Patrick Whelan

In the Chorus of the Lord

REMEMBERING PETER GOMES

There is a quiet battle going on in U.S. Christianity about whether being a Christian is more about what one professes or how one acts. In the eternal argument over faith versus works, Harvard's Rev. Peter Gomes often expressed a deeply Catholic affection for both. Through his preaching and writing as minister to the university for nearly forty years, and in his Inauguration Day benedictions for two Republican presidents, he explored the interrelationship between suffering, creativity, and faith in a way that was not often heard in Protestant circles. He died last February at age sixty-eight.

Having long taught a course on the history of Harvard, Peter liked to say that faith was "a part of the university's very DNA, an essential part of both its historic and its contemporary identity." Continuing the work of the seventeenth-century president-preachers, Peter felt the weight of history as minister in the nondenominational Memorial Church—a white-spired rival to the neighboring imperial-columned Widener Library in Harvard Yard, the two buildings serving as a perpetual reminder of the tension between faith and reason.

Ordained a Baptist minister in the tumultuous year 1968, Peter was nonetheless a quiet champion of Catholic ideas and the great Catholic thinkers. He was the exception to many rules. On occasion he would proudly declare that he was baptized a Boston Catholic (his father grew up Catholic in the Cape Verde Islands). But Peter was later raised near Plymouth Plantation and had a heartfelt affection for the Puritans. He rose proudly to become president of the Pilgrim Society. Professor Henry Louis Gates explored Peter's ancestry in a documentary for PBS, detailing how Peter's mother was descended from Virginia slaves who had been freed by their Quaker owners at the close of the American Revolution.

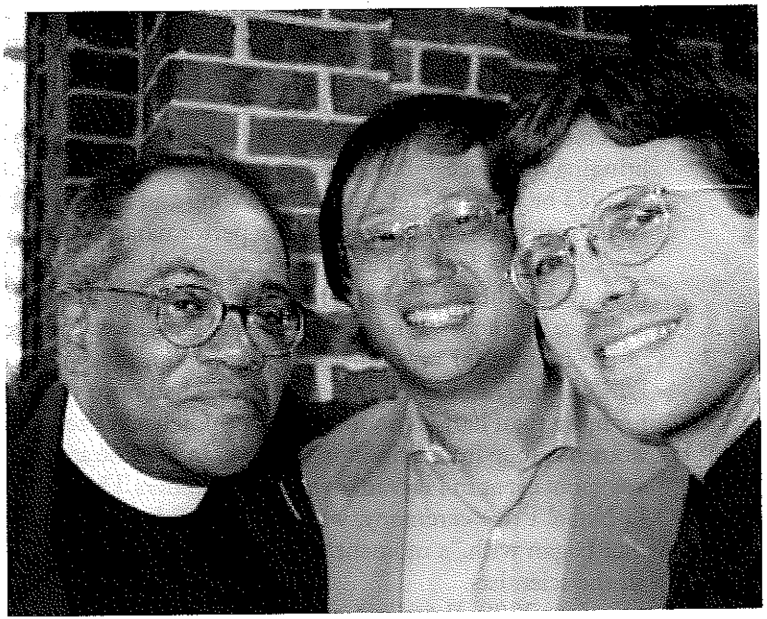
Peter had a great affection for high-church ceremony, and he traveled frequently to Britain for speaking engagements. His sermons were laced with references to Cardinal John Henry Newman, and to Saints Augustine and Aquinas.

He welcomed many prominent Catholics to speak in Memorial Church. In 1976 he hosted a series of lectures by Hans Küng, the popular Swiss theologian whose ideas on infallibility and the divinity of Christ had drawn the ire of the Vatican. In his 2002 book, *The Good Life*, Peter wrote that Küng

> was trying to demonstrate that a Christian was one who did not simply believe certain things, but who acted in a certain way in fulfillment of the commandment to love God, self, and neighbor. If you want to know what good is, you do good, which is to love in these transforming ways, and you will, by doing, be good. Christians who ask what the good life is and how they might acquire it are supplied with the answer of the New Testament: obey the law of love and follow Jesus.

Peter loved telling the story of playing host to Mother Teresa in 1982, when Harvard seniors had chosen her to speak on the eve of graduation. The Class Day festivities, which Peter described as being "usually a riot of frivolity, self-congratulation, and self-indulgence," assumed an unaccustomed profundity as Peter welcomed Mother Teresa to Memorial Church. In the moments before her talk, Peter found himself struggling to make small-talk with her. As he asked where she'd been recently and where she was going next, she seemed lost in thought. When he asked whether it pleased her that so many Harvard students wanted to work with her in India, she replied, "It pleases Jesus." They then spent ten silent minutes together—an eternity for a rich conversationalist like Peter—before she delivered her speech to the thousands assembled in the Yard.

I was in the audience that day. Mother Teresa offered an impassioned invitation for us as young people to save ourselves for marriage and to dedicate ourselves to serving others. "You and I have been taught to love, to love one another, to be kind to each other, not with words but in real life. To prove that love in action as Christ has proved it,"



Rev. Peter Gomes in 1999, with Samuel Wong and the author she said. As Peter later described the scene: "Catholics were reminded that although she was a living saint, the almost universal title accorded her, she was also a real nun, and that that was the way real nuns still think and talk."

Peter loved to recount what happened the following day during the commencement brunch in the central courtyard of the Fogg Art Museum. While other honorary degree holders made conversation with the president and other Harvard dignitaries, Mother Teresa walked around with a sack and asked each of them to donate the value of their lunch to the advancement of her work in Calcutta. Peter enjoyed recalling the stunned silence that ensued as one-by-one the Nobel laureates and professors reached for their wallets.

"In churches whose gospel is success, prosperity, glory here, and rapture now," Peter wrote,

> suffering is clearly not in God's game plan for them; it is an aberration. This is what makes Mother Teresa so disturbing to the modern sensibility. She is so disturbing to the world as we know it, and to the church as we believe in it, that we must get her out of the way as quickly and as thoroughly as possible by making of her a saint, for saints, whether living or dead, as we all know, are virtually harmless.

I came to know Peter as a college student. I led the music for the Saturday midnight Mass every week at the Harvard Catholic Student Center, but early each Sunday I'd race to the Yard for choir practice and the morning service at the Harvard Memorial Church. An accomplished pianist, Peter had the highest expectations for the choral experience in his church. He had himself assembled the *Harvard Hymn Book*, and took pride in having included less well-known Catholic hymns like Cardinal Newman's "Lead Thou Me On." In Memorial Church, it was taken for granted that hymns would be sung in their entirety. Peter enjoyed quoting one of his congregants, who said, "Hymns are to Protestants what incense is to Catholics—reminders of the presence of God."

Peter often showed up in unexpected places on campus, bringing reverence—and humor—where it wasn't expected. In 1983 he joined Maestro Samuel Wong and the Harvard Bach Society Orchestra to narrate a performance of Prokofiev's *Peter and the Wolf*. He delivered a particularly persuasive portrayal of the finger-wagging grandfather, which left the audience in stitches. On a couple of occasions, he was master of ceremonies for my college singing group, the Harvard Din&Tonics, and loved to boast that he had once vamped for more than half an hour while the audience waited for a women's group from Princeton to arrive. In 1997 he appeared at a spoof event in Harvard's venerable Sanders Theater, the Ig Nobel Prize ceremony, where he offered a benediction that began with "a moment of science"—to the delight of all the scientists.

In late 2009, Peter lost consciousness during a speaking engagement in New York, but soon returned to work determined to continue at full speed. Then in December 2010 he suffered a stroke that left him largely paralyzed on his left side. Over the next two and a half months he steadily improved, and spoke often of his intent to deliver the Easter sermon from his old pulpit. I visited him through those hospitalizations and we spoke the day before he died. Sitting in a chair at Massachusetts General Hospital, with a sweeping view of the city, he greeted me and reached up with both arms to offer a hug—a remarkable feat for someone in his condition. On top of everything else, he'd suffered an attack of gout two months before, and when I asked him how his toes were feeling he performed a little dance with his previously immobile left ankle.

He laughed when I told him that my eleven-year-old son had insisted after our last trip to the Memorial Church that it was a Catholic church. Peter responded, "He's not the only one who's walked out of our church with that impression."

We talked about the snowstorm earlier that day, and about the inscrutable beauty of nature. We recalled a story he told during a sermon some years before about taking a spring walk with one of his friends—he smiled and said it was the Harvard poet David McCord—who asked him abruptly, "What is the color of spring?"

"Green, naturally," Peter responded. But then his friend corrected him, and pointed out that all the buds were first red—the color of passion and new life. "And once you've begun thinking about it, doesn't the red color just leap out at you every time you take a walk in the spring?"

Peter died the next morning. I was reminded of his devotion to the three-hour Good Friday observances he led over the years, preaching on the last words of Jesus and about redemption found in suffering. "Protestants have long beguiled themselves with the notions that they worship a victorious and risen Christ, and thus an empty cross," he once wrote. "Unlike their Catholic and Orthodox brethren, they will not make their devotions to the broken and bruised Jesus hanging down in garish Roman detail from his crucifix, and so the Protestant churches are filled on Easter but empty on Good Friday."

Peter was particularly sensitive to the suffering of others, which he saw as the place where faith and works were most potently joined. "It is the most orthodox of Christian doctrine that the Savior does not save us from suffering, but is with us in and through suffering," he wrote. "I always end memorial services and funerals with the prayer long associated with Cardinal Newman," he said in 1996. "O Lord, support us all the day long of this troublous life, until the shadows lengthen and the evening comes, and the fever of life is over, and our work is done. Then, in thy great mercy, grant us a safe lodging, a holy rest, and peace at the last." ■

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