

# *Mass of the Resurrection Homily for* Father Emmanuel Gardon, C.P.

(1921-2017)

There is an Irish poet, Brendan McCarthy by name, who once wrote:

"Tis a harsh and dreadful thing to love what death may touch, But ah more terrible still to have never loved at all."

My brothers and sisters, we gather this morning to hold the memory of a lover, a disciple of Jesus, a priest who knew Him in the breaking of the Bread, who touched Him in the broken lives of others.

We come together in this sacred place to honor this Spanish/Irish fiery red-head - or at least used to be - who was drawn to a community of passion, wearing his heart on his chest, preaching a Crucified Christ who is fiercely in love with each of us.

We gather to remember this down-to-earth New Yorker who walked the talk...well, he and Max did...the flip flops and the padded paws...who accompanied us in our struggles and questions, or in our praying together, or as a cop about to go out on the beat, or as a firefighter who runs into a burning building when everyone else is running out, or as a congregant needing a word of comfort and wisdom.

And we Passionists come together to bury our eldest brother in the Province - 96 years old - still driving to celebrate Sunday Mass in Hobe Sound until only a few months ago when it was time to surrender.

I first met the young Father Emmanuel when I was 11 years old. He was ordained the year I was born. As Bishop Barbarito and Father Paul can attest, Brooklyn Catholic school boys, especially those perhaps from Saint Bernadette's and Saint Anselm's, were expected to go to confession every two weeks whether you needed it or not. We were teenage boys. Everything was a sin! Now when you are a teenager and things are confusing and everything is erupting and you are too afraid to ask anybody anything, well, you want to be very careful which confession line you get on. You certainly don't want to go to Father Murray who was fond of giving a rosary for a penance and telling you that you were going to hell in a hand basket!

Then came this priest to Saint Anselm's every weekend from a monastery in Queens. **THE WORD WENT FORTH!** Go to the priest with the black robe, the big belt and badge. The guy is really good. He doesn't ask questions. He's young. He understands. He's not like Father Murray. I think every teenager in Saint Anselm's lined up for Father Emmanuel.

I'll never forget Father Emmanuel's question to me at the end of one of those Saturday afternoon confessions. It was the very first time anyone had asked. "Have you ever thought about becoming a priest?" Great confessor. You bring what you think is the worst part of you and he speaks to the best part of you.

Yes, he knew. He was from "da Bronx". Mott Haven. Just like the rest of us, and of succeeding generations, studying on the stoops, learning on the streets. He was the only child of Manuel Gardon and Mary Casey. He grew up in the shadow of Saint Luke's on East 138th Street - Irish, Germans, Italians, and one Spaniard named Manuel. Taught by the Dominican Sisters of Blauvelt and the Brothers of the Sacred Heart. Free tuition in those days...the formative years when all of life happened on your block, and at your parish and local candy store.

It was the 1920's then. Not too many people in Mott Haven, the Bronx, had stocks and bonds. But everything crashed, the Great Depression, and you learned to do without. And you grew up loved, cherished, and getting used to needing very little and sharing what little you had. You were given an education by the sacrifices of your parents, the Sisters, the Brothers. You had a sacred duty to give back. So is it any wonder that young Hugh Gardon would find his way to a monastery, to a community of brothers who shared all things in common and saw suffering as redemptive?

Now I have to be honest here. When Emmanuel asked me to preach his Funeral homily a few years ago, he insisted that nothing be said about him. In fact he put it in writing - and I quote - "absolutely no EULOGY BALONEY and keep it very short!" I have already failed him.

I get that. If Emmanuel was anything he was human, real. Isn't that why we have all packed this chapel this morning? We don't gather here because of the list of his accomplishments, degrees, titles, awards. The two readings he selected for this morning's Mass say it all...one from the Prophet Daniel and the other from Paul's Letter to the Romans.

You know the story of Daniel in the Lion's Den. It is the story of a young man's courage, of facing his fears, of deepening his faith, of embracing what life has in store for him, of looking deeply at what could have the possibility of destroying him...only to turn it into a blessing.

When we are young we are full of passion and fire. The years of Emmanuel's formation as a Passionist were also a time in the world of Holocaust and a madman requiring that young men wear a badge with a swastika. No, not a baloney eulogy but how can anyone not take inspiration from young men who at the very same time took vows of poverty, chastity and obedience in a coarse woolen habit, wearing a crown of thorns, carrying a cross on their shoulders, a badge placed over their hearts as a sign that they held dear the memory of a Crucified Jew?

We learn, don't we, to be signs of contradiction as we slowly are transformed by Christ?

And then Paul to the Romans - a teacher, a preacher - like Emmanuel. Maybe like Paul, at least in the beginning, we can be very self-assured. Then hopefully we are knocked off our horses and

brought to a people who help to shape and deepen us. For Emmanuel it was a classroom, a library, the streets of Union City, New Jersey, learning a new language and trying to make sense of a changing church, meeting great resistance. Or to the firefighters and cops. Or to the African-American folk of Saint Paul of the Cross Parish in Atlanta, learning to dance down the aisle in African vestments, not being embarrassed because he knew he was loved and accepted, this skinny white man! Then on to California where he became a home health aide and bathed the wounded bodies of too many young men dying of an incurable disease.

We face our fears by touching wounds. And then we see the face of a Crucified Christ in them.

As the Apostle Paul wrote at the end of his life, and Emmanuel bids us to listen: "death no longer has power".

Now some people "retire" to the Palm Beaches. That would not be the word that pops into my mind about Emmanuel. Was it because he volunteered to drive a boardwalk train at MacArthur Park? Was it because he went to 6 AM roll call at the North Palm Beach Police station or ate breakfast at the firehouse next door? Was it because he showed up at memorial services and accidents? Was it because he drove ol' Fid his classmate to his doctor's appointments and then to Duffy's Irish Pub for lunch? Was it because of the homilies he preached at the daily Mass in this chapel, or hearing the confessions of retreatants, or using his Spanish language skills to counsel migrants? Was it because he took care of the sacristy until a few months ago when he could do it no more? I don't know. Maybe.

There is something about living life in the place you are meant to be, and dying where you were meant to be transformed. Emmanuel told me not long ago: "A teacher gives you content. A preacher helps you to fall in love." He was both.

Emmanuel loved it here. He loved the ministry and he loved you. And he loved this community of Passionists. As in any family we sometimes drive each other nuts but.....in the end he allowed them to care for him and love him back. No baloney eulogy. It is what it is.

And what goes around comes around. He became my confessor again when I would visit North Palm Beach. Different sins, thank God, but the same kindness. When you're Provincial it's hard to know who to go to. But then again it's easy to feel comfortable with a guy who hears your confession in a big arm chair with a dog on his lap!

A wise man, a loving priest, a compassionate Passionist. We know, we just know, he was Emmanuel, "God with us".

Thank you, Father. And God bless you too.

Rest in peace.

Robert Joerger, C.P.

8/9/17