



HOMILY FOR THE FUNERAL MASS OF FR. DERMOT BURNS

Today, we gather to commend to the Lord the soul of Fr. Dermot - a brother priest who faithfully served the People of God here in the Diocese of Achonry for 42 years.

To Father Dermot's brothers, sister, in-laws, nieces and nephews, relatives and friends, we extend to you our deepest sympathies on the loss of your brother and uncle.

I don't need to tell you, his family, or anyone who knew the man that Fr. Dermot was very much in love with life; so full of the zest of living, so brimming with joy, so full of banter, so full of fun and merriment. He exuded life and cherished it to the very last breath.

We all have our own particular fond memories of Fr. Dermot. They are usually very happy and very funny memories. Those memories abound today and they weave together a unique tapestry of a unique life.

One of my own fondest memories goes back a few years. I wasn't too long in the parish at the time. I remember returning to the parochial house after saying the morning Mass. As I turned the key in the door I could swear I got the smell of freshly burnt toast.

It didn't take me long to discover a rather elderly man (a total stranger) sitting at the kitchen table having a leisurely breakfast. Before I could ask who he was and how he got in, the uninvited stranger managed to speak first. He demanded to know who I was, how I got in and what on earth was I doing in Fr. Dermot's house.

It quickly emerged that he was an elderly priest friend of Fr. Dermot. One of the many many friends he had made over the years. At some stage Fr. Dermot must have given him the loan of a key to the parochial house. He hadn't known Fr. Dermot had retired and was merely availing of his hospitality (as he had done, on occasion, in the past) while waiting for him to return from the Church

Fr. Dermot got a great laugh out of that when I told him!

And that's just one of the more sanitised events Fr. Dermot is remembered for.

The incident was funny but it really sums up Fr. Dermot's life as a priest and as a human being. The key to the front door, given freely and trustingly, was symbolic of the key to his soul (which he gave so generously to God in the priesthood) and the key to his life (which he gave to his family, friends and parishioners).

Fr. Dermot was, very much, an open book. What you saw is what you got. He wore his great big heart openly on his sleeve. This was a quality which endeared him to so many people whose lives he touched in his ministry as a priest.

He was great with people. In exchange for the keys to his inner spiritual self he received, in return, from others the keys to their lives. The bonds he forged, over the years, with people he encountered (as parishioners or as colleagues) were truly remarkable. Those bonds he held on to and never let break.

No matter where he might be, I would always notice people going out of their way to approach him and talk to him. He was a kind of a magnet for people. Even after the passage of time (often decades), he kept up ties and friendships. He was the only individual I knew whose Christmas Card list actually increased every year.

And it wasn't just his friends from Straide parish who kept in contact with him. It was, also, his friends in all the other parishes he had served in - Bonniconlon, Achonry, Ballymote and Kilkelly.

They all remembered him for the same reasons. They remembered his compassion, his kindness, his generosity, his sincerity, his wit and his humour.

He was a very people-centred person who generously gave the open door of his life to so many others: celebrating their successes, lamenting their failures, consoling their distress, and (when necessary) helping carry their crosses. In this, and in so many other regards, he was a priest to be admired and respected. He had learned his theology in Maynooth but had spent his days, ever since, living that theology.

He was also a man who, to his great credit, never hesitated to delegate responsibility within the parish. He realised something we priests all eventually learn - namely, that there are always people within every community who can do many things we do far better than we, ourselves, can.

It stands to reason, then, that we should build strong teams and allow the gifts and charisms of a community to flourish. This is exactly what Fr. Dermot did. In this respect, he left a great legacy behind. One has only to observe the pristine condition of this Church and grounds to see how much he achieved.

Family meant everything to Fr. Dermot: his twin brother Pat, his brother Frank, his sister Joan, his nephews and nieces and in-laws. Not to forget his beloved parents (Una & Paddy) and brother John who have already gone to their eternal reward. No family could have supported a brother any better than you have done.

As one might expect, Fr. Dermot was particularly close to his twin brother Pat who was especially good to him and looked after him above and beyond the call of even brotherly love and duty.

This parish of Straide was, also, very very special to Fr. Dermot. It was here he spent the last 23 years of his life. He often confided how happy he was here - how kind and how good parishioners were to him.

Fr. Dermot worked in parish ministry for all of his 42 years of priesthood. His priesthood was founded on a deep unshakable faith and on a spiritual life that brought him ever closer to God. His priestly ministry was truly a beacon of hope for so many people. He exercised his ministry brightening so many lives, binding so many hearts, smoothing so many paths, calming so many souls, warming so many lives. And it is great to see so many of his former parishioners here today at his funeral Mass. Fr. Dermot just had that wonderful gift of connecting with the people he came in contact with.

When, unfortunately, in 2011 he had to retire due to ill health there was never a question of him living anywhere else except in Straide. He chose to spend his (all too short) final years with the people he knew and loved. That is certainly a great compliment to his former parishioners who are owed a great debt of gratitude for the manner in which they looked after and cared for Fr. Dermot.

Another thread in the tapestry of Memory I have of Fr. Dermot is chatting to him about how difficult it can be to find something new to preach on every weekend. He consoled me by saying that *“It’s difficult to be profound every Sunday”*. Then thought for a while and added *“But it would, indeed, be nice to be profound the odd Sunday though!”*

I’m sure there were days when he, too, stood at this lectern and looked to the heavens for divine inspiration. I’m sure from this spot he, also, must have focused his eyes on a particular design on the windows of the gallery – a design which catches my eye frequently.

There are, as you would expect, images of crosses on those stained glass windows. However, there is also a subtle detail that can easily be missed. If you look carefully you can see that there are little green shoots of growth emerging from the foot of each cross.

The Cross was something Fr. Dermot became all too familiar with in his later years following a life-threatening diagnosis just before Christmas 2010. But the cross he was given to carry never dampened his spirit or took from his wit and good humour. Even when given very bad news a few short weeks back, he never lost hope and he never gave up but, rather, fought bravely on.

I think he got great consolation from the green shoots of growth that are always there at the foot of even the heaviest of crosses we are sometimes given to bear. Fr. Dermot’s deep Christian faith led him to believe those green shoots would, ultimately, bring him New Life. Today, we pray that he has, already received, that reward.

After this, his funeral Mass, Fr. Dermot will be laid to rest in the Church grounds - facing East to greet the rising sun each morning. He will be under the shade of two oak trees planted last year by Bishop Brendan in honour of Ss. Peter and Paul to mark the centenary of this Church dedicated to the two giants of our faith. Those oak trees are young now. But, I'm told, they will spend the next 300 years growing and, then, another 300 years stagnant before they will spend a final 300 in decline.

Knowing Fr. Dermot as I do, I don't think he will wait that long to visit St. Peter. No doubt, he has already entered the gates of heaven and is, by now, making his presence felt and catching up with old friends.

Hopefully, at some stage, he might get a hold of St. Peter's Keys and have a few copies made for us, too, on the quiet so that when our time comes may let ourselves in to one of the many rooms that today's Gospel assures us are already prepared for us.

In the meantime, until we meet our friend and brother again, may his gentle soul now Rest in Peace. Amen