

On July 29, 2014, at a Funeral Mass in Holy Rosary Cathedral, the Diocese of Toledo honored the life of its highly respected and greatly loved Auxiliary Bishop Emeritus Robert W. Donnelly. In my homily at the Mass, I noted that Bishop Donnelly, who was ordained as a bishop in 1984, could serve as a great example of the kind of bishop Pope Francis wants for the Church today. In a well-publicized 2013 address to Apostolic Nuncios, who play an important role in episcopal appointments, Francis insisted that they should look for candidates who “are pastors close to the people, fathers and brothers, that they are gentle, patient and merciful; animated by inner poverty, the freedom of the Lord and also by outward simplicity and austerity of life, that they do not have the psychology of “Princes.” The pope warned against picking priests who ambitiously seek the episcopal office and would be “in constant search” for higher positions. We need bishops who, above all, are able to “watch over” the flock, who “have sun and light in their hearts,” so they can “lovingly and patiently support the plans which God brings about in His people.” The Church needs pastors who “know how to be ahead of the herd to point the way, in the midst of the flock to keep it united, behind the flock to prevent someone being left behind, so that the same flock, so to speak, has the sense of smell to find its way.”

In subsequent talks, Francis has continued to insist that the Church does not need bishops who are “apologists for their own agendas or crusaders for their own battles” or who strut around in episcopal finery like “peacocks.” We need “authentic” bishops who are “humble and faithful sowers of the truth.” In the now familiar phrase of Francis, bishops should have “the smell of the sheep” they serve.

In Pope Francis, we see a living example of these episcopal ideals. As archbishop of Buenos Aires, he was well known for his simple lifestyle, using public transportation, living in a small apartment and cooking his own meals. And now as Bishop of Rome he has impressed the whole world with a series of actions that reflect Gospel values: asking people to pray for him; choosing to live in the Vatican guest house rather than the papal palace; travelling in an ordinary car; washing the feet of Muslim girls; visiting the poor and the sick. In Francis, the world sees an authentic human being; theists recognize a genuine believer; Christians of all denominations discern a follower of Jesus who lives Gospel ideals; and his fellow Catholics detect a bishop who embodies the Vatican II ideal of the dedicated servant leader.

What people around the world appreciate in Francis, Bishop of Rome, people in northwest Ohio respected in the life and ministry of Robert Donnelly, Auxiliary Bishop of Toledo. For his Funeral Mass, Bishop Donnelly chose as one of the scripture readings Second Corinthians 4:7-15, where Paul speaks personally about a “surpassing power” that comes from God who raised Jesus to life in order to save the whole world. In my homily, I invited reflection on the countercultural character of this “surpassing power.”

In a classic study of how power operates in human relationships, the psychologist Rollo May, who absorbed a good deal of theology from his teacher, the influential Lutheran theologian Paul Tillich, distinguished five types of power: coercive power, which is the brute force Josef Stalin had in mind when he asked how many divisions the Pope had; manipulative power, which the wealthy are able to use effectively in the political realm; competitive power, epitomized in great sports rivalries (Ali vs Frazier, Tiger vs Phil, Venus vs Serena); nourishing power, represented by parents caring for their children; and integrating power, which occurs when individuals cooperate in doing good. Dr. May has given us an excellent analysis of how power is conceived and operates in our secular society. But he has said nothing explicit about Paul’s surpassing power, or what we might call a transcendent or spiritual power. Our one-dimensional secular culture tends to dismiss spiritual power, and to ignore its accomplishments.

In Second Corinthians, Paul insists that the surpassing power that enabled him to deal with affliction and persecution was not his own but was from God. This divine power was definitively operative in the death and resurrection of Christ, who shared his power with his disciples. For Paul, this participation in Christ’s power was so real that he could say that he carried in his own body the dying and the life of Jesus. He well understood that his great success as the Apostle to the Gentiles was due to the surpassing power of God, mediated by Christ. Pope Francis has attuned us anew to the amazing effectiveness of spiritual power, rooted in an authentic lifestyle and a genuine life of service. In doing so, Francis provides a perspective for appreciating the life and ministry of Bishop Robert Donnelly.

In preparation for preaching at Bishop Donnelly’s Funeral Mass, I asked many people to tell me about him. Strikingly, not one person mentioned any accomplishments of his, not even his great work in organizing a very successful Renew Program for the whole diocese. On the other hand, every person spoke glowingly of his personal virtues and strengths. His nephews and nieces typically mentioned his genuine humanity: having fun at parties; taking an interest in their children; and playing sports and games with his family. At the same time, he was their priest, ready to preside at family baptisms, weddings and funerals with his engaging pastoral presence. His ordination as a bishop did not alter his familiar relationship with relatives. On one occasion, when he was home for dinner, his father thought he was having a heart attack, and, as he lay down on the couch, told his bishop son to call a priest. Expressing a common family perception, one of his nephews told me his uncle “always led with his heart.” Uncle Bob did indeed radiate a surpassing power that gave hope and encouragement to the family members who loved and respected him.

Former parishioners of Bishop Donnelly uniformly noted his kindness, patience and especially his approachability. In his presence, individuals felt comfortable, respected, accepted. He was an attentive listener, with the ability to focus on each unique individual he encountered. One woman was very nervous about going to confession, especially to a bishop, but found all her anxiety disappeared when he greeted her very warmly. Bishop Donnelly enjoyed tremendous respect among those he served. It was not unusual for parishioners to get involved in projects simply because he asked and they couldn’t say no to him. Several persons mentioned

how good he was at visiting the sick. One woman attributed her recovery from a serious illness to his healing touch. A prominent member of the Toledo civic community praised the bishop for his behind the scenes support for local programs to assist the poor, suggesting that he had an intuitive sense of the social dimension of the Gospel. Bishop Donnelly exercised a spiritual power that provided comfort, healing, and reconciliation to those he served so well.

Among his ordained colleagues, Bob Donnelly enjoyed great respect and admiration. One of his longtime priest friends said that in 65 years he had never heard him say anything bad about any person. It was common for him to show concern for his fellow priests in simple ways. One priest in the middle of a big decision about his future was gratefully surprised when Bob just stopped in his home to ask how he was doing. One of his good friends and a travelling companion succinctly stated some of his positive qualities: a true gentleman who maintained an even personality; a man of dignity who was never pretentious; a people person who was a warm and loyal friend; and a priest with a deep spirituality who lost none of his admirable qualities when he became bishop. A priest, with a keen eye for the strengths of his colleagues, declared that Bob was the quintessential example of a bishop living in solidarity with his fellow members of the baptismal priesthood - - perhaps a clue to the dynamics of the surpassing power that energized him during his many years of active ministry and sustained him in the last year when his mental and physical powers waned.

Bishop Robert Donnelly was a man of the people who never lost the common touch; a priest who came to see himself as a servant leader; a bishop who was never pretentious and always ready to listen and learn. The surpassing power of God was at work in him, enabling him to share spiritual power with the flock he served. With the smell of the sheep all over him, he is a great example of the kind of bishop Pope Francis envisions for the Church.

In the passage from Second Corinthians, Paul teaches that the surpassing power that raised the Lord Jesus to life will also raise his followers to share in his risen life. Bolstered by that shared hope for Bishop Donnelly, the Eucharistic celebration enabled the large assembly that filled the Cathedral to give symbolic expression to their love and respect for the bishop as well as their good intentions to emulate his inspiring example. It seemed so very fitting to offer that great reservoir of positive energy to God through Christ in the power of the Spirit, concluding with the shared acclamation of the Great Amen.