

Funeral Mass for Michael Steve Sperando (6/19/62-3/19-24) – March 22, 2024 – 1,100 words
Cathedral of Saint Paul, Birmingham, Alabama – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L. – 10:00am

It is a great honor to welcome you all here today, as together we join in thanking God for the great gift of Michael Steve Sperando, who left a lasting impression on us all. We are relieved that he is no longer suffering, but it is still not easy to say farewell, so we offer condolences to Catherine and Steve, Sister Tonette, Gina, Sarah, spouses, other family members, and friends all. Special thanks to our Bishop Steven Raica for accompanying us in prayer today, along with past Cathedral Rectors Father Kevin Bazzel and Father Pat Cullen, who will speak at the end. We also thank Father Bryan Lowe and Deacon Wally Zieverink for their presence on the altar, not to mention the Benedictine Sisters here present. Finally, I also acknowledge the Cathedral staff here with us; we all loved having Mike's help down through the years and will always treasure the time we got to spend with him.

This past Sunday, before I gave Mike the Anointing and the Apostolic Pardon, I said that I really didn't think he needed it – and I was serious about that. It has often been said that those with Down Syndrome are among us as angels sent by God – and Mike certainly personified that. He always had something uplifting, indeed humorous, to say. Yes, G.K. Chesterton once wrote, "Angels can fly, because they can take themselves lightly"; Michael seemed to know this and soared among us as a kind of angel who helped lift our spirits and cause us to rise above our preoccupations. We can never forget his warm smile or unique turns of phrase. For example, I recall how after Mass, Mike would chat with me outside and always ask about my family; he would then conclude by saying, "tell them I said 'hey'". Mike had never met my family before, but he cared; he was interested.

Well, to Mike now, I say, "tell Jesus, Mary, Joseph, St. Paul, St. Scholastica, St. Benedict, and all the saints and angels that we said 'hey'"! And I feel moved to address a specific word to Catherine, Steve, Sr. Tonette, Gina, Sarah, spouses, and other immediate family who supported Michael throughout his life; namely: "Well done, good and faithful servants!" The often-sacrificial care you provided Mike was truly exemplary and a beautiful thing to behold. You ensured that he was surrounded by love, that he was treated with dignity, and that he had every opportunity possible along the way. You have shown us all the value of life and how there is an important place for everyone in our world. The investment you made in Michael has already paid a rich dividend, and I have no doubt it will continue to do so for years to come. On behalf of all here, I thank you for your witness of love.

More than a witness of love, you – and Michael – gave a witness to hope; and that is very fitting, for your surname, "Sperando", comes from the Italian verb for "hope". Michael's innate sense of joy, which you encouraged and built up in him, was not some sort of vague optimism or nervous happiness; it was not unserious. No, it was something real, substantial, and very serious, that pointed us all toward the life to come. Yes, with St. Paul in the second reading, we grieve today not as those "who have no hope", but rather, as those who believe in and look forward to something far greater that awaits us in heaven. We believe that not only is Mike with Jesus now awaiting the resurrection to everlasting happiness beyond this veil of tears – but that we also will get there if we follow the same path of charity; we believe that God will "get us there" in spite of all the challenges this life sends.

I daresay that our hope is stronger because of people like Michael, whose lives have intersected with ours. In the gospel, Jesus spoke of his disciples as God's gift to him. Christ sees each one of us as a gift! Think about that! And we do well to reflect on that, because if we are truly gifts to God, then we must be gifts to each other, too – and that is no doubt what Michael was to us. I spoke earlier of him in terms of being like an angel; but it occurred to me that we misspeak if

we focus too much on the angelic, for Michael showed us what it meant to be truly and fully human: to love unconditionally, to have a sincere and spontaneous concern for others, to call out the best in others, to see past all the bad things to the good, to be simple in a good way – that is, to be child-like – rather than so fraught with complexity and conflict. Yes, what a gift Michael was to God – and to us!

And the wonderful thing about God's gifts is that they endure. We look upon this casket and are hit by a sting of separation; we are still adjusting to the physical change. But then, we call to mind these great memories and we feel that Michael is still with us, that he is near. And so it has been also with the other people who have been gifts to us and have gone before – and I feel I cannot fail to mention Mike's beloved friend Antoinette, as well as dear Sister Mary Vernon Gentle, and so many other family members and friends along the way. We grieve the separation and the adjustment, yet we remain full of hope. What a gift the Lord gave himself in Michael Sperando – and what a gift he gave us! But we have been chosen by God also. Therefore, inspired by such great gifts and seeking the help of his grace, we strive to persevere on the path of charity till we are all reunited again.

Now there is much more I could say about these readings, about the prayers, about Michael, and so forth, but studies have shown that one of the leading causes of a loss of hope is long-winded preaching. Fathers Cullen and Bazzel will highlight some other dimensions in their remarks at the end. And we will all have the chance to continue sharing memories at the luncheon that follows. For now, we turn our attention toward the Lord Jesus, who will soon be present among us in the Eucharist – I think of how much Michael loved attending Holy Mass... and we ask Jesus to renew in us his gift of hope!