

**My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,**

**Upon hearing of Jim's death, the image that came to mind was that of the late Pope John Paul II, soon to be St. John Paul. I suppose because he, like Jim, spent his last days imprisoned in a body that no longer responded to his wants or needs. But, upon later reflection, it occurred to me that both, in their living and in their dying, they taught us how precious life really is. That every breathe we take, no matter how labored or difficult is, in fact, a precious gift from God.**

**My thoughts then turned to the image that hovers above the altar in Our Lady of Consolation Church, that of Jesus' agony in the garden. There, in my mind's eye, I saw Jim kneeling beside Jesus, praying with him, "Father, if it is your will, take this cup from me; yet not my will but yours be done." Year after year, day-in-and-day-out, I imagined Jim kneeling there beside Jesus, praying that prayer until it took root in the very core of his being.**

**In the beginning, when this dreaded disease first struck when he was in the full vibrancy of his youth, no doubt Jim's prayer was indeed, "Father...take this cup from me...". As the years became decades eventually, I believe, he came to acknowledge that for some unknown reason this was part of God's plan for him, so the prayer eventually became "Father, if it is your will, take this cup from me..." Finally, after almost a half century kneeling there in agony beside Jesus in the garden, tried and purified now like gold in the furnace, Jim prayed with all of his heart, "Father, if it is your will, take this cup from me; yet not my will but yours be done."**

**It was then only a couple of years ago that I noticed and Grace noticed, and I suspect that all those who cared for Jim and ministered to him noticed, a beautiful peace came over Jim and surrounded him and seemed to fill his very being.**

**But, like Jesus, that surrender was not an end to the suffering and agony. In the last couple of months he had to endure the pain of Christ on the cross of Calvary before it was finished.**

**Now, here we are, gathered in the Church of his baptism, to celebrate this life of Christ-like suffering. And there truly is so much to celebrate in the life of Jim Filoromo.**

**First and foremost is the beautiful love story that he and Grace have become in the lives of us who know them. Tammy Wynette don't know nothin' about standing by her man if she doesn't know how Grace has stood by Jim. He, in his illness, wore down her last nerve; worried her to a frazzle; drove her crazy with frustration; and surely caused her endless nights of crying herself to sleep and waking up to cry all over again. But, though often shaken, at times despairing, how many times feeling overwhelmed, she never gave up on him and stood by him all these many years.**

**Theirs is a love that was crushed to the ground, stepped on, kicked to the side that came up again stronger with each attack that the disease and the world could throw at them. Nothing could destroy the faithfulness of that bond of love that they shared.**

**In their love for each other Jim and Grace embodied the love that God has for all of us—a love that's willing to die for us; a love that is constant and faithful; a love that overlooks every shortcoming; a love that looks beyond our faults and sees our needs. Indeed, today we celebrate this beautiful love story of Jim and Grace Filoromo.**

**Today we also celebrate the magnificent dignity of the man. Jim Filoromo was a proud man, an accomplished man, a man who took pride in his work, and gave his best. Though his body failed him at every turn and all he accomplished and achieved in the earlier days of his life was perhaps long forgotten, no one who ever visited him or came into his presence without experiencing his awesome dignity. His was a presence that spoke strength even in weakness; a fierce determination that never allowed for self-pity; and a courageous acceptance of what he could not change, but would never allow for defeat.**

**Worthy too of celebration are the lives of all whom Jim touched in their care and ministry to him. I don't believe that anyone who cared for Jim or ministered to him has not been changed. Each of us have come to realize how precious life is, what courage really is, and how compassionate love makes us so much more wonderfully human. Walking away from Jim's bed of pain, or quiet suffering, or raging boredom, or excruciating agony, whatever the day offered to him, who has not been challenged to appreciate even more the blessings we have received and wondered how we might endure all that he was enduring?**

**There is yet something more that we might celebrate today that's a little more complicated to express. It is the unitive nature of life! I came to appreciate it when Grace told me the story of Sunshine. Sunshine was Jim's companion for the past twenty some years of his life. He accompanied him from his home to Harrison House, where he shared the room with Jim for the past 10-and-a-half years. Each day at 7:00 and 10:00, Sunshine would stand up and sing and dance to Jim's delight. He was so constant in this, that were he to raise a ruckus at any other time of the day, the staff would know that Jim was in crisis.**

**Jim loved Sunshine and each day when he was fed, he reminded the nurse or attendant to feed Sunshine. However, in the last three days of Jim's life, Sunshine refused to sing and kept a silent fast, refusing to eat. By then, Jim too had fallen into a silent, painful coma.**

**Grace kept telling him it was alright to let go, but, fighter that he was, Jim held on to life. Finally, the hospice nurse pulled Grace aside and pointed out that Sunshine also had fallen silent and was refusing to eat. It occurred to Grace that Jim needed assurance that Sunshine would be taken care of when he left. She promised him that she would take Sunshine home with her to watch over her as he had watched over Jim. She then went to**

**Sunshine and offered him the same explanation. Sunshine began to sing and dance. He sang and danced for more than two hours, and then Jim died.**

**Sunshine celebrated his going home by, in the words of Grace, “eating like a pig” even though he is an African ring-neck bird.**

**Thus, even in his dying and Sunshine’s song and dance, we can celebrate the unitive reality of all life—the divine, the human, and that in nature. We are one! One with God! One with all humanity! One with nature!**

**Just like the agony in the garden, the suffering and dying of Jesus on the cross on Calvary is not the end of the story, what we celebrate the most today is what remains of Jim’s story. His life speaks to us in the words of Paul to Timothy: “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. From now on a merited crown awaits me; on that Day the Lord, just judge that He is, will award it to me—and not only to me, but to all who have looked for his appearing with eager longing.”**

**My dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,**

**There is not one of us here, aware of the dignity and courage and faithfulness, with which Jim Filoromo lived his life who, no matter how little our faith, does not believe that he is indeed wearing “that merited crown”.**

**Grace, harkening back to the days of their youth when they loved to dance to the music of Motown, shared with me her hope and firm belief that Jim danced through those purley gates to the tune of James Brown’s “Getting’ on the Right Foot”. I invite you, as you listen now to smile in joyful celebration of Jim’s life—his life with us, and now with God. I give you James Brown, “Gettin’ on the Right Foot”!**