and giving it up would be like abandoning my identity. The community had sent me to college and had paid for my education. I was barely getting started in life. Was it fair to leave after all they had invested in me? Maybe I would wait to be a hermit after I retired. Lastly, to leave a secure and safe life and launch out into the deep and into the great unknown with no money or assurance of success, how was that to be borne? In a word, I knew the Lord was asking me to leave all to follow him as a hermit, but I could not bring myself to do so.

Then my 16-year-old brother, Tom, came down with spinal cancer. The doctors told my parents he was dying, that he might only have a year to live. I went home from the hospital that fateful night and thought for days afterwards: "My brother is dying. His life is over at 16. How can I tell the Lord that I will wait until I am retired to be a hermit as he is calling me to do? I do not know how long I will live. What if I was killed crossing a busy street in Portland or in a car accident? How could I face the Lord and know that he called me to leave all for love of him and yet I refused?"

From then on, I began the process of leaving the Sisters of St. Mary of Oregon and beginning life as a hermit. I lived for the first year in a hermitage in La Pine, Oregon. That was September of the year 1979. As of this month, I have been a hermit for 40 years. And my brother did not die. He miraculously survived his first bout with spinal cancer and then, just 12 years ago, a second bout with it. By God's grace, he survived that and just about a month ago was diagnosed with second stage bladder cancer.

When we were planning Tom's 60th birthday party for this historic year, he told me he did not want me to spend money on flowers, as is my custom, or on any other gift. He wanted me to write something about my prayer life. I thought it was only fitting to tell him how integral he has been to my vocation as a hermit. Without his faith and courage, I doubt I would ever have had the ability to leave all to follow Jesus.



So Tom, "Happy Birthday" on your historic 60th! I thank God for the gift of your life and love, which enabled me to celebrate 40 years as a hermit, and happily so, since it is God's will for me. I owe you a lot. I will have all eternity to thank you.

With deep love and gratitude,
Your Hermit Sister Beverly

After Tom read my letter and cried, I asked him if that was the story he had in mind and he said, "Yes." He enjoyed his big dinner party with family and friends at a nice restaurant. Our mutual friend,

Sister Charlene Herinckx, SSMO, brought him (at my suggestion) a beautiful bouquet of flowers made with roses from the convent garden. A little brother should know he cannot get around a big sister! He and his special birthday party needed flowers.

In late February, 2020, Tom had a radical surgery to remove his cancerous bladder. The doctors said it was needed because, if it metastasized, there would be nothing they could do for him. We endured long agonizing months last year waiting for signs he was recuperating from surgery and recovering his vitality. Looking back, we can see it was actually a slow, painful decline.

On September 15, 2020, Tom had his last birthday party with his immediate family because COVID-19 restrictions did not allow us, his extended family, to travel to be with him. He was hospitalized with life-threatening complications three times in December and we did not even know if he would make it to Christmas, but he did. He started dialysis, which was difficult for him both physically and emotionally. Finally, by God's mercy for his frail suffering body, Tom's great heart gave out on the evening of January 17, 2021.

With Leslie's help, he had called me on the phone about 5:45 PM Idaho time. All he could quietly whisper, as a way of saying "good-bye" one last time, was "It's been quite a journey!" I could easily see him smiling because he always seemed so pleased with the life he had had. He loved his wife and was so proud of his kids. I started to say something to him from my full heart, "Tom, I have always admired you for your courage, love and care for other people..." Then the alarm on the heart monitor interrupted me. I heard a nurse in the background and Leslie crying and talking to Tom. I did not think she would remember I was on the phone. I knew Tom was dying, so I hung up and prayed and waited. It was such an extraordinary grace. I felt like I had been in the hospital room with them at that important moment. When Leslie called me later that night, after she had driven home from the hospital, Tom had gone from this earthly life to eternal life about ten minutes after we were talking together. How good God was to include me so intimately in that sacred passage.

As we pray Lauds each morning, using Zechariah's Canticle, these are the concluding two verses: "All this is the work of the kindness of our God; he, the Dayspring, shall visit us in his mercy to shine on those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace." (Lk. 1:78-79) Leslie concluded

IN MEMORIAM THOMAS G. GREGER

A donation was sent to
Marymount Hermitage from
Laurene & Ernie Houghton, Cambridge, ID

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THE SHADOW OF DEATH

(Continued from page two)

Tom's obituary by saying that "He was a shining light." My brother received the Light of Christ and cast it forth on us. May the "Dawn from on High", who is Christ, bring my beloved brother into his Kingdom of eternal joy and peace in heaven which is home for all of us, God's children.

In conclusion: The funeral arrangements are pending. Until the State of Oregon is open, we will not be able to travel to Beaverton and gather as a family. We hope to have the funeral Mass for both my Dad and Tom together at St. Clare's parish in Portland. Leslie and Tom were married there almost 24 years ago. Tom will be interred with our parents. It seems very fitting since he was so close to both of them, Bob and Vera Greger. As Leslie said, "After the funeral and burial, Tom wants his big party!"

I sincerely thank the priests who offered to say Mass for my brother, Tom, and to the many friends who promised prayers for the repose of his soul and consolation for his family, especially his wife and children. I appreciate the sympathy cards and kind notes I received when our family news began to be known. Leslie wrote a wonderful obituary for her husband. You can access and read it at <https://www.dignitymemorial.com/obituaries/beaverton-or/thomas-greger-10009357>. I featured the once-in-a-life-time visit to Marymount Hermitage from Tom and his family for the April, 2018 newsletter entitled, **Marymount: The Twins' Tributes**. You can re-read that and see more photos of them there. Finally, after Tom's death, I wrote an email to family members and friends to tell of his last days, especially with regard to receiving the sacraments. I wanted those who for months had been praying for my brother to know that, unlike so many dying Catholics in the tragedy of 2020, Tom had all the sacraments. The mercy of God was abundant to the point of miraculous for him in life and in death. I would be happy to send this email to anyone upon request.

This meditation is not what I imagined writing when I promised to do so in the last newsletter. However, I think the outline of my brother's life and sufferings does show that living by faith and having a spirit of gratitude, joy, love, generosity and peace is the true path to heaven. Jesus IS the Way; HE is our heaven now and forever. (See Jn. 14:6)



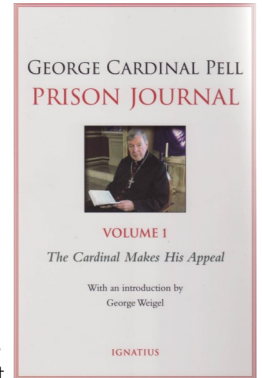
THOMAS GEHL GREGER September 1959-January 2021

COMMUNITY NEWS

LENT: The Church has always proposed as penitential practices for the season of Lent that we re-dedicate ourselves to prayer, fasting and almsgiving. Perhaps now is the time to carve out dates to make a retreat this year. Marymount Hermitage is open. Make your reservation while the calendar is new and space is available. A hermitage retreat features silence and solitude. Adult individuals and married couples may apply. Every season has its beauty and natural attractions. Inquire about your preferred dates either by email or phone.

RECOMMENDED READING:

George Cardinal Pell, who was falsely accused of sexual abuse of a minor and unjustly jailed for over a year, was finally exonerated by the Supreme Court of Australia. While imprisoned, Cardinal Pell kept a daily journal and it is being published by Ignatius Press. Volume #1 is a spiritual masterpiece with all the components of a classic. I have been reading it for about 30 minutes every evening and look forward to it from day-to-day. Surprisingly, the book is a page-turner! Read it for yourself and find spiritual wisdom and new insights from Scripture. We all have our sufferings, and here is a poignant testimony of how that can be borne with grace and dignity, humanity and even humor. Pell is a modern day Thomas Moore or John Fisher.



WINTER: The weather for winter 2020-2021 has been quite mild so far. We have gotten only three big snow storms, which required the main road to be plowed, but usual daytime temperatures have been above 32* with



bright sunny skies to lift our spirits. I grew up in Illinois where temperatures were often below zero. To date the lowest overnight temperature was 10*, so no complaints! Above, see Mt. Council with new-fallen snow.

PRAYERS: There is so much to pray about these days. Let us keep our focus on faith and our eyes on Almighty God. St. Paul writes that "Everything works together for the good of those who love God." (Rom. 8:28) Discouragement, anger, bitterness, un-forgiveness, hopelessness, despair, negativity are not from the Holy Spirit. Let us pray for each other that we may be "delivered from evil", as we say in the Our Father, and encourage each other to have hope and trust in God who loves us and wants all manner of good for his children. To the many of you who worry about me and ask: I am well, safe and content. God is good! What more do we need but Him?