

I've been asked to offer a few words of remembrance.

It has become very apparent to me in the last few days that the story of John Edward Sassani is in each and every one of us who have been travelling miles and miles simply to be here together again in his presence. The story is in each one of you, in all of us together, those who knew him really well, those who just met him recently.

I'm here to say I know you loved him and I know he loved you.

It was obvious in the way he lived his life, the way he celebrated the Sacred Mysteries, the way he listened, the ease with which he would respond to requests saying, "Sure..." and then would figure it out. So, I will share with you some of my/our memories of him.

I first met John in the early nineties - and I say "John" because, when he introduced himself, he'd say, "Hi, I'm John Sassani." At that time, he was in his early forties. I had been working in the office for about seven years, and he had recently been named Director of the Office of Spiritual Development. We had a great staff who worked well together. As we got to know one another, he took the time to listen to what we had to say, and he paid attention to the work that was already being done.

In those early days, I'd been asked to do a retreat in Narragansett, Rhode Island, for the Christian Brothers. The priest I was supposed to be working with was unable to make it. So, I went into work, and I said to John, "I've got this retreat in Narragansett, I need a priest on the team. Do you think you could help me out?" He said, "Sure!"...It was an eight-day retreat! Without hesitation, he said, "OK, let me check my calendar." He was available, and together we planned the retreat.

On the first day of the Narragansett retreat, I realized there was an opening prayer service that needed a Scripture reading. It was at the last minute, and we were in the middle of setting up the chapel. Fr. John was in the back unloading boxes and all sorts of things that we brought with us. I called back to him asking, "Is there a Scripture passage that we could use for the opening prayer service tonight?" At first there was silence. I didn't think he heard me. Then all of a sudden from the back of the chapel in a clear voice he said, "Here's one: *I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection by sharing in his sufferings and becoming like him in his death.*" (Philippians 3:10 NRSV)

You know, I heard those words that day, and it clicked in me. *I want to know Christ* put words to my desire, because in the end that is all I want, and, whether you know it or not, it is what you want, it is what we all want: to know Christ. And the reason we want to know Christ is because we live the Paschal Mystery: the life, death and resurrection of Christ in the ordinary experiences of our life.

Fr. John got that! He got that the Paschal Mystery happened in him, that it happens in our lives, in our families. Those of us who knew John well - and those of us who didn't - connected immediately. He saw it as Christ teamed up with us...the visual would come later.

He was baptized here in this church, can you imagine, sixty-four years ago. Nick and Natalie had a family that came to this church, a family that celebrated sacraments - the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ -here. So, on that day, when he was brought here, he was immersed into the waters of baptism, immersed, even if it was a trickle of water; he was immersed into the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. His name was given on that day, and it got a little "translation" to John Edward "Teddy" Sassani. He left here that day having been anointed, strengthened for the rest of his life, having put on a white garment as a sign that he belonged to Christ. He left here that day belonging to a community, the Body of Christ.

Martha, he spoke of your children's baptisms as their not only being baptized and becoming members of this Christian Community but becoming his brothers and sister in Christ. Now he felt his nephews and his niece were brothers and sister to him, a whole new message about the Christian family.

He also lived a life in family where Christ revealed himself. On some of our retreats, we did a timeline where we would recall our life and plot it out on a line in our prayer journal. Retreatants would be asked a simple question, "When was the first time you realized God's presence in your life?" Then, pondering the life events on the timeline, retreatants would write down the story of when the awareness of God's presence first happened and then mark it on their timeline. When the retreat was over, Sister Anne, Fr. Dan, Fr. John and I would review the retreat we had just led. After one of the retreat days, we focused on the question "When in our lives had we first recognized God's presence?" Right away, John said, "Colorado!" All of us replied, "Colorado?! We thought you grew up in Swampscott". Then he told us the story...for a time the family did live in Colorado and, get this, his first experience of knowing God's presence was looking out the window in the front of the house and seeing Pike's Peak and being filled with an awareness of God's presence. He thought he was about six years old at that time. In recent days, I googled Pike's Peak, and, on the screen, I saw a magnificent image of the grandeur of God, just as John had described all those years ago.

There were other stories too about how Christ revealed himself to John as he was growing up. One of those memories he would often share was of him as a boy coming into a room in the Sassani house and finding his dad on his knees praying. That memory stayed with him all the days of his life, and he spoke of it often.

Another memory was of the day of his ordination, seeing his mother heading up to St. John's Church and wondering why, on a day when so much was happening, would she be going to the Church? Later he asked why she went to the Church and she said, "I went to pray for you and for what you are saying 'yes' to." Christ was laboring in him even then and also in the family in the little things that make all the difference.

And when John was ordained, members of the congregation assembled in the Cathedral of the Holy Cross, brought up the gifts of bread and wine. The gifts were given to the Deacon, who gave them to Cardinal Medeiros, who said to John, "Receive from the Holy People of God the gifts to be offered to God. Know what you are doing. Imitate what you celebrate. Conform your life to the mystery of the Cross."

Father John has done this all his life. The bread and wine that is offered is just bread and wine, but, for us, we know that, at the words of the priest and by the power of the Holy Spirit, simple gifts of bread and wine become the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ. Those things can slip by us these days, but you and I, all of us who are living the Paschal Mystery in the ordinariness of our everyday lives, know the difference. There are crazy things that get in the way, things that turn our lives upside down: the irritations, the fights, the illnesses, the unspeakable sufferings that seem like they cannot be shared; that is what the Paschal Mystery feels like at times.

And here is a man who understood how that felt. He knew it when he celebrated these Sacred Mysteries, and he knew it when he met us and listened to our stories, and he invited us into it...that is what he did. He helped us know Christ. He helped us to recognize the Paschal Mystery, the Life, Death, and Resurrection of Christ as it unfolds in the ordinary events of our lives. He would remind us that the Paschal Mystery must be lived; it cannot be solved, but it can be lived, because Jesus Christ lives it in you, with you, through you, one step at a time.

There is a little story he told about his preparation for ordination. Shortly before he was ordained, his seminary spiritual director asked him if there was anything he was worried about. There was. He believed when a priest said the words of consecration that the bread and wine became the body and blood of Jesus Christ. But how would he know that *his* words would coincide with the Holy Spirit and it would happen for him...he worried.

I'm not sure how that conversation went, but what I do know is he was assigned to Sacred Heart Parish in Roslindale and began saying Mass on schedule. One day, he took the bread and he took the wine and said the words of institution at the consecration of the Mass. As he lifted the bread and as he lifted the wine, he began weeping. Tears flowed from his eyes. He thought he must be overtired.

Yet, it happened again and again that summer. Eventually he brought it up with his spiritual director and he said, "I think there's something wrong. I may be having a nervous breakdown." She, in the spirit of Saint Ignatius said, "Oh no, you know what is happening here? You call that a consolation, an increase in faith, an increase in hope an increase in love. As a matter of fact, you know how you had that concern, that worry, before you were ordained? This is Christ assuring you, telling you, 'It's OK John, *I am with you always, to the end of the age.*'" (Matthew 28:20 NRSV)

This is the man whom we have known and loved, and we sensed that in him. I know this, because, during these difficult days in this last chapter of his life you came, you dropped in and called, you cared for him every step of the way, and here we are now. We are at a time when we have come to the end of his story here with us. He is now with Christ. I would have loved to have been there to hear that greeting.

I'll conclude by reminding you of the holy card you all have with the image on it called "Unison." The picture is of Simon of Cyrene helping Christ carry his cross. It is a painting that Fr. John loved.

One day in 2012, after we had moved the Cursillo to Campion Center in Weston, we were setting up for the upcoming weekend. John said, "I want you to see something. There is a picture on the second-floor corridor, it's called 'Unison,' it's painted by a German artist, Sieger Koder." I went with him (this usually didn't happen), and, when I saw the picture...I was not impressed. So I said, "Tell me what you're seeing." And he said, "Don't you see? The yoke, the yoke." I wasn't seeing that. In the crossbeam of Christ's cross, John saw Simon of Cyrene and Christ yoked together, bearing that weight together, and this became part of many homilies, spiritual direction sessions, casual conversations, interviews with Confirmation candidates... He ordered many prayer cards and prints from Pauline Media and offered that picture to many of us as a way of saying, "Christ is with you, and all you have to do is put one foot in front of another and ask for his help as he is asking for yours."

To you, his family, these last years brought us closer to one another and to this day. You were beside him as he lived the Paschal Mystery of Christ's life, death, and resurrection, and you allowed us to share that with you. It has been a privilege.

My family has treasured him all these years as so many other families have.

So, for Fr. John, I say, "Thank you". It has been exquisite life, an extraordinary life lived in Jesus Christ. A life of friendship where we have come to know Christ in an unbelievably personal way, knowing and believing Christ was here with us and helping us no matter what!