

A Kind and Gentle Pastor

When I think of Archbishop Joseph Cassidy, or Bishop Joe as I knew him, a set of remembered images come to mind – the slightly tilted posture and radiant smile, sitting in the back of his Ford car on the way to Ballyfin College, delighting as a child when he slipped some money into my hand as he was leaving. What will stay in my memory most, however, is his easy manner, the way he could relate so well to young and old, devotee and non-believer, laity and clergy. At his wake, people spoke of ‘the centre of our lives’, a ‘gentleman’, and a ‘superb human being’.

Words

Joseph Cassidy’s skills of communication contributed significantly to the affection with which he was held. He loved to work with words and arrange them in ways that transcended the time and space of their original delivery. As he put it himself, if a word could do it he tried to find it. This found expression in the art and craft of his preaching. In an age of instant online communication, Joseph Cassidy demonstrated the power of the carefully-prepared and well-delivered sermon. Through telling phrases and resonant stories, he reached into people’s everyday lives and understood their struggles. Never afraid to communicate church teachings to human realities and situations, he put it up to the congregation while showing he was on their side as well. Whenever Joseph Cassidy spoke, people listened and learned. I still remember bits and pieces of homilies of his that I heard 20 years ago.

Ministries

Joseph Cassidy’s priesthood was an apostolate of teaching and caring. After ordination in Maynooth in 1959 he taught at Garbally College, Ballinasloe, becoming bishop of Clonfert in 1979 and archbishop of Tuam in 1987. As priest and bishop, Catholicism for Joseph Cassidy was not just a matter of private conviction but of public relevance as well. He worked hard to advance the economic development interests of the west of

Ireland, to secure the well-being of families and to provide pastoral care to emigrants. While he was well suited to being a bishop, there were aspects of episcopal ministry that he found difficult, especially the administrative burden of long hours sitting at his desk, preparing speeches, responding to letters, and taking calls. It may be that the ministry he took up after retiring the crozier, was the most fulfilling of his career.

Wherever his life’s journey took him – the geographical arc extending from Charlestown, Maynooth, Ballinasloe, Loughrea, Tuam, Moore, and finally back to Ballinasloe – Joseph Cassidy remained a quintessential Mayo man. ‘How will they do this year?’, he would inquire of the annual fortunes of Mayo GAA. If attachment to place was a defining characteristic of his life it was no less so of his death.

Endings

After leaving Tuam, Joseph Cassidy enjoyed 14 years in Moore parish. It was here that he was able to serve as parish priest in a small rural community setting. Redeployment rather than retirement he would say. In his 75th year he then moved to nearby Ballinasloe. It was shortly after this that illness took a grip of him, his mobility and even his voice. Yet, he was never more eloquent than when he was unable to speak, affirming, in a quiet and patient manner, the dignity of end-of-life living. His best homilies were lived out in those final days.

As evidenced by his deeply moving and poignant burial service in Moore, it was clear that he won the hearts and minds of its people. I know I speak for many of them when I say that Moore never had a priest like him before. Joseph Cassidy was a very good advertisement for priesthood in today’s church.

It’s strange now, after all these years, that I won’t be able to ring him, visit him or ask of him. There’s no forgetting though of the man and priest I was privileged to know as Bishop Joe. May he rest in peace.

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