

Requiem Mass for Fr Jim Duffy
Our Lady Help of Christians, Rickmansworth
Tuesday 23 November 2021

EULOGY

In the reading from the Letter of St Peter, we heard about the way in which a pastor should care for his flock: not for money but for love, not as a duty but gladly, not as a dictator but as an example.

That sums up Fr Jim's priestly ministry. Fr Jim was a superb pastor. He welcomed all who came to him and responded to them with the love of Christ. He was never judgmental or critical. One of his favourite verses from scripture came from Isaiah (42:3): 'He does not break the crushed reed, nor quench the wavering flame.'

He took the view that, if people facing problems approach a priest, the last thing they need is to be told how bad they are. Sticking to the letter of the law was not the most important thing for Jim. He was a firm believer in those words of Jesus: 'The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.'

I once told him that the difference between dog-lovers and cat-lovers is that dog-lovers like order and discipline, whereas cat-lovers are more anarchic, because you can't control a cat. He immediately recognised the truth of this, and often referred to it afterwards, because he was, as you all know, a cat-lover, and he didn't think that discipline was the supreme value.

However, in one respect he was very keen on keeping the rules, and that was in the celebration of the liturgy. He felt that the liturgy, and in particular the Mass, is at the centre of our lives as Christians, and he felt that it should be done correctly. Jim always described himself as a Vatican 2 priest: he was

undergoing his training for the priesthood while the Council was in session, and he welcomed it as an opportunity, as Pope John XXIII put it, to open the windows and let in the fresh air. He particularly welcomed the documents on the liturgy, and he developed a lifelong interest in the celebration of the liturgy in such a way as to reflect the insights of the Council. He felt that the great strength of the liturgy, as it developed out of Vatican 2, was its breadth and depth, which made it flexible: it could be used in such a way as to reflect the specific circumstances of the celebration and those participating in it. However, he felt that it should be celebrated with great care and reverence. He didn't like carelessness, nor adding bits or subtracting bits in a way that had no liturgical meaning.

He wanted to make it a fitting offering, and in the last months of his life, when it was impossible to go out, first because of lockdown, then because of his health problems, he celebrated Mass on his dining room table. I was often the congregation to his celebrant, and I was on my mettle not to mess up any of the responses. I thanked God for the Universalis app on my phone.

When Fr Jim came to Rickmansworth there was a lot of building work to be done. The presbytery was a strange building, designed as a brewery, with ground-floor rooms that were only five feet high (because they had been built to store the vats) and the rooms stretched out along a corridor that was so long that by the time you got a cup of tea from the kitchen to the living room it was cold. The church had been adapted post-Vatican 2 but it was a partial job, and Jim wanted to reorder it. The presbytery was arguably the more urgent job, but Jim remembered the words of King David: (Psalm 132):

I will allow no sleep to my eyes
nor slumber to my eyelids,
till I find a place for the LORD,
a dwelling for the Mighty One of Jacob

So the reordering the church came first. This gave Jim the opportunity to deploy his lifelong interest in liturgical celebration and he was truly delighted with the result. Once when we were talking about epitaphs he said that his favourite epitaph was that of Sir Christopher Wren who lies under a simple slab in the crypt of St Paul's Cathedral inscribed with the words:

Si monumentum requiris circumspice

If you seek his monument, look around you.

This place of worship is Fr Jim's monument.

One day I was saying to Jim that it's amazing the church has survived for so long when you think of the terrible corruption in the days of the Renaissance when the Borgias and the Medici were getting their relatives, who were often men of wicked lives, made pope. His reply was that the church survived because, in every age, there were men and women who accepted Jesus as their Saviour and lived lives of simple faith. Fr Jim was one of those people. His last days in Watford General were very difficult because, owing to the restrictions, no visitors were allowed. However, thanks to some of the nurses and to Sharon Blaney, I was able to speak to him on his mobile phone. The conversations were difficult because his power of speech had been affected by his stroke, but in the last conversation we had he managed to get out the words: *Thy will be done*. He repeated it twice, and these were his last words.

He was a man of great faith.