Father Thomas J. Steele, S.J.
1933 – 2010

Homily from the funeral liturgy of Father Tom Steele
By Fr. Mike Sheeran, S.J. October 30, 2010

Although Tom Steele was a Regis faculty member for almost thirty years, he only returned to Denver two months ago when he was impaired, to live at the Xavier Jesuit Community after a fifteen year absence in New Mexico. So let me tell you a bit about Tom as I knew him.

When first I came to Regis in 1975 to try my hand at teaching Political Science, Tom was already a tenured teacher of English, highly regarded by students and faculty for excellent teaching. We understood that Tom was in Denver largely because this was the driest climate in the Missouri Province and he had a vulnerability to ear infections in places like Kansas City or his home, St. Louis. In fact, Tom had done doctoral studies at the University of New Mexico partly because of the Albuquerque dry weather. His 1968 dissertation had studied the works of James Fennimore Cooper.

Already, Tom was hard of hearing. He confided once that he couldn’t be in St. Louis for 24 hours without getting ear infections! Tom worked hard and quietly on lip reading, so that many of his students asked questions in his class for a whole semester without realizing he was largely deaf.

Meantime, Tom wrote scholarly articles, some in American Lit, most in the area of his growing fascination, the literature and cultures of the Hispanic and Native American Southwest. By his 1997 retirement from Regis after 29 years of teaching, Tom had more than 40 articles and a dozen books under his name. They ranged from his Santos and Saints, the reference work owned by every contemporary santero, to his collaboration with Regis Professor Ron Di Santo, Guidebook to Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance. (Tom’s interests and his talents were hardly narow.) After retirement to Albuquerque, I count four more books and can’t quite tell how many articles.

During a 40 year stint, Tom acquired an extensive teaching collection of Santos, selected to illustrate different styles and periods of this ancient Southwestern expression of art and devotion. Some items were given to him, most he bought with a subsidy from Regis. About one quarter of the collection is on display at any one time in the Morada-style museum he designed in our Dayton Memorial Library.
Along the way, Tom discovered the brotherhood of Penitentes, the lay Catholic communities that kept the Faith alive in New Mexican villages with private prayer and public processions, especially at Holy Week, for over a century when there were no priests to bring the sacraments. I think Tom’s initial fascination with the large statues the Penitentes carried in procession - a variety of santo - led him to publish lost liturgical texts and turned him into a deep admirer of the religious devotion of this secretive lay brotherhood. One of the great joys of his life came when he was invited to himself become a member.

The invitation to join the brotherhood of Penitentes is symptomatic of a whole other side of Tom’s life. Never merely a scholar, Tom found great joy in ministering to people, whether the undergraduates in his English classes, the Denver mothers in his book club, the santeros and santeras and their families, or the people of various New Mexican villages where he helped out on weekends. Tom just plain enjoyed the folks he met and adjusted to their interests, their food, their lifestyle. He even became a good cow-puncher and enjoyed helping on roundups in New Mexico and – with his friend Dan Ritchie - on Dan’s ranch near Kremmling. He was friend, student, and pastor as well as scholar.

Tom’s life included some heavy Crosses. When first I knew him, Tom was beginning to realize that he was drinking too much wine and beer. Although always able to function, Tom gradually realized he was a working alcoholic. Quietly and devotedly he availed himself of Alcoholics Anonymous, developing a life-long commitment to attending meetings, befriending and supporting others struggling with the addiction, ministering to those who approached him. Never noisy at Regis about his recovering status, he always was there for faculty and students struggling to cope with their own addiction. And I knew him well enough to realize what personal struggle preceded his life of dedication to recovery.

His ever-increasing deafness took its toll as well. Inevitably, it isolated him by putting a certain barrier to easy conversation, especially in groups. He worked against the loneliness of it and became a master at delivering maddening puns served up with a patented smile that alerted his hearer that something outrageous was about to be uttered!
And, in the last three or four years, Tom became a victim of a particularly cruel form of Alzheimer’s. Tom continued to understand what was being said to him. He knew the response he wanted to make. But, a growing amount of the time, he couldn’t find the words and had to shake his head in apologetic frustration. It’s hard to imagine what a stripping was involved in this Cross, as a man of such facility with words and expression was reduced to a listener who felt he could contribute nothing, even though he had so much he wanted to say.

It struck me that Tom became much more overt about his faith as the disease stripped him of his capacity to communicate. Often, when his struggle to speak yielded only frustration, he would touch your arm or shake your hand and manage to say something like, “God bless you.” And when Tom Steele did that, you knew you were blessed indeed.

Recently, Tom developed signs of radical anemia, including collapsing in church or in his room. About a month ago, his doctor provided the diagnosis of advanced mylo-dysplasia (a variant of leukemia) with a life expectation of only a few weeks or months. So that same day and the next, Tom, fully aware that his time was short, went around to various people he knew on campus to say his good-bye’s while he still could. And many people that day were blessed by this man who could hardly speak.

Tom Steele was scholar, teacher, and priest. As his life went on, he embraced heavy crosses and exulted — oh how he exulted! - in so many aspects of God’s world. And, as so much was stripped away from him, he became more and more a man who expressed the Christ who lived within him. May he rest in peace.