

Fr Paddy Casey 5 June 2021.

When Fr Paddy moved into Newbrook Lodge Nursing Home in April 2019, a home had to be found for many of his possessions. I acquired a number of his books, among them a book on Funeral Liturgies by Flor McCarthy. When I was thumbing through it last night I found that he had written a good deal of commentary in the margins. And I discovered that like me he often used this particular gospel that we have just heard at funerals. The story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus is one of the most attractive in the gospels, especially because of the way it speaks to us. Here indeed were men who were reeling from a profound loss, facing the reality of a cruel death, the loss of someone they had placed such hopes in, who they had faithfully followed expecting great things and now all they felt was a shattering numbness. And what did Jesus do when he encountered their sense of distress and anxiety – he opened the scriptures to them.

This same sense of distress and loss is shared by all of us when we encounter the death of someone we love and cherish. Death is never easy because it robs us of someone we love and without our consent. And these are precisely the emotions that the disciples are feeling as they journey on this road. We too can have our eyes opened by scripture because when we open the scriptures what do we find? We read of Jesus standing there and saying – *I am the resurrection and the life, he who believes in me will never die.* Or again – *The one who saves his life will lose it, but the one who loses his life for my sake will find it.* Or again - *I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.* Or again – *There are many rooms in my Father's house, I go to prepare a place for you.*

And the words of that beautiful reading we have just heard from Lamentations comes to mind. *The Lord is good to those who trust him, to the soul that searches for him. It is good to wait in silence for the Lord to save.*

And so here in scripture we see the basis of what we are celebrating here today – the death of someone we have known and loved. And through the words of scripture we celebrate in hope because Jesus is the resurrection and the life and Fr Paddy believed in him. And all those who believe will be raised up on the last day. And because of that we take our tears and our sorrow and we mingle them with great hope and even with joy. We have no fear for Fr Paddy because he was a person of great faith who firmly believed in the resurrection.

Paddy wrote in the margins of McCarthy that each person has a unique story to tell, the story of their life. For Paddy that life began in Walshestown on the family farm almost ninety one years ago. Born to his parents James and Mary Anne he had three brothers – Jimmy, Michael, and John. Educated in Walshestown National School and St. Finian's College he entered Maynooth College to study for the priesthood in September 1948 and was ordained here in this Cathedral on 1 May 1955. Both he and Fr Liam Murtagh were ordained early because they were badly needed in the diocese. So badly in fact that after a short stint of a few months in Dunboyne he ended up in the diocese of St Augustine in Florida, where he served in the parish of Christ the King, Tampa for almost five years. He loved his time there and when he was called home, Archbishop Hurley presented him with a chalice to mark his ministry in Florida. It is one of two chalices we are using at our Mass today.

After short appointments in Castletown-Kilpatrick and Drumraney he was then sent on the emigrant mission to St Francis parish in Handsworth, Birmingham in 1962 where he

remained for two years. On his return he served in Dunderry until 1974 and then in Kinnegad until 1983. He was appointed parish priest of Carnaross where he served until his retirement in 2008, after which he returned to live in Mullingar.

So much for the chronology but it tells us little of the man himself. Throughout his life he had three passions, sport, family and faith. From the very beginning he was an avid sportsman. He brought a passion and energy to it that belied his size. His was the famous victory in St. Finian's in his final year in the half mile, the 880. Michael McGearthy was expected to clear the decks, despite whatever handicaps the other competitors were given. Paddy Casey put his head down and won the race by a nose. In his final year in Maynooth he played in a county final and stopped a winning goal by tripping his opponent. He said that the opponent twice his size, turned on him and told him that only he was going to be a priest he would have murdered him.

Wherever he went he was passionate about sport, from American football and Baseball in Florida, to GAA at all levels from the Primary school upwards. In Carnaross he became an avid Meath supporter except of course when Meath met Westmeath! He was very torn when that wonderful Carnaross Meath player Ollie Murphy did for Westmeath on one occasion! At an All Ireland Final between Cork and Meath, Larry Tomkins was Cork's star player. He was injured before the final and sought treatment in Old Trafford. During the final he sent a ball wide. The Meath supporters witnessed the diminutive figure of the Parish Priest of Carnaross rise to his full height in his seat and roar down – Larry, ye may go back to Old Trafford! Paddy of course was well known for such interventions. In fact I would speculate that if he had any trouble recently getting in at the Pearly Gates, it was probably the result of lobbying by referees! But I am sure St. Peter at most gave him a yellow card!

And then there was family. Fr Paddy was deeply connected to Walshestown. He never lost his deep love and affection for his home place. Two weeks ago, after months of isolation in Newbrook Lodge due to Covid 19, he finally and just before he would no longer have been able to, got home to see Walshestown. Patch and he were reunited one last time! He was delighted, it was his last wish, because all his life he was rooted in that place. He loved visiting Tullamore and Horseleap but he never lost his deep attachment to Washestown, to his family home and to the place he grew up in. All his life he returned for visits and holidays. He had an unbreakable bond with his brothers, his sisters in law and their children. To you his nephews and nieces he was Christmas, Easter, Summer and Halloween. He made time to be with you all, he spent his holidays with you every year, he taught you all to swim, there were endless mystery tours. He had tremendous pride in all of you and that pride was never ending, extending to the next generation.

And what was lovely to see was the manner in which over the last two years and the last few days you returned the deep affection he had for you. He was never alone right to the moment the Lord called him. And I know that all of you want to particularly thank John and especially Tina for all you have done for him over the last few years. You continued to treat Walshestown as his home, despite the shift in generations and I know he deeply appreciated that.

There is no question however that what defined Paddy was his faith and his ministry as a priest. Everywhere he served his example of friendliness and openness to others was a defining part of his ministry. He quite simply made friends everywhere he went, and that was not confined to Ireland. When he went on the biannual holidays with Fr Andy and Fr Peter

and others (all of you who were so good to him) he was hardly a day in place when people who couldn't even speak English would adopt him and help him round the buffet. And he always had that impish sense of humour. He was such good company full of lore and stories. I think it was the great Canon JJ Mc Garry who taught him how to preach in Maynooth, who said to him one day – *that smile of yours will roof many a church as you go through life*. And it did! He was devoted to his parishioners, he visited them all regularly, especially the sick and he was a constant presence in the local National school. Above all he loved celebrating the sacraments with them. How many countless thousands of time during a priesthood that lasted over sixty five years did he, like the disciples in the gospel, meet the Lord in the breaking of the bread?

He was of course immensely proud of his priestly heritage. He had three uncles who were priests. The great Gaelic scholar Fr. Paul Walsh was his mother's brother. Fr. Pat and Fr. John Casey were his father's brothers. Fr. John spent all his ministry in Liverpool. Fr. Pat was a chaplain on the Western front in World War One and the chalice he used there to say Mass is the second chalice that we are using at Mass today. The diocese owes a great debt of gratitude to the Casey and Walsh families. At one point there were four first cousins ministering in the Meath diocese – Fr. Paddy, Fr. Michael Walsh, Fr. Aidan Walsh and Fr. Christy King. Truly we could do with such a commitment today.

At this point I had better head for the finish line! Paddy would not want me getting time faults! I do however want to thank all the staff who cared for him in Newbrook Lodge. They gave him exceptional care and were very fond of him and he of them.

The last thing that Paddy would want, is to for me to suggest that he was a saint. He was not perfect. Like all of us, there was failure in his life - shortcomings, sinfulness, stubbornness, deafness, whatever. Indeed I bore the brunt once or twice myself! We have all experienced what it means to pick ourselves off the floor of humanity and stand like the tax collector in the temple, saying to God - Be merciful to me a sinner. And so we ask God to forgive him whatever failings he may have had, because despite them he was a person who led a good life.

Let us finally return to the Emmaus journey and one of Paddy's favourite reflections:

All through life's day our risen Lord walks with us.

Often, however, he is a stranger to us,

For he never forces himself upon us.

Before the day's end we will ask many questions,

Experience many failures, disappointments and heartaches.

And then, suddenly, whether we are young, middle-aged or old,

we will find that the shadows are lengthening and night is fast approaching.

In that moment we pray that, like the disciples on the road to Emmaus,

our eyes will be opened,

And we will recognize him - the stranger who walked at our side - as our risen Lord.

And he will not vanish from our sight,

Instead he will guide us through the dark valley of death to the safety of the Father's house.

May Fr. Paddy's gentle soul rest in peace in the house of the Father.

Fr Paul Connell

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