

Eulogy of Fr. James Patrick O’Kielty

Given by Timothy T. O’Donnell, February 22, 2019, Christ the King Chapel

How does one capture a life?

Especially the life of a great man? A life that was so filled and rich with meaning and purpose. A life which began on June 9th, 1930 — the feast day of Saint Columcille. That life began on Achill Island on the west coast of Ireland. The 8th child in a family of nine, he was the youngest boy, surrounded by five sisters. As he used to remark, “I grew up in a sorority!”

A life which took him to Scotland, the continent, pursuing a vocation as a priest and missionary. He was ordained in 1954, on a day which he claimed was “the last date for valid ordination.”

He served 11 years as a White Father Missionary in Africa, later in Bolivia, setting up catechetical programs for the Aymara Indians, despite government opposition. Training over 100 catechists, he then returned again back to Africa to courageously serve as a pastor in Burundi after the massacre of Hutu priests in that area.

Later he served as a Navy Chaplain with distinction from 1979 to 1995, and finally telescoping, parachuting here to Christendom College in 2002. As Fr. Mark Byrne commented when he heard of his death, “he was one-of-a-kind and a fine example of the glory days of Irish missionary priests.” The Catholic faith was deep — deep in his bones.

Who can forget his opening semester homily, when we were told, “Seamus in Irish means James, Kielty means bondsman. So, I am James Bond!”

Who could forget his humor and one-liners, many of which I cannot mention in this Chapel today.

When asked, “how are you doing?”, inevitably the response, “I’m in bad shape! I need a raise.”

“I want to be in Monsignor!”

One of his final comments: “If I had the support of your wife like you, O’Donnell, I’d be Archbishop of Canterbury!”

He would then salute and say, “request permission to go ashore!”

During his ministry here at Christendom, many knew him as a spiritual father and, for many, a spiritual grandfather, to every Billy and Sheila here on our campus. Of course, he loved the Mass and celebrated the ordinary form and the extraordinary form and, in a certain sense, can be said to have had his own rite, celebrating Mass in Irish, French, Latin, and Burundi — sometimes all at one time!

He certainly was a great preacher in the pulpit, always exhorting, always building up, loving alliteration. Inevitably, in every homily, it would be something like: “Because you are Catholic! Filled with faith, hope, peace, love and joy!” These words would just roll from him.

He heard our confessions for 17 years. He knew our sins, he knew our failings, and yet he loved us passionately and joyfully, warts and all, always encouraging the penitent.

And how he loved Christendom, writing in his final Christmas letter before he died, and I quote, “Christendom College is the most Catholic place in the whole wide world ... The finest Catholic college in America.”

But Fr. Seamus’ faith always shined forth most radiantly when he celebrated the Holy Sacrifice. How can we ever forget when he softly breathed the words of consecration, those words which bring heaven to earth, when he raised the Body of the Lord, when he raised the sacred chalice bearing the price of our redemption. It was as if he was straining with his entire being to reach heaven itself, for he knew, as every priest instinctively knows, that when that Sacred Host is raised to heaven, it is a prism through which the Heavenly Father looks down with joy and lovingly says of the priest, “you are my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased.”

How can we forget his love for children and how, with a smile and twinkle in his eye, he would bless them at the altar rail with his pinky and an emphatic, “quoque!”

And how he would linger for prayer after Mass and stop by Saint Patrick’s window here and pray for Ireland and her people.

A special word of thanks today must be given to Brenda O’Reilly, who took care of Father’s medical needs so faithfully. Thank you, Brenda, for your work.

And Jane Wagner who cleaned and took care of his apartment — no small undertaking. Thank you, Jane, for that.

We all owe, in a very special way, a very special thank you to Mickey Krebs, who accompanied Father throughout all his ups and downs, of which there were many. Thanks to you, Mickey. You accompanied Father through all of those, with loving and faithful assistance, and endured Father’s constant teasing. But, as you know Mickey, teasing was part of Father’s language of love and affection which can only be done when one is absolutely sure of that person’s devotion and love.

May God bless you Mickey for all the love and support you showed Father during his time here.

One of Father’s pains was the fact that he missed so much the opportunity to speak Irish, his mother tongue. In his last letter to me he wrote, “when a man full of years and full of heirs passes to his reward, in the Gaeltacht they do not offer condolences, but say, ‘Nach meidhreach do!’ ‘Isn’t it happy for him!’”

His passing marks an end of an era. Saint Teresa of Avila once exclaimed, “I want more than anything to see God! But to see him, we must die.”

We must never forget his faith and his two-cane fortitude. It was a grace to see a man face death with a calm serenity, which sprang from the depths of his soul, witnessing to the indelible mark of his baptism, his confirmation and his priestly ordination, which he lived out daily. He died as he lived, loving life, seeing the goodness of life, and yet yearning to leave and see his beloved Jesus and his beloved Mary.

He was no stranger to suffering, he was tough — the doctors were amazed at how long he held onto life in his final battle. It is an amazing thing to watch a soul continue to merit in pain, but still thinking of others, responding with humor and affection.

Even in the midst of his pain he looked at me at one moment and said, “I need a raise.” I said: “If I give you a raise will you stay longer?” He said: “I want to see Jesus, not you, O’Donnell.”

His room in the hospital was filled with incredible peace and was soaked in prayer. It was a beautiful thing to see nurses and doctors coming continuously, sensing something powerful yet peaceful in that room that they did not find anywhere else in that hospital.

Fr. Pollard said Mass for him and anointed him multiple times, giving him the apostolic pardon. God bless you Fr. Pollard for your presence during those final days.

When Fr. Tom prepared to say Mass, a nurse entered the room and, with tears in her eyes, asked, “can I stay for the Mass?” Perhaps that was why God in his providence allowed him to linger far beyond the doctor’s expectations.

Now of course, we are not here today to canonize him. In his opening homily at Christendom back in 2002, he said, “I want to die here because people at Christendom will pray for me when I am gone.”

“Isn’t it happy for him?”

Let us all continue to pray for our beloved Father O’Kielty with hearts filled with love and with gratitude. Thank you, Father, for your paternal presence. Thank you, Father, for your humor and your wit. Thank you for your love for Ireland and her glorious tradition. Thank you for the great service you rendered to our country. Thank you for giving each and every one of us so many memories and so many stories we can pass down to our children and grandchildren. But above all, for your gift of faith and for strengthening your brothers and sisters in Christ in the one, holy, Catholic and apostolic faith.

Once and for all, delivered to the Saints.

Requiescat in Pace. May he rest in peace. Amen.