

HOMILY

GIVEN BY

THE RT. REV. MONSIGNOR CLYDE HUGHES JOHNSON

AT THE FUNERAL MASS OF CANON SEAMUS CUNNANE

ON SATURDAY 16TH OCTOBER 2021

Canon Cunnane chose these scripture texts with his usual care and fore-thought and one wonders whether he felt that the first reading, with its words “Can a woman forget the baby at her breast. I will never forget you.” as applying not only to the Lord’s tender love for his flock, but also to his own incarnation of that loving care in his priestly relations to his parish? It certainly fits well.

Among Canon’s meticulous arrangements for his funeral, as well as choosing Father Phillip Harries as celebrant, through all the successive drafts he made it was always Canon Johnson to be the preacher. I presume he knew what he was doing. It is not easy to give an adequate picture. I could have wished he had written the sermon himself; it would have been his style.

Canon Cunnane and I were the last two Canons remaining of the Chapter of Canons attached to the Cathedral Church of old Menevia, St. Mary’s , Wrexham before being transferred in 1987 to St. Joseph’s Cathedral, Swansea, complete with a new Bishop, and re-structured Diocese, but still continuing with the ancient title – Menevia, i.e. St. David’s. Together with Fr. Owen McGreal and Canon Michael Lewis we were the last of the old Menevia men still around – still remembering the former days of an almost entirely rural diocese. A brotherhood of priests sharing similar challenging situations, but less bothered by centralising Bishops. It was beautiful. I shall not attempt to give an exhaustive overview of Canon’s life and ministry, that will be for others, but I will attempt a fellow priest’s side-view if you like of a remarkable man. A colleague, a man we regarded with respect and affection, and not without a little exasperation at times, it must be said.

James Joseph Cunnane, our Seamus was born in Carlow, Ireland in May 1929. Educated locally, he entered the Irish Civil Service for a period, not a simple walk-in and walk-out job in those days, as Sister Angela has told me. Volunteering for the priesthood, he entered All Hallows, Dublin for 7 years of ecclesiastical studies, gaining a degree in philosophy. He was ordained priest for Menevia Diocese in Wales in June 1955. Did he ever tell anyone why he chose Wales? Menevia was always portrayed by the then Bishop, John E Petit as a tough, demanding missionary area, the only prospect for priests being the equivalent of the Churchillian – toil sweat and tears.

For a zealous young man like Seamus that was attraction enough, especially the Celtic setting for this adventure.

He subsequently served as curate in Bangor, Holywell and Rhyl. Bishop Petit must have been impressed because in January 1962, after 7 years, our Seamus was appointed Parish Priest at Cardigan with the task of building a new church for the parish and a fitting setting for the recently restored shrine of Our Lady of the Taper.

It would have been a daunting prospect for most, but not for Father Cunnane. And so, in God's providential plan, he had found the place for his life's work, and the setting where he could share his many gifts to the full.

The church, opened in 1971, was designed by Bishop Petit's favourite architects, Messrs Weightman and Bullen of Liverpool, a church that was to misquote Churchill, a remarkable example of modern architecture. Canon did have a particular say in the construction of a kiosk-like housing for the shrine statue. He told me he had seen similar arrangements at a Marian Shrine on the continent, and he thought the confined space added to the mystery and devotion of a pious visit.

During Canon Cunnane's 37 years as Parish Priest here as well as attending assiduously to his flock, he learnt to speak fluent Welsh, albeit with an Irish accent. He built up the annual pilgrimage to the shrine, usually marked by the presence of the Welsh Bishops. This expression of Marian devotion and teaching was always strictly orthodox and scriptural, avoiding anything that might confirm local misunderstandings on the place of the Blessed Virgin in Catholic teaching. He studied and researched the medieval history of Cardigan, discovering previously unknown documents and pre-Reformation traditions in the locality. He took a prominent part in the fight for the restoration and opening to the public of Cardigan Castle. He re-established contact between Cardigan and the Benedictine Monks of Landevenec in Brittany the community that had taken refuge here during a time of persecution in France over 100 years ago. He made sure that a beautiful ceramic plaque of Our Lady of the Taper was made and placed alongside those of other Marian shrines, in the great basilica at Nazareth. His knowledge of Jerusalem and the Holy Land was so extensive that he became an official Israeli appointed guide to the Holy Places.

He was also Canon Theologian to the Diocese. And in his spare time, he became an international Chess champion by post and internet.

Stop, I hear him saying. You are making me embarrassed. But that list could go on and on, without even mentioning his personal and charitable contact with so many non-Catholics in the town.

He was a remarkable and very clever man. There were indeed other clever priests around but perhaps none with that self-confident energy and enthusiasm that was his gift. With all that bravura, there were also inevitable side-effects or unintentional consequences. He was only human after all. And here I have to say, "sorry Seamus, but you know this would be coming when you chose me".

To put it bluntly he always wanted the last word on everything, and he was always confident that he was right. Not uncommon failings, brethren, especially among the clergy!

One could smile indulgently if you like at these characteristics, but not always so easy if they caused you frustration and exasperation, and this could happen even to his friends. A classic example of this is a true tale related among the old Menevia clergy. Canon Cunnane was rural Dean of Pembrokeshire and Ceredigion, and each month presided over a meeting of the local clergy. In those days a theological or moral paper, set by the Bishop, would be discussed. The Deanery included some other erudite and clever priests beside the Canon, none more so than Father David Lewis of Tenby, scion of an ancient Welsh gentry family, and an Oxford man to his fingertips. With a sharp wit. After the general discussion, Dean Cunnane gave his own decisive opinion in his usual magisterial manner. Father Lewis spoke "Well, Seamus, that is the most illogical statement I have ever heard." Seamus drew himself up to his full canonical dignity, and looking around the table he said. "I will have you know, I'm the only priest here with a degree in logic." Father Lewis responded, "Well thank you very much for telling us that Seamus; we would never have guessed otherwise." (Laughter among the congregation).

After all those years and all those achievements, many that will last long after his death Canon finally retired, as required by Canon Law at the age of 75. He intended to spend his retirement in Cardigan with his dear housekeeper Miss Joan Pemberton, whose eyesight was now failing.

Bishop Mullins, who knew Seamus well, had his misgivings. But surely Seamus argued with the Bishop, it would be unthinkable for him to go anywhere else. And indeed for a priest who had been a 'round peg in a round hole' for so long – an experience not granted to all. It would be well nigh impossible for him to leave. In any case now, as a retired priest, he could do as he liked. And so he did.

Canon was followed as Parish Priest by a succession of priests, recently including our Father Phillip Harries who was a good friend and support to him during his final years.

After a series of what can only be called problematic relationships with his successors, the Canon could finally relax. He had not been able to let go of his baby (1st reading), he would not let go, he could not let go, and I am sure he was convinced he should not let go completely of the parish, people and church and the town – his baby "I will never forget you".

Father Phillip worked his magic in such a way that when major changes to the church building were mooted, always a TABOO subject with the Canon, he had the grace to say "Yes, I often thought of doing that myself".

Grace and peace prevailed in the end, and he died in the place he loved among his own.

And so finally my good colleague and friend Seamus, Canon Cunnane, would I'm convinced have wanted me to ask you to do 3 things for him:

1. To thank God for sustaining him in his remarkable and fruitful ministry in this place – he will not be forgotten.
2. He would have wanted to ask forgiveness for any hurt or offence he might have caused anyone.
3. And above all he would have asked for your prayers for his happy repose with the Lord he loved and served.

And so we bid our last farewells. A representative parishioner has written – Father Cunnane was a font of knowledge, understanding and compassion who always had time to listen and advise whatever the subject. He will be sadly missed.

The local paper said on its front page

“FAREWELL TO A GIANT OF A MAN”

followed by a host of local tributes.

- ❖ And a fellow priest might well add “Well done, Seamus. You did all right. God bless you”.
- ❖ God bless him indeed and rest him now that his life's long labours in the Lord's vineyard are ended.

Eternal rest grant to him O Lord and let perpetual light shine upon him.

Dear Seamus rest in peace and thank you.