

A Spiritual Journey

- Good evening, brothers. Tonight I am going to share with you some thoughts and experiences about spiritual journeys that bring us closer to God.
- Last month Sir Knights Frank Suarez and Neal Carter gave our parish a presentation on their experiences walking the Camino de Santiago through France and Spain. If you hadn't heard their talk, the Camino is a very difficult 500-mile trek along the route that the Apostle James the Greater likely walked when he spread the Gospel to the people of the Iberian Peninsula.
- Frank and Neal shared a lot of details about their trip such as the beautiful sunrises and sunsets they saw; the majestic mountains they traversed, the awe inspiring architecture of the many beautiful churches and castles they visited.
- They spoke of the grueling, rocky paths they walked; the friendly and inspiring people they were touched by. They shared some very personal revelations of faith from their experiences and encounters with other people over the 38 days of their trip.
- It is evident to me that it was a very difficult journey for them, yet a very rewarding retreat from their normal life routines.
- A couple of days before they departed in May, I wished them well and let them know how excited I was for them. I told them I was a little jealous of them because this pilgrimage seemed like it would be a great spiritual journey.
- When they came back and gave us the presentation on their pilgrimage, and I saw how moved they were by it, my desire for walking the Camino de Santiago was reignited. I mentally put this on my short "bucket list".
- However, after reflecting on their talk, I realized that I was currently on a significant spiritual journey of my own and of a completely different nature. My encounters and experiences on this journey have reaffirmed insights on life in this world and the next that I want to share.
- This journey was uniquely different. I was privileged to be able to walk the last leg of life with Sir Knight Oliver Semmes. It can never be replicated again exactly, so all the more important to share it with you.
- Four years ago, my spiritual director advised me to pay close attention to someone nearing the end of life. There is so much opportunity to learn from their transition to the afterlife. At the time she told me this, my mom was in a coma on her deathbed, and I didn't really know what to do with this advice.
- After hearing Frank and Neal talk about their journey, I realized I was already on this spiritual journey with Oliver Semmes through no plan of my own. And by happenstance (or not), it was Frank Suarez who unknowingly led me to the start of this journey.

- Last summer Frank informed me that the Semmes needed their lawn irrigation system repaired, so I visited Oliver and Julianne to see how I could help. Their lawn was in rough shape as it had not been adequately watered through the heat of the summer.
- I was there for most of a week repairing cracked pipes, replacing broken sprinklers, and cleaning and resetting about 50 root-bound sprinkler heads. At the end of most of those days I would check in with Oliver and Julianne to let them know how things were going.
- We would end up talking an hour or more about all kinds of things. I could tell that they were feeling isolated from the parish as they were home bound because of Oliver's lung disease. So, I felt like my visits there had a higher purpose than just getting their lawn healthy again. These visits were really nice. I got to know them much better than I had known them before.
- A few months later Julianne called me to ask if I would be willing to take over all lawn care for them. Their lawn was not getting the TLC it needed from the company they had hired and they were looking for someone else they could trust.
- I agreed to do this and began taking care of their yard at the beginning of the calendar year. As before, I would try to check in with them every day that I came to help and we would visit for a good while.
- On one of those early visits, I learned that they had not received communion for a long time. I just assumed, like everyone, that someone was bringing them communion. But that was not the case as they did not want to impose on anyone to bring them the Eucharist.
- I began bringing them communion every Sunday. When I was out town, Susan Mary Rose would bring them communion.
- Sometimes Nancy was able to come with me. They both already knew Nancy well as they had served in ministries together years before, so our visits would often last an hour or two. These were uplifting visits for both the Semmes and us.
- This journey with them was not physically difficult for me, but it became somewhat emotionally difficult as we watched Oliver's health decline over time. However, I found myself able to easily handle this sorrow as I watched how they faced it with trust in God.
- Oliver and Julianne were both so thankful for every day that they had together. They also profusely expressed their gratitude to us for bringing the Eucharist to them. They were never negative about their health issues and the difficulties that come with aging. They both have such a positive attitude about all aspects of life—both the good and the difficult.
- In mid-summer Oliver entered hospice care as his physical condition worsened with no possibility for improving. But his mind was still very sharp and his spirit as elevated as ever. I continued visiting him every time I was there to do yard work or to bring communion.
- A week before his death, Oliver's health took a significant downturn. When I showed up to do yard work, his son Paul informed me and relayed that his dad would appreciate a visit

more than having his yard groomed. So I reprioritized my day and visited Oliver and Julianne for an hour and a half before taking care of their yard.

- The next night, Nancy and I brought them communion so that they could celebrate the Solemnity of the Assumption of Mary with the rest of the parish. That was the last visit where we had a somewhat lengthy and completely coherent conversation with Oliver.
- When we arrived, I noted with wonder and amusement how Oliver lit up when Nancy came in the room to greet him, more so than he had done with me or other people.
- Oliver's significant decline was understandably upsetting to Julianne. Her son and daughter-in-law asked me if it would be possible to bring her the Eucharist every day until Oliver's passing to give her strength. I agreed without hesitation.
- No sooner had I said "yes" to this that I recalled the advice of my spiritual director to pay attention to a dying person's last leg of the journey. I realized right away that this last leg of Oliver's journey had no clear beginning point. From my perspective, it started with those first few visits at the end of last summer and continued throughout this year to the day he died.
- There is no way I can articulate all that I learned about and from Oliver and Julianne during this 12 month journey, but I can and want to share the most significant sensations I experienced, as well as a couple of amazing insights.
- There were seven very positive movements of my heart during this time that are as obvious to me as the wonders that Frank and Neal saw and experienced on the Camino de Santiago. I will do my best to illustrate these movements to you.
- First, there was welcoming acceptance. Oliver and Julianne welcomed me into their home like I was a life-long friend from the time of my first visit. Being greeted by them was like experiencing the beauty of a golden sunrise as it welcomes a new day.
- As sure as the sun rises on every new day, they greeted me on every visit with such heartfelt warmth. Being welcomed and accepted by them made me feel like I belonged there.
- Second, we had a mutual and earnest gratitude for our time together, especially on visits when we shared in the mystery of the Eucharist. This deep gratitude seemed as majestic as the beautiful mountains inviting pilgrims to new spiritual heights on the Camino de Santiago.
- The third sensation was that of intimate friendship. I enjoyed hearing their many stories and life experiences. They patiently listened to my simple thoughts and stories, which seemed insignificant compared to their long and monumental life together.
- I marveled over how easily God connects people with seemingly different backgrounds to show us how alike we really are when he is our common bond.
- The fourth wondrous experience was to witness Oliver's unwavering faith. He is a true prayer warrior. In the course of our conversations he frequently praised and thanked God. If he knew of someone in need, he would ask me to pray for them.

- On several of my visits, I realized too late that I was interrupting him praying the Rosary. He was never without his Rosary and his prayer missal. Even on the last few days of his life when he was at his weakest, he put forth great effort to make the sign of the cross before we prayed together.
- I have come to realize that it is easy to say we have the fullness of faith when we are in relatively good health and can do everything for ourselves that we desire to do. But I see now that as we age and can no longer do the simplest things for ourselves, that faith in God and our fellow man takes on a new dimension, a new depth. When we can do nothing else, we can still pray.
- The fifth movement of my heart came as I experienced Oliver's affirming love. He always told me that he loved me when we parted ways. I made sure to do the same. In the last week of his life I told him that several times throughout each visit.
- Each time he would begin to fade into semi consciousness, either he, Julianne, or I would remember to say "I love you." Almost always he had a smile on his face as he closed his eyes.
- There is nothing more important than sharing God's love with others, especially those who mean the most to us. So, brothers, don't be surprised if I am more vocal about expressing my feelings toward you. Important things should not be left unsaid.
- A sixth natural sensation I recognized with absolute clarity was a calming and comforting blanket of peace. This peace was expressed on his face, in his voice, and in his movements. Even during the last week when he was bed ridden and uncomfortable or restless, he expressed what he was feeling with gentleness and asked for help with utmost politeness.
- His profound peace had a calming effect on everyone around him. It was like gazing out over the expansive horizon of a beautiful glass-like lake. The smallest ripple would be briefly noticed, but it was part of the beauty of the lake and was quickly absorbed back into the calming stillness.
- Appropriately, the lasting sensation that Oliver imparted was his eternal joy. This was hardly the last of the sensations I picked up on. All of them came to me multiple times in my conversations with him over the past year, but eternal joy seemed to be the ultimate purpose for all he said and did.
- All of the other sensations pointed to what Oliver ultimately desired above all things—to spend eternity in the presence of our all-loving God. No matter the difficulties of the present moment, he never lost sight or ever doubted the eternal joy that outshines all other experiences and sensations. As Father Kelly stated, there has been no one more prepared for the transition from this life to the next than Oliver Semmes.
- These seven movements of my heart I experienced on this spiritual journey show a broad view of the beautiful landscape I traversed with Oliver. But there are two specific insights I have been blessed with that I would also like to share.

- The first insight focuses on the fullness of faith. We all start out at some point on our life journey with some faith in God because we choose to have faith. But the fullness of faith is a gift from God that comes through life experiences and prayer.
- We come to the fullness of faith by recognizing and reflecting on God's miraculous or mystical intervention in our lives and letting that intervention shape who we become. We then share this gift of faithfulness by the way we think, speak and act when we encounter others.
- I came to know this about Oliver through the stories he loved to tell from his younger days. There is one story he shared at least a half dozen times over the past year. He would always tell me to stop him if I had already heard it, but I never stopped him. I could tell it was a very significant God experience for him and I loved to hear the conviction in his voice as he told it.
- I cannot do his story justice, so I won't try. But it had to do with God preserving his life through a miracle when he was a 30-year-old Navy pilot flying off of an aircraft carrier. It impacted him in a very significant way and I am sure it was a key waypoint in his faith in God.
- It made me reflect on a mystical intervention that God made in my own life that transformed my understanding of God in a significant way. Like Oliver, I have revisited that experience many times and I know it was the start of my turn to full faith in God.
- I would hope that everyone has some encounter of significance with God to help strengthen their faith in him. Not all experiences need to be grandiose, but these key events should be identified and brought to prayer throughout our lives. This is how faith in God grows.
- The second insight that Oliver reaffirmed for me is that the beauty of a soul outshines all other natural beauty in the world. Realizing this helps us to have some understanding of how much more beautiful and spectacular the supernatural world will be when compared to the beauty of God's creations in this world.
- I realized this through witnessing two interactions with Oliver early in the last week of his life.
- After a long pause in a conversation with him in his weakened state, I wanted to prompt some pleasant memories for him so I said, "Oliver, you have lived in Navarre almost 30 years and you have enjoyed many things like fishing and sailing. What has been your favorite thing about living in Navarre?"
- He did not hesitate in his response at all as he said "Getting to wake up every morning with Julianne." This warmed my heart and gave me something to think about.
- The next interaction was the following night when Nancy and I brought him and Julianne communion for the Mass of the Solemnity of the Assumption of Mary. As I mentioned earlier, when Nancy first greeted him, he lit up and was more animated than I had seen him with anyone else in previous days.

- This also gave me something to think about. Later, when reflecting on his comment about waking up with Julianne and also how he reacted to Nancy's greeting him, it dawned on me that Oliver looks on the inner beauty of a person above anything else.
- This reminded me of what really attracted me to Nancy when we were young and first dating. While she was an attractive, fun-loving 22-year-old Air Force nurse, it was her inner beauty that most attracted me to her over all the other pretty nurse interns that had stepped into my world that summer.
- We should never lose sight of inner beauty. Material beauty eventually wanes, but spiritual beauty grows greater and greater if we nurture it. This is something Oliver never lost sight of and I am glad that we walked this journey together so that he could remind me of that.
- So brothers, thank you for your patience and attention as I shared my experiences of a special pilgrimage. Please reflect on the faith and beauty of your lives and share those gifts with others who need to hear of them.

Peace Be With You,

Marc Barrett