

Anthony Russo: A Tribute in Honor of Our Friend

by Kieran Dickinson

Our dear friend and colleague in philosophy study, Anthony Russo, passed away on May 14th in New York City. Brother Dunstan, David Alexander, and I attended the funeral a few days later at the Basilica of Saint Patrick's Old Cathedral on Mulberry Street. We were also present for the entombment and later had lunch with Tony's family (sister Camille, cousin Raymond, and others).

Tony was born on October 4, 1944 in New York City. Other than during his stint in the United States Marine Corps, Tony lived his entire life in New York City, specifically in Lower Manhattan close to Little Italy, Chinatown, and Wall Street. He struggled in school due to undiagnosed dyslexia, but later studied philosophy at Fordham University. He worked as an insurance broker during his professional career, however, by the time I met Tony, in the early 2000s, he had entered the third, contemplative phase of life.

Capon Springs, West Virginia, at the cabin there owned by the Benedictine monks of St Anselm's Abbey, is where I met Tony. It was a most unlikely place to meet him, because he was a New Yorker through and through and ill at ease amid sticks, hollows, and the Wardensville police (who stopped our car). Tony was there by invitation of St Anselm's sole extraverted monk, our own Brother Dunstan, who had met Tony a few years before this at the annual Lonergan Workshop at Boston College. Tony had not only read the work of Bernard Lonergan, but appropriated it. He lived by it, or better yet, embodied it, not in the sense of often quoting Lonergan but in the sense of employing Lonergan's method of interiority and self-appropriation so thoroughly that it was part of him.

For me, Tony became a mentor and teacher. I was so impressed at this man who was a daily communicant like me, an orthodox Catholic, who had worked in the world, who had studied Catholic theology and philosophy so thoroughly, and who had also ventured deeply into Zen and Eastern Orthodox practice, all without fear or contradiction. (Later I learned that Fr. Thomas Keating, O.C.S.O., the founder of the centering prayer movement, had been a mentor to Tony, and that Tony had seriously considered becoming a Trappist monk.)

Tony and I met many times when my law practice took me to New York City; we also spent time at the Lonergan Workshop at Boston College; and once Tony came to stay at my family's home in Virginia. Most often, though, I spoke with Tony over Skype or Zoom in the context of philosophy reading groups sponsored by the Lonergan Institute, reading Norris Clarke, D. C. Schindler, Ryszard Legutko, Pierre Manent, Martin Rhonheimer, and others. Tony's understanding of the readings was profound. He used to read on ahead and read and re-read the chapters and, of course, relate the current author's ideas to those in his extensive mental library that had been formed over decades of reading and self-appropriation. To visit Tony in his element, in Lower Manhattan, was a delight: he was a most attentive host, always anticipating any need a guest might have. Indeed, he was remarkably other-focused, not in spite of but perhaps because he had such a rich interior life.

Tony was a mystic. Once I asked him whether he had ever had an enlightenment experience. He replied that he had been given to understand that he was on the right track. He spent a couple of hours in prayer daily and did this habitually for years. He often encouraged me to pray or checked on my prayer.

I will take his advice with me to the end. Always assume that the person you're talking to is hurting worse than you are, he said. Make sure your wife and kids go first class. Drive 55 – he meant, go through life more slowly but keep going. Focus on the mysteries — this was in 2019, probably the last time I saw him in person, as we prayed the Rosary together by the East River.

He thought the best of me and others in our Lonergan Institute circle—in my case better than I deserved. When I think of Tony's very generous judgments of me and of us I recall Our Lord's words: the measure with which you measure will be measured out to you. These words give me great hope for Tony. They also bring to mind the responsibility of those of us who were Tony's close friends to measure up to his example.

To close, I recopy the words of a prayer sent me in the days after Tony's death by Fred and Sue Lawrence (who knew Tony well from his yearly sojourns to Boston College for the Lonergan Workshop and who called Tony one of the kindest and holiest members of the Lonergan community):

We give them back to thee, dear Lord, who gavest them to us. Yet as thou didst not lose them in giving, so we have not lost them by their return. What thou gavest thou takest not away, O Lover of souls; for what is thine is ours also if we are thine. And life is eternal and love is immortal, and death is only an horizon, and an horizon is nothing save the limit of our sight. Lift us up, strong Son of God, that we may see further; cleanse our eyes that we may see more clearly; and draw us closer to thyself that we may know ourselves to be nearer to our loved ones who are with thee. And while thou dost prepare for us, prepare us also for that happy place, that where they are and thou art, we too may be for evermore.