At certain moments in history, destiny seems to hesitate between weal and woe, as if awaiting the arrival of someone – who usually doesn’t come. But towards the end of the 12th century, a child appeared who almost managed to turn the Christian ideal into a triumphant fact.”

It is with these words the French writer Julian Greene begins his biography of Saint Francis of Assisi entitled God’s Fool. These words might apply to many people in history who made a positive impact in the world. Yet, how wonderful it is when we personally encounter a person who impacted us – someone who turned our world around. For myself, and for many of our readers, we have encountered such a person – namely, Father Benedict Groeschel.

This Grayfriar News is dedicated to a man who many – even those who never met him – considered a special brother, father and friend. No doubt, as one small article is certainly not sufficient to say everything about him, I will rather propose to present a picture.

On the canvas of our imagination we can see Father Benedict wearing the now well-familiar gray Franciscan habit. We see his wooden rosary, large cowl and simple cord. Like his spiritual father, Saint Francis, Father Benedict is not portrayed pondering over some book in his study or preaching at some church pulpit; rather he’s outside. He’s standing on a side swatch of bright green grass, and behind him is a 3’ stone wall. Beyond the wall is a shallow bay or an inlet. In the distance we see a pair of elegant snow-white swans making their way towards the shore with a duck and a long line of ducklings tagging along at a short distance. Yet, they’re not the only creatures which appear to be drawn to Father, because at his black-socked and sandaled feet stands an amber colored cat with a curled tail looking up at Father and begging for his daily mid-afternoon snack.

Yet, curiously enough, Father too is looking up – not so much with his head, but with his eyes. Lifted too is his arm – the arm once shattered by an unexpected accident. Now we see his arm strong and limber, easily stretched above his head pointing to the brilliant sun, burning white hot almost directly above his head. The surrounding sky is a blanket of royal blue, although on the distant horizon a cluster of dark clouds can be seen. Father’s other arm appears almost pressed against his chest as he clutches three or four small books. The keen observer or art student will notice he has one finger pointing to his breast – indeed his heart.

Now anyone who knew Fr. Benedict Groeschel knew he was a people person. He loved people of all kinds and all ages – and they loved him. So we can easily imagine he is almost surrounded by people.

For example, closest to him on his right is an elderly African-American woman embracing a bulky brown paper bag overflowing with food; close by stands a young woman who resembles her, perhaps it’s her granddaughter; she is obviously pregnant and evidently alone. Both women are intently looking at Father – a look which could be best described as a gaze of gratitude. Nearby we can see two boys. They appear to be brothers. The older boy is smiling at Father while the younger appears delighted admiring his brand new toy. Behind these, standing at a distance is a man with disheveled hair and clothes – homeless, addicted, or mentally ill. Perhaps all three. He too is looking at Father, but with bleary eyes and extending his hand hoping to receive something he knows he doesn’t deserve.

On the other side is a different group of people. While everyone is looking at Father, one is not. In fact, we cannot see his face as it is covered by his hands. His white hair stands in contrast to his black attire. Clearly distraught, his body is slightly bent over and to the side. Yet, standing to his side is a young man – a young seminarian proudly wearing a sharp black cassock with crisp white collar and holding a thick black breviary tight to his chest. Next to him, a middle-aged married couple, both holding an open book and a pen, are evidently approaching Father for a brief word, a blessing and an autograph.

Finally, as if flanking the small gathering and filling in the gaps, are religious in various colored habits – some in white, others in blue, but most evidenced are the bearded young men and black-veiled women in gray each expressing in their own unique way an evident admiration, inspiration, and dedicated love.

Those who knew Father Benedict personally will immediately understand and correctly interpret this imaginative portrait. Father is pictured at Trinity Retreat House in Larchmont, continued on back
October 3, 2014 promised to be the beginning of a wonderful feast of Saint Francis. The Community in the New York area celebrated the Transitus, the “passing over,” of Saint Francis to eternal life. The night included a reading of five Soliloquies written by one of our friars, Father Solanus, accompanied by music set to Francis’ own words.

At 11pm that night a knock came upon my door and Father Andrew whispered the news to me that Father Benedict had just passed. Brother Shawn, Father Benedict’s caretaker for the night, was on the phone and related to me that Father had passed peacefully in his sleep after finishing the Rosary.

That evening I felt closer to Francis’ first followers than to Francis himself. New thoughts of the experience of the early friars present at the death of their Father Francis filled my mind and heart. What was done at that moment? What was it like for those early brothers to lose their spiritual Father, the man who taught, formed, inspired and loved them, the man who so fully possessed the gift and charism of the evangelical life they were called to embrace and carry forward?

In a real way, that experience of the early friars has been mirrored in the passing of Father Benedict. This man, along with the seven other founding friars, has not only made an impact on our little community, but was a figure of hope and courage to so many throughout the English-speaking world. The questions of those first friars became my own and in the midst of the practicalities, deeper questions made themselves felt. How will we carry forward our “instigator’s” inspiration, his love for the poor and his love for evangelization? We, like those first sons of Francis, must go on in hope trusting that the same God who inspired Father Benedict will inspire us to carry out the work of his Franciscan heart.

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Father Benedict was always grateful to know the younger brothers. Each year he had classes with the postulants and novices. Here, Father shares a word with Brs. Michelangelo, Joshua and Rufino just before their first profession of vows.
From top to bottom:

The brothers showing their love and devotion were deeply grateful to be chosen pallbearers for Father’s viewing at St. Crispin Friary. Father Benedict spent many years with the poor from the south Bronx; many of their children and grandchildren came to pay their respects.

Father Glenn Sudano kisses Father’s stole: an act of reverence toward his priesthood. Many who were personally touched by Father Benedict’s priestly ministry attended the viewings in the Bronx, St. Joseph’s Home in Totowa, NJ and Sacred Heart Cathedral in Newark, NJ.

At the Funeral Mass Father Benedict’s sister Marjule Drury (seen in the foreground) with the brothers behind mourn the loss of their spiritual father and long time companion. Father Benedict would often explain, “it was a work of God,” that lead him in this renewal effort.

As in Baptism water is used to symbolize our new life in Christ so also, after the funeral Mass, the Church uses water to remind us of Christ’s resurrection and victory over death as we see Cardinal Seán O’Malley of Boston doing here.

Brs. Benjamin and Joseph Michael are seen here praying for the repose of Father Benedict’s soul. Father was interred at Most Blessed Sacrament Friary—a great gift to the friars who live there.
In hand pressed to his chest Father holds some books. By close inspection we can identify them: a book of the Holy Gospels, The Confessions of Saint Augustine, Abandonment to Divine Providence, and finally the life of some saint. His finger, which touches his heart, is a wordless gesture by which he is telling us, “Here is the place where God deigns to dwell.” This is why he always spoke of personal conversion – our souls must be pure and therefore must be converted by human effort aided by Divine grace.

Finally, the admiring crowd which surrounds him is almost evident. On his right – biblically the place of special preference and honor – we acknowledge the widows he fed, the unwed mother he housed, the orphans he served and helpless and seemingly hopeless who never went away empty-handed. On the other side stands the distressed priests he supported, young seminarians he inspired and the almost countless laity and religious he instructed and counseled. Finally, the family of friars and sisters he initiated, labored for and loved very deeply – to the very end.

Friends, while we have attempted to describe the life of Father Benedict by a simple painting, no doubt he would desire that we not look at him, but ourselves. He would invite us to imagine what our lives looks like. How would our lives be best portrayed? Where would be, what would we be pointing to, and what kind of people would surround us? Would we be surrounded by possessions rather than people? And about the people in our lives – would they be looking at us with a gaze of gratitude, or would we see sadness or frustration on their faces?

Father Benedict would remind us that while we live, we always have the opportunity to change. When it comes to our lives, we are not only the principle subject, but also the artist. Yes, we hold the brush, apply the paint, and create the composition. We have only to be humble and obedient to the Great Artist who desires to make a masterpiece of all of us. How wonderful it is when our lives become a beautiful work of art, and how tragic it is when they become something banal, abstract and ugly.

So let us once again return and rework the quote with which we began: “At the beginning of the 20th Century, a child appeared who almost managed to turn the Christian ideal into a triumphal fact.” This child of which we speak became the man many of us grew to know and admire. Because he was born, the world – our world – has become a better place. Yet the example he has left us, we must follow; admiration without imitation is useless. So, with brush in hand and paint fresh on our palette, let us endeavor to make our lives a masterpiece like his own. And by our efforts aided by God’s grace, may the painting of our life be entitled as the one most appropriate for his own. May it simply be called: “A Life Well-Lived.”