

Homily Given at the Funeral Mass of Msgr. Dennis Sheehan on November 27, 2020, by Msgr. Peter Conley

Your Eminence, Bishops, Father, Deacon... but more importantly you - Bill and Susan, Molly, and Dennis' many nephews and nieces:

We are here to do a bittersweet task, a task of mourning, grieving, praying, and remembering Dennis Francis Sheehan. Bitter because it was so unexpected, so shocking. I was speaking with him at 4:30 in the afternoon last Friday. His mood was chipper – looking forward to getting out of quarantine in two or three days. I was told he was dead by 6pm. But there was sweetness in the sense that he was ready, ready to meet his Maker, his Redeemer, and the One to whom Dennis had faithfully pledged his life and love.

We had been friends since 1956 – some 64 years. I look forward to someday in the spring when we can all gather after our vaccinations and share all of the stories.

Dennis left specific instructions for his funeral: he was a liturgist but never a liturgical terrorist. But he did say one thing quite specifically: there would be no eulogy. He was of the opinion that, when one priest eulogized another at a funeral, it was really an ecclesiastical license to exaggerate, which is only a step away from an outright lie. Instead, he insisted it must be a homily. I remember vividly when we buried your mother almost 51 years ago that he began the homily by saying, and I'm paraphrasing: "We are not here to simply remember the life of Cecilia Henry Sheehan but to recall with profound affection the life of Jesus of Nazareth. Her Savior who, too, was born, lived and died but also rose from the dead – and with that opened the gates of Paradise for all of us" - you, me, and Dennis.

When God breathed life into Dennis, He also breathed into him a fine mind, a nimble tongue, and a quick wit. I do remember a story that is fairly old. Decades ago, when he was on the personnel board, a colleague was suggesting the name of his friend to be the pastor of a parish that was opening. So his friend made the recommendation and advised everyone, "After all, he's had 25 years' parish experience." Dennis raised his hand slowly - all movements were done slowly - and he said, "Excuse me, that's not quite true. He's had one year of experience 25 times." And speaking of his slow movement, I never saw him run - either to something or from something. All his movements were measured, quite measured. I also said if he ever reached top speed he was sauntering!... maybe ambling!

You have heard the Scripture readings Dennis had chosen, and each of them was full of future, Christian hope. When he saw a new heaven and a new earth. God himself would wipe away every tear and there shall be no more death or mourning, wailing or pain, for the old order has passed away. He has moved into the New Order. And when Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, he did not want them to be as people who grieve, who have no hope. But on the contrary, for if we believe that Jesus died and rose, so too will God, through Jesus bring with him those who have fallen asleep, and they will be at peace. The gospel was taken of course from the Gospel of John.

The promise of the Eucharist, for on this journey to the new heaven and the new earth there would be food, special food. “I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world.”

Fifty-seven years almost, he, by the power of the Spirit, was able to make present that food, that drink. I believe he would have said almost 18,000 Masses since the day we were both ordained... same church...same time.

I think Bill, Susan, and family, you made a wise decision to make sure this funeral private, because, if it was not private, the church would be full. First of all, with the parishioners. He loved this parish. He loved especially the Festa della Madonna and the Parade. Not only that, there would be priests galore. Yes, and there would be colleagues, Protestant ministers for he was a member of the Ministers Club for at least 40 years.

With a certain personal reluctance, I surrender to the will of God who so unexpectedly called Dennis from us and to Himself. His mysterious ways, the whys and the wherefores, will always elude us; they are beyond our comprehension.

At the end of every funeral, I ask those present to do three things:

—We will now commit him to the earth from which he came - dust to dust - and, at the same time, realize our own mortality – a sobering reminder that death and judgment will come for us all.

—I ask you also to commit him to your memory with affection. Tell the stories of when he was young. Tell the stories of when he was at his best and, yes, tell stories of when he was not at his best. None of us are always our best.

—I ask you to commit him to your prayer. There is now no abyss between Dennis and us – it’s called the “communion of saints”.

He lived his life as all of us, with failures, with fragility. He knew sin, but more importantly, he knew the tender compassion and mercy of God, and he preached it well.

There will be no more Sunday evening suppers at Paddy’s or Papa Razzi in Wellesley. There will be no more Tuesday evenings at the seminary here in Weston with the faculty (where he was once rector) where he would come and slowly climb the stairs. Where he would partake of that amber colored liquid that enhanced fraternal fellowship. I will close with words from a holy card we both have:

May He support us all the day long,
Till the shades lengthen and the evening comes
And the busy world is hushed
and the fever of life is over and our work is done.
Then in his mercy may He give us a safe lodging
and a holy rest and peace at the last.

Dear friend Dennis, I hope to see you soon – sooner rather than later. Amen. And Dennis, Alleluia.