

Bishop Leo O'Reilly's Homily

at the Funeral Mass of Very Rev. Canon Eugene Dowd.

Church of Mary Immaculate, Virginia, on Sunday 2nd September.

It is fitting that we should be here in Virginia to say farewell to Canon Eugene Dowd – or Fr Gene – as he was affectionately known. There are many other places which could justifiably stake a claim on him: the parish of Bearwood in Birmingham where he spent the first three years of his ministry after his ordination in 1952; Newtownmanor, Glenfarne and Drumkilly and Killargue in all of which he served as curate. And of course there's Killinagh, where he served his first term as a parish priest. But Virginia has the strongest claim. Lurgan was his last appointment as parish priest. He was here for 14 years until he decided to step down in the year 2000 and go as a curate to Killargue. He was the one who oversaw the building of this church and the development of the new graveyard adjoining it. His heart was here and it was his wish to have his funeral Mass in this church and to be buried in Virginia.

Fr Gene was 60 years a priest on 22 June this year and he was still active in his retirement until shortly before the diagnosis of his final illness around this time last year. One of the symbols of his life on the table here before the altar, and a very appropriate one, is an icon of the Good Shepherd which Cardinal Brady presented to him and to all the surviving members of his ordination class on the occasion of their Diamond Jubilee last June. Fr Gene truly was a good shepherd, a dedicated, conscientious and hardworking priest who gave himself totally to God and to his people.

As well as serving in all the parishes I mentioned, he was for many years a chaplain to Loreto College and later Chaplain to the Travelling Community. He was in a multitude of organisations – the Pioneers was one of the closest to his heart. The Pioneer Pin here among the other symbols is the one his father wore until his death.

In his days in different parishes in North Leitrim Fr Gene was very involved in Emigrant at Home Week, often travelling to London and Birmingham and helping to organize events to enable emigrants keep contact with home. The list of his involvements goes on and includes Marriage Encounter, Jesus Caritas Prayer Group for Clergy, the annual pilgrimages to Lourdes and Knock. Anything that could help to build up the community of the Church, Fr Gene would be there.

He was ordained ten years before the opening of the Second Vatican Council. He could have been an old style priest, wedded to the old ways of doing things. But he wasn't. He embraced the changes brought by the Council. He adapted to the new approaches to celebrating the Mass and the sacraments. He was constantly updating himself and trying to keep abreast of new developments. In every place he served he tried to have full and active participation in the Mass. The music sheets here on the table recall his constant encouragement of music and singing in the liturgy. Maybe encouragement is too weak a word! He would be pleased with the wonderful choir and the congregation here today are sending him off with song. Even as he got older he was full of energy and enthusiasm. His vision of the Church was not confined to his own parish but extended to the diocese and the whole Church. A particular concern he had was the decline in vocations to the priesthood and the religious life. The best way can honour his life, his memory and his priesthood is by working and praying to encourage people to devote their lives to God and to others as he did.

The key to understanding Fr Gene's zeal and commitment was his strong interior life, his personal relationship with Jesus Christ and his prayer. The prayers of the breviary here were his daily nourishment. The Mass was the focal point of every day, the place where he met Christ and was nourished by his Word and by his Body and Blood. The energy and enthusiasm that were so much part of him were the outward manifestation of that new life he first received at baptism. Those words of St Paul in the second reading were obviously very important to him – he chose them and the other readings nearly a year ago for the Mass today: "...when we were baptised in Christ Jesus we were baptised into his death...so that as Christ was raised from the dead.. we too might live a new life."

We pray that Fr Gene will now receive the fullness of that life in Heaven. St John tells us in the Gospel that Heaven is nothing other than the final fulfilment of the relationship with Christ which begins in baptism. "Eternal life is this: to know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent."

Fr Gene's relationship with Christ and his hope of Eternal Life inspired his ministry and sustained him through the many difficulties and changes he experienced in his life as a priest. It supported him through several bouts of serious illness. His recovery from a brain haemorrhage several years ago was literally miraculous, an answer to an outpouring of prayer. His faith was a particular support to him in his final illness and helped him to prepare for death with courage and dignity.

So we thank God for Fr Gene and for all whose lives were touched by God through his ministry. We celebrate a life given generously and wholeheartedly to God and to others. We celebrate the gift of celibacy lived out joyfully and fruitfully and a witness to priesthood at its best. But we also pray for him. He was a holy man, a man of constant prayer and great devotion, but he was also very conscious of being far from perfect. He knew he was a sinner and he would want him to pray for him rather than just praise him.

I offer my deepest sympathy to his sisters Sr Philomena and Noreen, his brother Seán, his sister-in-law Maureen, his brother-in-law Vincent, his nieces and nephews and other relatives, and last but by no means least I offer my sincere sympathy his faithful housekeeper and friend Pasty who cared for him so constantly and so well. May he rest in peace.