

BISHOP KENNY: A LIFE LIVED FOR OTHERS

By Bishop Edward J. Burns

In February 1995, a few days after the sudden death of Bishop Michael Kenny, the Juneau Empire began its editorial mourning his passing with these words:

“Juneau has lost its most respected voice. Roman Catholic Bishop Michael Kenny, who died Sunday of a brain aneurysm while visiting the Holy Land, was a man who deserved to be heard. Whether he was saying Mass at the Cathedral of the Nativity, testifying before the city-borough assembly or Legislature or just talking with acquaintances on the streets and stairways of Southeast Alaska, Kenny always spoke with sound reasoning, good humor and high intelligence. Then, without fail, he listened. He was the rarest kind of human being: a person of morals who commanded respect without ever asking for it.”

When I introduce myself as the Bishop of Juneau, many people tell me of their encounters with Bishop Kenny. I never knew or met Bishop Kenny, but I thoroughly enjoy hearing stories about him and his hard work. In addition to learning about his public positions on war and peace, on poverty and the arms race or even on matters of Church doctrine and teaching, I also hear about the kind of person he was. His kindness and consideration, extended even (or especially) to those who saw things differently than he did. His contagious enthusiasm was present in every situation, whether during the celebration of Mass, attending the theatre, jogging or cooking. People still talk about his deep reserves of empathy and understanding, especially for those who were struggling with the challenges and the burdens of life. He was noted for his humility, taking his responsibilities seriously but not himself. And, his sense of humor never failed him.

Michael Kenny was appointed the third bishop of the Diocese of Juneau on March 27, 1979. Exactly two months later, he was ordained bishop in Rome by Pope John Paul II alongside 25 other men from 12 countries. The diocese he served for 16 years included all of Southeast Alaska, from Yakutat in the north to Metlakatla in the south. He traveled to every community in Southeast and met just about every member of the Catholic community. He made his home in Juneau and he was deeply involved in the life of the local community here. He was a familiar figure at places around town, not only at the Cathedral, St. Paul the Apostle Catholic Church and the Shrine of St. Therese, but at the Glory Hole, the (then) Racketball Club, Perseverance Theatre, Juneau-Douglas High School and Foodland.

In 2009, Juneau Veterans for Peace proposed to the Assembly that a new downtown park be named after Bishop Kenny. On June 29, 2009, the Assembly unanimously adopted a resolution naming the city park at 3rd and Seward Streets in downtown Juneau the “Bishop Michael H. Kenny Memorial Peace Park”, citing his dedication to peace and reconciliation, public advocacy of nuclear disarmament and love for humanity and for the people of Juneau.

This downtown park is one place to remember Bishop Kenny. Another place is the chapel at the Shrine of St. Therese where he is buried. Bishop Kenny loved the Shrine. He enjoyed presiding at many weddings celebrated there and coming out to visit with parents and children who came to the Shrine. But the Shrine was also a place of retreat and prayer for him. Shortly before his untimely death, he asked for the crypt of the Shrine chapel to be opened. In the crypt, under the altar, is the tomb of Bishop Joseph Crimont, SJ, the first bishop of the territory of Alaska. He went down into the crypt to pray at the tomb of his predecessor. Then he pointed at the empty space next to it and commented that he expected this to be his grave. Little did he know that this would be his final resting place only a month later.

Archbishop Francis Hurley, reflecting on Bishop Kenny, wrote: “Bishop Kenny was in love with life. Like all Christians he knew that all are destined for an eternal life with God. His preaching, his chats, his liturgies, his writings were in the language of this world but were pointed to the next. In traditional terms, he can be described as a priest taken from among men for things that pertain to God. He never forgot where he came from, he never lost sight of where he was going.”

This coming year will mark Bishop Kenny’s 75th birthday. From my perspective, I find it important to remember those who help shape a community. It is my hope and prayer that all the seeds Bishop Kenny sowed in Southeast Alaska will continue to bear fruit.

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