

Sermon preached at the Mass of the Resurrection celebrated for Fr. Eugene Lefebvre, 21st May 1929 - 30 August 2018, St. Timothy's, Roxborough, Philadelphia, 6th September 2018. The Rev'd Canon Stephen C. Casey.

Isaiah 25:6-9; Ps. 121; 2 Corinthians 4:16-5:9; John 14:1-6.

Several years ago my wife was involved in a major car accident. I received the news when I had just started the liturgy at the Wednesday noon-day healing service. I saw my secretary standing at the end of the aisle with a worried look on her face; I beckoned her forward and she told me the news. Fr. Gene and Gladys were in the small congregation. Without hesitating I stepped away from the altar, took off my stole and handed it to Fr. Gene saying something like: "My wife has had a serious car accident, would you be so kind as to continue the service?" Without saying word, he took the stole, and as I left the church, I saw him behind the altar doing the work of a priest. For me, that image of Fr. Gene "doing the work of a priest" in time of need has always remained.

I cannot remember the exact circumstances, but as near as I can tell, Gladys and Fr. Gene began attending St. Edward's during the summer of 2005. It was not long before he was getting involved in the liturgical life of the parish. He celebrated at the 8 am Sunday service on a regular basis, as well as on High and Holy Days, Christmas Eve, Holy Week, Easter, as well as those Sunday's in my absence. But more than anything else, he became a pastoral presence in the church. On my recommendation the vestry voted to appoint Fr. Gene Honorary Associate Priest of the Parish in recognition of his service, for aside from serving the liturgy, he never failed to ask after people's welfare, never failed to keep them in his prayers.

I have always considered it a great honour when retired clergy choose to attend my parish. We clergy are funny folk - we are particular about the kind of liturgy we experience as well as the quality of the preaching and leadership. When a retired priest lands on your doorstep, no matter whether high church, broad church, low church, or no church, those of us still in the trenches can take it as a compliment. What made it particularly pleasing in Fr. Gene's case is that we discovered many things in common. Immediately before his appointment as rector at St. Timothy's, early in his career, Fr. Gene and Gladys served St. Mary's, Williamsport. My first parish was St. Paul's in Lock Haven, just up the river from Williamsport. Fr. Gene knew, as those of who have served in rural Pennsylvania know, the kinds of joys and challenges such rural ministry brings.

Fr. Gene had studied at Durham Cathedral, as I have, and we both shared a long lasting love of the place. He studied the Church Fathers, as I do. In fact, not long before his final illness, he passed on to me two volumes of his Anti-Nicene and Nicene Fathers of the Church. Like all clergy, he had his little idiosyncrasies. It was always a challenge trying to find where he was - precisely - when intoning the Mass. The 1928 missal was so ingrained in his mind, no matter how hard he tried, he could not wrap his voice round the 1979 missal. Then there was the way he recited the Lord's Prayer, with his deep sonorous voice and his emphasis on the word "tres-paa-ses." Then there was incense: Fr. Gene loved to swing the incense. A few moments ago I learnt that the saying at St. Timothy's was "swing and sway with Fr. Lefebvre. By such mannerisms, the clergy endear themselves to us all.

At the noon-day service yesterday, we remembered the life and ministry of Fr. Gene. One of the regular attendees, Irene Achey, told me that in one of her last conversations with Fr. Gene he had commented on how he wished he had left some form of legacy. I am not sure what he meant by that, but I think Irene spoke for us all when she told him what a fine priest he was, and how over the life-time of his ministry he had helped so many people.

One of my seminary class-mates, Andrew Doyle, now Bishop of Texas, has written what I believe is one of the finest summaries of the work of modern clergy. Responding to the oft made criticism that clergy do not live in the “real world,” after offering a description of what he discerns is the life of the clergy, Bishop Andrew ends with these words, which serve nicely as a wonderful legacy for Fr. Gene: “Clergy labor under the stresses and strains of a job at the crossroads of business, religion, spirituality, and public speaking. If anyone knows about the real world it is the clergy person...only they can be foolish enough to have faith given everything they have seen and experienced. They not only know what real life is about, they have committed their whole life to walking with people through it regardless of what it brings, regardless of the faithful and the faithless, and regardless of where it leads... (+Andrew Doyle)”

Aside from his time at St. Edward’s, I only know what Fr. Gene shared with me of his life. You know far better than I the life and ministry of Fr. Gene Lefebvre - his time serving his country in the Navy, his time serving the church, especially his long and fruitful ministry as teacher and priest at St. Timothy’s, his ministry in this diocese of Pennsylvania. You know better than I his life as a husband, father, lover, friend. In the Gospel of John, shortly before his Passion, Jesus assures his disciples that there are many rooms in God’s house. We live our lives in rooms, and whichever room you shared with Fr. Gene, never stop visiting that room of remembrances, for that is how he will continue to live on in you.

Invariably when studying the worship of the church, clerics of our generation had to read: *The Shape of the Liturgy*, by Dom Gregory Dix. Towards the end of this magisterial work, Dom Gregory, in far more eloquent language than I can offer, reminds us that we tend to think of history as the movement of great events and famous people, characters who stride across life’s stage. But the most moving thing of all is not the thought of well remembered saints, but of the innumerable millions of faithful men and women, each with their hopes and fears, their joys and sorrows, their sins and temptations, who in their lives and in their time have tried to remain faithful to their families, their communities, above all to God in Christ. They are, Dix tells us, the *plebs sancta Dei* – the holy common people of God. Fr. Gene was one such as these, and through his life and his priesthood, this is the legacy he has left us all.

If there is one phrase with which I could describe Fr. Gene it is that he was deeply Anglican, so I would like to close with words of, perhaps, the most famous Anglican Divine, John Donne. Donne lived in the time of William Shakespeare, and preached frequently on the subject of life and death and faith. John Donne firmly believed in the promises of God in Christ, so well articulated in our lessons from Corinthians and the Gospel of John, and offers these rather wonderful and comforting words about death and the hereafter:

*And into that gate they shall enter, and in that house they shall dwell, where there shall be no Cloud nor Sun, no darknesse nor dazzling, but one equall light, no noyse nor silence, but one equall musick, no fears nor hopes, but one equall possession, no foes nor friends, but one equall communion and Identity, no ends nor beginnings, but one equall eternity.*

*(A sermon preached at Whitehall February 29th, 1628)*

Into that eternity Fr. Gene now dwells, and until that time when all lives are consummated in Christ, may his soul, and all the souls of the faithful departed, rest in piece and rise in glory. Amen