

Monsignor Dennis Sheehan
Homily Given on April 24, 2019
Memorial Mass for Fr. John Sassani

To craft a homily at a Memorial Mass for Father John Edward Sassani, a preacher should have four hands. The first hand should hold the Word of God from Genesis to Revelation, every sacred syllable. A second hand needs to grasp the mystery of the priesthood, where God calls, in the words of John Newman, “men, not angels, ministers of the Gospel”. For John Sassani, the preacher’s third hand must hold the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola, that classic text that has led so many to friendship with Jesus Christ their Lord. Finally, a fourth hand must hold the cross of Jesus Christ, itself so present in John Sassani’s faith and life.

John left his earthly life in the wee dark hours of Easter Sunday morning. I am not here a believer in coincidence. John loved the Easter feast more than most I know. Decades ago, he and I served together at St. John the Evangelist here in Nonantum. We prepared an Easter fire so brilliant, it attracted two of Newton’s ladder trucks screaming down Adams Street. When the Vigil ended (no, we didn’t use Easter water to put out the fire!), John had an idea. Leave all the church lights on, he mused. Let the light of Easter shine through the wall of colored glass until the light of Easter morning. I thought of that light right away when I heard of John’s death early Easter morning. The light of Easter shone in his darkness and in ours.

We gather this evening around his earthly remains to celebrate the Eucharist. This sacrament, where God’s people, sinners and saints, gather to be fed by Word and sacrament, was at the heart of John’s life and ministry as a priest. John was no ordinary preacher. Having him give a homily, one knew that he was speaking from his heart and life. He didn’t need theatrics and oratory. He spoke directly and powerfully from a mind and heart embedded deeply in the Word of God and the life of the Catholic faith. From John’s preaching, we learned more than the treasure of Scripture. He made life very concrete with stories of his friends and family. He was alive with God’s Word and made that Word alive for us.

John’s special gift as a priest was taking Catholics on a journey from membership to discipleship. He did this through the Cursillo retreat weekends. The experience for many of you here tonight was life-changing and lasting. John never came back after a Cursillo event tired or down. Gathering men or women, opening up hitherto undiscovered depths of faith, leading retreatants into prayer- it was life-giving for John and life-changing for us.

Fr. John relished leading retreats, using his treasured Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius as a roadmap. He led so many of us into the riches of imaginative prayer, the unique gift of St. Ignatius’ teaching on indifference, the discovery of discernment in consolations and desolations.

I watched John at work over the years. He worked hard with the members of his parishes. But always he was on the prowl for what he called “the real deal”. It described many of you. He spotted a Catholic ready in faith to go deeper, to take the road from being a member to being a disciple. If you made a Cursillo, it took for you. If you did the weekly long “19th Annotation”, it changed you. It gifted you. But it was John Sassani’s gift as a priest to be God’s instrument leading you to Jesus Christ in friendship.

St. Ignatius teaches that prayer before the cross is the test of a real disciple’s maturity. For over two years, John Sassani lived the experience of the cross he discovered in prayer. As his memory failed and his self-awareness became compromised by disease, we all watched helplessly with heavy heart. Living with him day-by-day, I never heard him complain, never saw him get angry or frustrated. When I pause to reflect, I realized he was the model of St. Ignatius’ practice of indifference. Here, more agonizing, was the sharing of the Cross at the heart of his faith and ours. “Take Lord, receive all my liberty, my memory my understanding...give me your love and your grace. This is sufficient for me.”

Good friends of Father John Edward Sassani’s: we have been privileged all of us to know a disciple, a priest, a soul-friend. He lived with joy, generosity of spirit, and great serenity. He was filled with gifts of God’s granting and gifted all of us in turn. He loved and lived in the Easter light. May that same light fill him now in God’s presence with the life of Christ Risen. Alleluia.