

# REQUIEM MASS FOR DERMOT MCKENNA SJ

24 JANUARY 2020

## Homily notes by Gerry O'Hanlon SJ

*After they had eaten, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these others do?"*

*"Yes, Lord," he answered, "you know that I love you."*

*Jesus said to him, "Take care of my lambs." A second time Jesus said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?"*

*"Yes, Lord," he answered, "you know that I love you."*

*Jesus said to him, "Take care of my sheep." A third time Jesus said, "Simon son of John, do you love me?"*

*Peter became sad because Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you love me?" and so he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you!"*

*Jesus said to him, "Take care of my sheep. When you were young, you used to get ready and go wherever you wanted to: but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands and someone else will tie you up and take you where you don't want to go"*

— John 21: 15-18

You can sense Simon Peter a bit impatient and uneasy as Jesus asks him three times, do you love me? Well, those of you who knew Dermot so well can imagine how blunt he might have been in his reply!

But as we gather to celebrate and give thanks for him, to mourn his passing, I think those words of love and of being young and old say a lot about someone we have all known, will miss so much, and of whom we have our own particular memories.

When you were young: I think first of his time as a young Jesuit, joining in 1947 – not so easy: a pre-Vatican II church that saw the modern world as its enemy, a Society of Jesus that had a tough, of its time, emotionally illiterate formation, a spirituality that focussed on an ascetic reading of the Spiritual Exercises, and a notion of obedience that often bypassed consultation and discernment. The camaraderie that existed among the foot soldiers was often accompanied by an anti-authority hostility and even anger.

And then the climate changed. The Church in the modern World of Vatican II, a retrieval of the mystical, more emotionally charged, and experiential version of Ignatian spirituality, the opening to finding God in all things and an understanding of the faith that does justice

– all this meant that Dermot could breathe in a way that wasn't so easy beforehand, despite his idealism, his love of God. He found Paddy Doyle in Rathfarnham to be a kindred spirit in the 60s and 70s, and he became engaged in the main apostolate of his life, Bolton Street College of Technology, later to become the Dublin Institute of Technology, now part of a University.

It's almost as if those changes in title – reflecting a struggle for parity of esteem on behalf of technical education, taken for granted in continental Europe but always somewhat second-class till then in Ireland – mirrored the kind of project Dermot and his colleagues were engaged in. In retrospect it seems to me that he – and *they*, including Brendan Duddy who is still with us today – were kind of unsung heroes, in first touch with the secularisation and secularism which we take for granted in Ireland today but which then was new, with a group of students who were often viewed as second best by wider society, and, as priests, in a role was really very un-clerical, demanding new responses.

Dermot and his colleagues had different ways of going at this challenge. Some preferred a more traditional, chaplain and pastoral/sacramental role, while others, Dermot among them, preferred a more direct analysis and dialogue around the world of work and all it demanded. Dermot studied in urban sociology, in social psychology, and with apprentices, students of professions, trades and crafts, taught and ran groups which took into account their experience of the world about them and tried to point to the values they might otherwise have missed. Above all, with the help of many staff members, and through his study of the Mondragon Cooperative project in the Basque Country in Spain, he eventually set up the Bolton Trust to help fund and support the cooperative movement in Ireland, his great passion in life – more of this later in the mass.

He was a great walker, hill walker, as well, and he often joined staff and families on walks on weekends. And so, over decades, this often hidden work, took shape: a real option for the poor, with Catholic Social Teaching at its core, but always in the humble guise of service, for believer and unbeliever alike, far from the critique of clericalism and entitlement which Pope Francis sees as such an obstacle to the gospel proclamation in these days.

And so at the banquet at the end – see Isaiah (25: 6-9) – this unsung work, these seeds scattered without apparent much fruit – need to be celebrated and told about.

And his family: his five brothers, Kieran, Padraic, Gearoid and Tome, all of whom are here today, as well as John who is in Canada and whom I got to know through Dermot, with Pat his wife, both of them wonderful people who would love to be with us today – would be part of this celebration, with their wives and children, and *their* children, as well as his cousin Angela. Dermot was a quiet and thoughtful presence in his family – well, they will admit themselves that it's sometimes hard to get a word in edgeways when they're all in full flow! – but he enjoyed the banter and slagging, often spoke about them, was proud of their achievements.

I had an email from John and Pat in Hamilton, Ontario, last night in which they wrote that they are with us in spirit today and that “Dermot was a special person and we all have great memories of him. We saw him in November and said our goodbyes to him then. His caregivers in the nursing home were caring and compassionate and gentle with him”.

1. When you are older.... like many of us, Dermot found it hard to transition into older age, to leave his beloved NC road for Gardiner Street and then later Milltown and here in Cherryfield. As he said, close enough to his death, how come the birds outside Cherryfield were so happy and free and he was locked into his chair? He knew then, and also earlier in life, through his own insecurities and weaknesses, that he needed God’s mercy, the experience of the First Week of the Spiritual Exercises. He could be grumpy, stubborn, blunt, not mincing his words. One of my last conversations with him, familiar to many of you I’m sure, began with me asking how are you, and he replying, awful! But then, before too long, even with some confusion and fading memory, he was smiling and there was even the old familiar laugh. His traditional faith would have helped him: he did love Jesus, he knew that if God is for us nothing can be against us (Romans, 8: 31-35, 37-39). He knew, with Rahner, that all life is a giving-back to God of what God freely gives to us and that death is the last big gift we give, of our own life, like a little child jumping from a high wall into the arms of his mother or father.
2. Life is changed, not ended –  
Our great hope of course is the resurrection, based on our faith in Jesus Christ. This is where the sophisticated Athenians walked away from Paul at the Areopagus, the Public Square – this was too much to believe! And yet Paul himself says we are the most foolish of people as Christians if there is no resurrection. There is a natural human longing for life and its continuance. And so we speak of heaven, sometimes in terms of eternal life, sometimes as the beatific vision, and sometimes – as I prefer – beatific life, a changed life, the fullness of life, in communion with God and all those we love. And so Dermot, we hope with a sure hope, has gone before us into this new life, with his virtues celebrated and his weaknesses healed, enjoying a table of good food and wine, getting more than the odd word in!

Conclusion:

It was a kind of running joke between Dermot and myself that when we ran into one another (we had first met when he trained the U-16s rugby team of which I was a member in 1964 in Belvedere!) he would greet me with something like, “Do I know you?”, with a twinkle in the eye and the smile and then laugh. And so it requires no great leap of my imagination to see that scene between Jesus and Peter now unfolding between Jesus and Dermot, as Jesus asks “Do I know you” and Dermot smiles, at rest, seeing, sensing the fullness of life that is before him.

Amen.