

## Requiem for Fr. Henry Rodriguez

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Fr. Peter Daly

My friend and classmate, Fr. Henry Rodriguez, died suddenly last month. He was only 61 years old. I will miss him terribly. His funeral was an immense outpouring of grief and joy. We might all hope to have such a funeral. It made me proud to be a Catholic priest and a friend.

Although Henry and I met each other in the seminary in Rome more than 30 years ago, we only really got to know each other over the telephone. In the last 10 years or so, we developed the habit of talking to each other for an hour or more, a couple of times per month. Usually we talked on Sunday nights after all the events were over. Henry was making dinner for himself in his kitchen in San Diego. I was getting ready for bed in Maryland. Our conversation was a joy. It was a safe zone for honest talk between two old friends, about faith, life, priesthood and the church.

We had some personal visits. I went out there eight or nine times in 30 years. He came to Washington, D.C. only once. On that visit we toured the new Martin Luther King memorial. We heard someone yelling, "Father, Father." Since we were in my town, I figured it was one of my parishioners. Not so. It was a school group from San Diego touring Washington. The "Father" they recognized was Henry. He was always the star.

Just five weeks before he died, I saw him for the last time at the North American College reunion in San Diego. I never go to reunions, but he pressured me. Henry was always the picture of health. He was a marathon runner. He ran the San Diego marathon most years. He also ran the Boston Marathon three times. His best time was in 2002 at Boston when he ran 3:27:41.

His death was front page news in San Diego. When I arrived at the airport on August 10, our classmate, Dan Murray, handed me the *San Diego Union Tribune*. There was Henry's picture on the front page and a full page story followed, recounting his life and ministry.

Henry was always a pastor and a priest, but his ministry did not stop at the church door. He was a community organizer with the San Diego Organizing Project. He was a police and fire chaplain. He was a social activist. He was a counselor at the gay and lesbian community center. He was a hospice and hospital chaplain. He said masses in half a dozen parishes around the diocese, rich and poor.

As a community organizer in the neighborhood where he grew up, he knew every street and house and many of the people by name. His work helped to stop the construction of an expressway which would have displaced most of the community. He also helped build a much needed shopping center (with a food store) because low income areas are often "food deserts." He was a key figure in building low- and moderate-income housing in his neighborhood. Eventually he bought one of those houses and lived there until his death.

For 25 years he had been a volunteer police chaplain, organizing the 16 police chaplains of various faiths and going along with police officers when tragedy struck. San Diego is heavily Catholic and Henry was always available. He counseled and encouraged many police officers and rode along with them on many calls. Dozens of times he helped them break tragic news to families who had just lost a loved one to crime.

The *Union Tribune* recounted how Henry responded to a domestic disturbance call in his neighborhood in a ride along with the police chief. "The screaming couple wasn't impressed to see the police chief at their door, but then they noticed the other guy. 'Father Henry,' the man said, 'I'm so sorry.'"

At his funeral, San Diego police chief Shelley Zimmerman, a Jewish woman, said Fr. Henry was her priest. The Saturday before he died he had gone with her to break the tragic news to the

family of a fallen officer who was shot in the line of duty. The shooting occurred just a block away from Henry's house and Henry heard the gun shots from his sickbed. They took the family down to the hospital where Henry anointed the dying officer before he was taken off life support. As sick as he was, Henry stayed at the hospital much of the night.

Henry was part of the reason that the San Diego Police Department has pretty good relations with its city. He helped the police to see his neighborhood as people first and the neighborhood to see the police officers as their friends and protectors.

Fr. Edward Brockhaus, who celebrated the funeral, recalled the first time he saw Henry, who was about 11 at the time, Henry rode up to the church together with this younger brother, Vincent. The boys were on "junk bikes," the sort of bikes that kids in the barrio make out of stuff they find in the trash. Henry wanted to come into the church to light a candle and pray for someone. The priest hesitated. Not sure about these two. But he let them in. The two boys knelt and said a prayer, such a cute image. Years later Henry was pastor at that same church for 17 years.

Brockhaus said that Henry was marked by two characteristics: courage and compassion. His courage sometimes got him into trouble, especially with bishops. His compassion made him see people's suffering and try to help them.

Henry was always a kid of the barrio. He dropped out of high school. Eventually he got his GED, with the encouragement of his co-workers at Sharp Memorial Hospital, where he worked as an orderly. No job was too humble or difficult for Henry.

The seminary took him away from his Southcrest neighborhood, into a much fancier world at the University of San Diego. Eventually he went to Jerusalem and Rome. The church opened a whole new horizon to Henry, for which he was always grateful. But he was rooted in the neighborhood.

For many years, Henry marched in his clerical collar with the San Diego police department in various community parades including the annual Gay Pride Parade, which got him into trouble with his former bishop. The diocese refused to assign him to a parish or pay his health insurance or pension contributions. Henry managed; cobbling together a ministry by helping in many parishes, and serving as a hospice chaplain. He also did counseling at the gay and lesbian community center. The new bishop of San Diego, Robert McElroy, brought Henry back into the diocesan fold and made him pastor of the parish where much of the gay community lives. Just a few weeks ago, after the mass shooting at the Pulse night club in Orlando, Henry went with the bishop to a memorial for the victims. He was a bridge to many communities.

As I stood outside the church while Henry's casket was placed in the hearse, it occurred to me that the huge crowd was a slice of heaven. Everyone was there; Latino and Anglo, immigrant and native born, rich and poor, black and white, gay and straight, cops and community, the homeless and the housed, Jew and Christian, believer and non-believer, old and young. At the cemetery, as his casket was lowered into the grave, I said a prayer over him. "Goodbye old friend. You did it! You ran the race, you fought the good fight. Now nothing awaits you but the crown of glory."

Rest in peace Fr. Henry.