

**Funeral Homily**  
**Donald Senior, CP**  
**November 15, 2022**

Good morning. In the name of Father Don Senior's family and our Passionist Community, I want to thank all of you for being here with us today, as we gather to pray for Don and celebrate his life. Your presence here is a great source of solace and strength at this time of significant loss. In a special way, I want to thank Bishop Frank Kane, representing the Archdiocese of Chicago, and Bishop Timothy Senior, Don's cousin (from the Archdiocese of Philadelphia), for their presence with us today.

One of Don's first published works was the book *Jesus: A Gospel Portrait*. Don later revised and republished this book, which has been used in many a classroom and adult education session through the years. Many professors, including me, still recommend this book to their students. At the beginning of chapter 1 of that book Don wrote these words:

*Great numbers of people know about Jesus of Nazareth . . . [But] it is not really part of the Christian program that people should simply 'know about' Jesus. Genuine Christianity is based on knowing Jesus. The urgency of the Christian mission since its beginning has been that people should come to know Jesus personally and, because of that relationship, to transform their lives. To know someone in this sense presumes an intimate interlocking of lives and fate. . . . The language of a relationship like this is not curiosity or exploitation but love. (7-8)*

Donald Senior loved Jesus Christ.

Deeply.

Because of his love for Christ he spent long hours studying the Jewish and Christian Scriptures. Because of that love he taught countless numbers of students to love the Scriptures and in that to love Christ. Because of that love he authored innumerable articles, essays, lectures and books in which he endeavored to instill knowledge and love of Christ in a wide variety of audiences. And because of that love he led many pilgrims to the lands of the Bible, especially Israel, the land where Jesus walked.

This love for the Scriptures and for Christ endured to the very end of his life. He was working on presentations and articles even from his bed in the rehabilitation center in Lincoln Park. The Scriptures were just a part of Don and they seemed to emanate from him. Often on Saturdays, I would see Don head upstairs to his office in our Passionist residence carrying a

stack of books, which had been sent to him for review in *The Bible Today*. He would somehow, almost miraculously, work his way through those books during the course of the day.

When I visited Don at the rehabilitation center a few weeks ago, I was preparing to teach a class on New Testament ecclesiologies, that is, the ways in which the different authors of the New Testament portray the nature and mission of the Church. In the course of our conversation, I asked Don who he thought wrote the Letter to the Ephesians. You may know that some Scripture scholars conclude that this letter was not written by Paul himself but by a student of Paul, some years after Paul's death. So I thought that I would get Don's brief take on the subject. Well, in response to my question, even in his seriously weakened condition, Don went on for about twenty minutes, quoting passages of the letter from memory and delineating the different scholarly opinions about the authorship of the letter. After about ten minutes, I started to interrupt and say, "Don, this may be more than I need to know." But he kept going anyway. It just flowed out of him.

In recent years Don gave a weekend Scripture retreat each February at the Passionist retreat center in North Palm Beach, Florida. These were popular, well-attended events. The other day a friend of mine from West Palm Beach called me when she heard that Don was ill. She had participated in a number of Don's weekend Scripture retreats. She simply remarked that Don knew how to take a passage or even just a verse of Scripture, break it open, and reflect on its meaning and relevance in a most illuminating way. And he could do this for fellow Scripture scholars as well as for ordinary people of faith like her.

Donald Senior was born on New Year's Day, 1940 in Philadelphia. He was the first baby born in Philadelphia in 1940. His birthplace led him to be a fan of Philadelphia sports teams. In fact, my last conversation with him before he suffered his stroke took place on the Saturday morning after the Philadelphia Phillies had a thrilling come-from-behind, extra inning victory in the first game of the World Series. With great delight, Don told me that he had watched the entire game and that it had been a real nailbiter. His family moved to Louisville when he was young, and Louisville remained the family homestead after that. Don had a great love for his family, and he made a concerted effort to stay close to them. He stayed in touch with his brother Vince and his wife Alice, and his two very beloved sisters -- Rita, with her husband Dudley, and Miriam. In a most remarkable way, Rita has been at his side all through his illness, offering faithful solace and support. Rita and Don's good friend, Maureen Meter, were Don's pillars of strength through the entire ordeal of his illness.

And, of course, Don was very devoted to his beloved sister Miriam, who had some special needs and lived the final years of her life here in Chicago at Misericordia home (that blessed place on the Northside of Chicago). During weekend home visits from Misericordia, Don and Miriam could often be seen walking down Cornell Avenue holding hands, on their way to

the Valois Restaurant for Saturday lunch. Don once told me that the most challenging aspect of that was trying to convince Miriam that she did not need to order the hot fudge sundae every time. The only time that I ever saw Don nearly lose his composure in public was while he was celebrating Miriam's funeral Mass at Misericordia.

Don's nieces, Beth, Amy and Meg and his nephew Pearce and their spouses were also very dear to him (with frequent visits). He liked to show us photos of Pearce's and Monica's little Oscar, whom he delighted in baptizing last year. All of us here today extend our deepest sympathy to you, the members of Don's beloved family, as you grieve his loss. We know how important Don was to all of you.

Don has a truly remarkable curriculum vitae, an extraordinary list of professional achievements, awards and recognitions, only a fraction of which can be mentioned here. Of course, he served as President of Catholic Theological Union for 23 years, where he also taught the New Testament for 50 years. For Don, personally and professionally, CTU was a lifetime commitment and mission. The school was his life and he poured himself into his work there with tireless generosity. In 2001 Pope John Paul II appointed him to serve as a member of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, and he was reappointed for a second term in 2006 by Pope Benedict XVI. He served as President of the Catholic Biblical Association from 1997-98. He was one of the general editors of *The Catholic Study Bible* and of the 21<sup>st</sup> century edition of *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*. He also served in many ecumenical and interfaith capacities in the City of Chicago, including a term as President of the Council of Religious Leaders of Metropolitan Chicago. He was a 2014 recipient of the Order of Lincoln, the highest award given by the State of Illinois, in recognition of professional achievement and public service. I should mention, too, Don's weekly Scripture commentaries in the *Chicago Catholic*, illuminating the Sunday Scripture readings for the people of the archdiocese, for lay and clergy alike.

Don was quite serious about his work and commitments. In some ways he was a no-nonsense person. But he also had a keen sense of humor. He could laugh at the anomalies and incongruities of life, especially the incongruities of the academic world. His sense of humor was sometimes a bit devilish. This Fall Don seemed to feel compelled, on more than one occasion, to point out to me that my Boston Red Sox had finished last in their division in Major League Baseball, while his Phillies had made it to the World Series. He seemed to treat this observation almost like a footnote in one of his articles

The Gospel reading that was chosen for this funeral Mass was Luke's account of the death and resurrection of Jesus. Don was a vowed member of the Passionist Congregation. He was committed to living the charism of Saint Paul of the Cross, the 18<sup>th</sup> century founder of the Passionists. This charism is the gift of keeping in mind and heart, and promoting in the minds and hearts of others, the *memoria passionis* – the living memory of the passion, death and

resurrection of Jesus. That commitment was manifest in Don's personal life and in his professional work as a scholar and teacher. His doctoral dissertation at Louvain was a redaction critical study of the passion narrative in the Gospel of Matthew. Later on, he would write four commentaries, one on each of the Gospel passion narratives, helping others to keep the memory of the Lord's passion in their hearts and minds. One of the highlights of my own time at CTU was the opportunity to team-teach with Don a course on the Cross in Scripture and Theology. Listening to Don reflect on the meaning of the Cross in the New Testament was enlightening and inspiring for the students, and it certainly was for me as well. And Don understood his vocation to keep the memory of the passion not just in the sense of knowing about the historical passion of Jesus, but also in the summons to active concern for the crucified of today. The call to solidarity with those many peoples across our city and across the globe in need of compassion, justice and liberation. He was committed to the dangerous memory of the passion, which is dangerous because it lifts up the lives of the forgotten and marginalized of our world. One way in which this commitment was lived out in Don's life was his work in helping to organize and lead trips to the Holy Land for persons with disabilities.

The second reading for our liturgy today was from Paul's Letter to the Romans (Romans 8: 31-35, 37-39). Don Senior loved to teach the course on the Theology of Paul. He often talked about Paul in homilies for daily Mass at our residence. He seemed to connect with Paul, the intrepid missionary apostle with the complex personality. In the famous passage from Romans that was read, Paul addresses the mystery of suffering that he confronted in his own life and that he perceived as permeating creation itself. After speaking about the groaning of creation, Paul reminds the Christians at Rome of their experience of the love of God revealed in Christ. Rhetorically, he asks, "What will separate us from the love of Christ?" After enumerating a list of hostile forces within creation, including death itself, Paul proclaims that there is not anything in creation that will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

This is really the language of contemplation. It reflects Paul's contemplative insight into the mystery of God's love poured out in Jesus Christ. God's tenaciously faithful love for creation and for each one of us. At this funeral liturgy, we pray that the God of life will embrace Don Senior in that love, welcoming Don home to his place of eternal peace and joy. And we ask that God embrace us, too, to ease our grief and enliven our hope.

Robin Ryan, cp