

# Homily for Father Jerry Kennedy

By Father Padraig Greene

Mass of Christian Burial  
Thursday, January 10, 2013

Do you remember the first time you met Fr. Jerry Kennedy? Or a memory of an experience with Fr. Jerry that has impacted you to this day.

The Great Karl Rahner wrote these words; THE PRIEST IS NOT AN ANGEL SENT FROM HEAVEN. HE IS A MAN, A MEMBER OF THE CHURCH, A CHRISTIAN. REMAINING MAN AND CHRISTIAN, HE BEGINS TO SPEAK TO YOU THE WORD OF GOD.

The Word of God that Jerry spoke and proclaimed throughout his decades of priesthood is so powerfully summarized in today's gospel – We are here today to celebrate the man, the Christian, the priest, friend, confidant, brother, uncle, who allowed those words shape his priesthood and his relationships with us.

We have been blessed to have known and loved Fr. Jerry. Yes, like Jerry we have so many stories to tell today – and in the future.

You and I today are mourning the loss of a great priest and a great friend.

Fr. Jerry's death has been a great shock to all of us. A light has gone out in the Kennedy family, Church, the diocese, and all the communities where Jerry served so faithfully. A light has gone out in my life and your lives.

He knows who is here – and he notices those who are not here. He notices especially those from the various parishes and ministries that he was involved in – you have always been part of the story of his life and now his death – especially his family, brother priests and women religious and all his soul friends

It is a privilege for me to be invited by Jerry's family to be the homilist. I have told Jerry many times in the past week I could have done without this privilege . He chuckled as usual. It is difficult because Jerry was a dear friend whom I have got to know , love, be inspired and mentored by for the past 15 years . When Kevin called me that early that Thursday morning to tell me Jerry had a heart attack - I never thought for one minute he had died;

I remember the day well six years ago was when Fr. Ray Sacca called me up and asked about the possibility of Fr. Jerry coming to Pleasanton. A very easy question to answer. That was a true gift not because we were friends and belonging to the East Bay Irish Mafia but I was so aware of his pastoral heart, love of his priesthood and people and knew Jerry always enjoyed the company of priests so I knew he would also be would be such a blessing to our lives together in the rectory. In those almost three years Fr. Jerry made such a difference in CCOP and won the hearts of the people, transformed the rectory into a home – but that is what he did in all his assignments both pastoral and diocesan.

Whether in St. John, San Lorenzo, All Saints, Hayward, St. Lpuis Bertrand, St. Leo, Santa Maria, Orinda, Sacred Heart , Oakland, St. Philip Neri, St. Jerome, San Leander, CCOP or St. Albert's in his retirement. Jerry or in his special ministries in the chancery, twice called to Vocations Ministry, Bishop's secretary or Master of Ceremonies or at Menlo Park forming

Vatican II priests for the future, involved in the restoration of the permanent diaconate – Jerry was always a priest who pleased God, loved his priesthood, loved people and gave his heart to his ministry.

Jerry was so proud of his being part of the home team, the Oakland team with Bishop John Cummins as the revered Captain. He was so proud of what the home team had achieved with Bishop John in the decades after Vatican II in ensuring that the fire and the spirit of Vatican II teaching would warm the hearts and minds of the faithful of the diocese. Yes, Oakland stood out. I came to Oakland first as a young priest doing summer supply work at our Lady of Lourdes in 1978, I had more hair and a better waist line – and the liturgical life of the Cathedral the social justice reach out programs as well as the welcoming of the stranger from all over the globe through a new diversity ministry were the talk of the Californian and beyond. Jerry was so proud of the Oakland Diocese, and being a part of the home team. He would want to be nowhere else not even Ireland. As a blow-in myself I have often remarked to my friends that I will never forget the spirit of welcome I experienced when I came to the diocese from the home team.

When talking about memorable Oakland moments in his life; Jerry would respond apart from his own ordination; The arrival of Bishop Begin at Oakland airport; The Installation of Bishop John Cummins as the second Bishop of Oakland at the Oakland Auditorium, and the 40<sup>th</sup>. Anniversary Celebration of the Diocese in the Paramount Theater of which he was a chief architect and to this day is remembered as a great event.

Today we celebrate and honor a Vatican II Priest par excellence. Where did it all begin

Jerry had a pastoral heart which was expressed in being a deeply caring priest to people. Where did that love and care for people come from. Jerry was noted for the depth of his caring and quality of his relationships. We are not born with such human qualities. It came from the sacred shelter called the Kennedy family home built on the marriage of Dr. William and Mary O'Connell and life with his brothers and sisters nourished and lived out in the parishes of St. Leo the Great and Corpus Christi and very much impacted by his uncle Fr. John O'Connell.. Jerry had wonderful parents – and in the Kennedy home there was no room for selfishness.

The family more than any other context in life is the foundational place of spiritual formation and the space where children discern a call to priesthood or religious life. Jerry learned very quickly at home that spirituality is primarily and essentially relational. Children learn what they live. It was within his family that Jerry's heart, mind, personality and soul was shaped. And Bishop Begin and Cummins noticed this gift of Jerry's heart space and assigned him twice to the ministry of vocation formation and the formation of future priests. He was a nurturer and a happy priest – both needed to foster and nurture vocations. I sometimes think if we spent more time nurturing families to be sacred shelters of love and joy and life then we might have more openness to vocations to the priesthood and religious life

Family was very important to Jerry. It was out of his own experience of family that he ministered. It was out of that experience of family that he cultivated relationships and friendships throughout his life – many have lasted over 60 years. The first couple he married were Ron and Dianne Staszko who are our parishioners and here today. At the end of the ceremony he told them to go their parents and give them a hug and kiss because family was so important. This reminded me of what Blessed John XXIII said the night of the opening of the Council – “go home and give a hug to your children from Pope John!!!”

Vatican II beautifully describes the role of the priest by noting three functions;

**Preach the Gospel**

**Shepherd the Faithful**

**Celebrate Divine Worship.**

Vatican II called for a Gospel based priesthood. Jerry preached the Gospel by his life. Jerry was good news. So many have noted – HE WAS SUCH A HAPPY PRIEST. But he also preached the Gospel effectively as a homilist.. For him , as for one of America’s’ greatest preacher Walter Burkart – homilies are all around us. When Jerry preached it was not off the internet or out of manuals, it was out of the experience of his interaction with God’s people – New Testament in one hand the daily newspaper in another. Jerry always put his experience into his homilies as he broke open the Word weekly. Burkart reminds us that our homilies are being prepared whether we know it or not by everything we do and experience - our prayer life – the people you meet during the day the visits to the hospitals and peoples homes visit to Santa Rita jail, collaborating with various parish groups - all our daily connections with God’s people shape and form our homilies. And of course Jerry used his great Irish gift of story telling. It was his ministry and love for people that put passion in his belly for preaching.

Vatican II also referred to the **shepherding of the faithful;**

Jerry was so appreciative of been in the seminary during the Council which prepared him to be a post Vatican II priest. He so often said that what made those years memorable was the presence of theologians on staff who would comment on the progress of the council and bring the articles from the New York times on the various document discussion of the previous day.

For Jerry the Church was the people of God. God’s people. Jerry was convinced in the Vocation of the Laity – each of us called to share in Christ’s ministry together. I would hear him say so often – “We’re all in this together.” He was a collaborator not a lone ranger. Jerry always said that he was a priest at the best time in the life of the Church and the Oakland Diocese. He could not wait to retire. He would share his joys but also his frustrations when he would see small seeds of triumphalism, clericalism and juridicism growing again in the garden of the Church.

Many of the ministries Jerry was allocated at CCOP were not for the faint hearted especially social justice – in fact he and the team built a whole year long process on Global Solidarity – Ted Gerlach, chair said to me recently that Jerry did not just turn up to meetings he was prepared-- and worked together with the teams. Ted said recently he was the spiritual conscience of the team. The Knights of Columbus would say exactly the same – he was more than a functional chaplain he was a team person – a true brother.

Jerry was always doing intentional random acts of kindness – little gifts – remembering birthdays – anniversaries of deaths, people having surgery – following up on an altar server who fainted at a morning mass - a inspirational note – he kept in touch with all those he married and the families of loved ones he buried. In preparing for such pastoral moments, Jerry was very magnanimous in the time he spent getting to know the families He NEVER EXPECTED A RETURN.....

A very significant part of Jerry's shepherding of God's people was his capacity to listen. Listening is the most important skill we bring to ministry. A good listener cares enough to let the other person talk. Often that is all that is needed. Jerry throughout his life offered the sacred space for people to speak their words of hurt and brokenness – and their eyes were opened and they were set free – through his caring, healing and loving. Jerry knew and lived it . Listening is the heart of ministry. We saw it in Jesus who was not a trained helper yet his earthly life was surrounded and shaped by his just being present and listening. Over 90 per cent of ministry is simply presence - being present to people. Turning up to people. As Joan Chittester puts it; The spirit we have not the work we do is what makes us important to people.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer who died a martyr under a Nazi regime wrote; Many people are looking for an ear that will listen. They do not find it among Christians, because these Christians are talking where they should be listening. He who can no longer listen to his sister or brother will soon be no longer listening to God either; He will be doing nothing but prattling in the presence of God. (Life Together ; theological Monographs.)

But in order to do that one has to be present to oneself. It is almost impossible to be present to others or reach out to others if we have not reached within ourselves The poet Yeats spoke about the deep heart's core - Jerry was aware of his deep hearts core and from that space ministered to people – by his presence – rather than his actions and accomplishments. His listening to his heart's core – and there were times he heard that he needed to take care of himself. He told his parishioners in one parish that he had the “curse of the Irish had him” – but the curse of the Irish did not have the last word with Jerry as he celebrated five years sobriety a few weeks back.

Listening to someone may not seem like much, it is costly though - but its effects are very healing. Parishioners, priests, seminarians, friends all benefited from Jerry's listening heart. In this noisy world, everyone yearns to be heard and understood , a key core value of pastoral ministry. Jerry got it. Jesus showed us the way – through that listening – eyes were open, people were freed- good news was heard. We have waited so long until we have been informed by all the health care professionals and manuals that the experience of being loved through listening made them whole again. Being listened to makes people well. That is the heart of ministry. It was the heart of Jerry's priesthood. People came for spiritual direction and pastoral counseling to Jerry. They were listened to – and their eyes and hearts were opened. They felt revered, respected and understood ,

Cardinal Bernardin , a modern day prophet wrote to his priests before he died; “Get away from the paperwork. Ask yourself, when people come to church, are they finding Jesus . If they are not they are wasting their time. People simply want us to be with them in the joys and sorrows of their lives. In light of that, priests need to be the face of Jesus to people. Compassion comes before compliance. Jerry in his pastoral ministry was a place, a space - a heart space where people found Christ – where God broke into peoples lives through the humanity of Jerry.

A listening heart is a compassionate heart; Jerry had the capacity to enter in the lives of people in a deep way from very early on in his ministry. He was able to accompany Bishop Begin in the final weeks and hours of his life; He was sent to St. Leo to care for Mons. Nick Connolly who was ill; he banded together with other inner city parishes to have a more systemic focus on the issues on the cycle of poverty. And the countless hours he spent being a wounded healer –laying his own woundedness at the service of others – by his own wounds so many eyes have been

opened, so many hearts have been freed – so many springs of life were opened – because of Jerry. Dr. John Rabada at the Finance Council on Monday night said that Jerry was a priest who leads you in the direction of God. – God who welcomes, accepts, forgives and loves.

A great resource in his life was his family of friends especially priests – the relatives we pick up during life’s journey. Jerry nurtured friendships – in order to have friends one has to be a friend – whether in St. Leo School where he was class president whether in St. Joseph High School and College and St. Patricks where he was Class President Jerry nurtured friendships that continue as strong today as we noticed on face book. He was invited to be the homilist at the Alumni Day in 2010, When some of his classmates were transferred to Rome for studies Jerry kept in touch with them and kept them up to date on what was happening in the diocese. Jerry also nurtured his own priesthood with a support group of priests that met monthly.

And finally and most importantly – Jerry was a man of the Eucharist - his rooms at CCOP and at St. Alberts had his mass kit very obvious and other Eucharistic symbols – The Eucharist was the source and summit of his life – it was here that he was truly resourced to be the body of Christ for others. It was here he served God and his people; He was very meticulous in all liturgical matters – but he presided at God’s table with heart – and as someone said this week – IT WAS OBVIOUS HE BELIEVED IN WHAT HE WAS DOING. He did not control the liturgy – he presided with heart and conviction and was one with the worshipping community.

For Jerry Priesthood – was not a job or a series of roles – it was a way of life – summarized well in the words of the prophet Micah; to act justly – to love tenderly and to walk humbly with God.

The monuments Jerry leaves behind are really those he has constructed in people’s hearts.

It is true;

Some people come into your life and quickly go.....

Some stay awhile and leave heartprints..... and we are never the same.

Jerry, Go neirigh and bother leat.

A great quote – did not use it – but speaks of Jerry.

“Do everything calmly and peacefully. Do as much as you can as well as you can. Strive to see God in all things without exception, and consent to His will joyously. Do everything for God, uniting yourself for him in word and deed. Walk very simply with a the Cross of the Lord and be at peace with yourself.

St. Francis De Sales.

There are some who bring a light so great to the world that even after they have gone – the light remains.

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