

In the Heartland With Bishop Pates

Two Great Priests

The Diocese of Des Moines lost two great priests in the last eight weeks. Monsignor Gerald Stessman died on April 4th and Father James Kiernan on May 15th. Monsignor Stessman was the older by two years.

It is remarkable how similar these two individuals were in both background and approach to ministry. Monsignor Stessman was from St. Joseph's Parish in Earling, located in the fabled Shelby County, which at one time was equivalent to a vocation factory as priests and nuns emerged in significant numbers from solid mostly German families. Monsignor was from a large family raised on a farm with parents of strong faith.

In turn, Father Kiernan came from a farm family steeped in the faith in Booneville, Iowa, and treasured his Irish heritage which was nurtured at St. Patrick's Parish in Irish Settlement.

Early on in their young lives, each sensed a vocation to priesthood. As a matter of fact, Father Kiernan set his sights on priesthood in his young teen years and never looked back. He often observed that his vocation was uncomplicated from beginning to end – never experiencing wrenching doubt or complications. He related that he was gifted by the peace his firm decision brought throughout life and the blessing coming therefrom of devoting himself totally to his ministry.

Both priests attended Loras College and its seminary program and then completed their theology study of four years at Mount St. Bernard Seminary in Dubuque immediately prior to being ordained priests.

They were ordained just as Vatican Council II was being initiated. They adapted well to the changes that were ushered in during these days. But their approach to ministry was timeless. It did not revolve around an ideology or some practices that seemingly shaped their expression of

faith. Rather, they were straightforward insofar as they anchored their faith and hence their ministry in relationship with the person of Jesus.

This connection with the person of Christ led them to a penetrating interest in and service to others with ministry that bore no judgment but instead led with mercy and kindness. For them every day was a jubilee of mercy. Through them others inevitably felt the tenderness and goodness of God.

A particular characteristic of each of them was that of being a “bridge” reaching out to connect others with God. They also sought to bring together people with different backgrounds, faith and experience.

Monsignor Stessman had an open and welcoming spirit so that one felt immediately comfortable in his presence. Those he encountered recognized that he listened, he cared, he assured them of their value. Stories emerged as to how he would meet perfect strangers at stores, airports and rest stops along the interstates. New to each other, they would engage in conversation that remarkably had lasting impact. One never intruded on his time. He was open, welcoming and understanding. His openness is illustrated by his eagerness to be of service at the Iowa State fair each year.

Father Kiernan exercised “bridging” by his ability to relate to youth, to religious women, to seminarians always having at the ready an engaging sense of humor and an endless repertoire of stories.

Even before Pope Francis exhorted us priests to go to the “peripheries” to minister to those who are poor, those suffering because of their circumstances, Father Jim was attentive to such, not only bringing a word of solace, but determined to enable them to experience better days. He was the chaplain of the men’s section of the Polk County Jail until the day he died. He frequently ministered at the Iowa Correctional Institute for Women in Mitchellville.

Father Jim and Father David Polich had an appointment scheduled with me the Tuesday after his death. They were coming to advocate establishing a minimum wage for all church workers that would compensate on the basis of reasonable way of life to which they were entitled as indeed are workers everywhere. By way of response and in memory of Father Kiernan, I am establishing a task force to try to achieve the goals he had in mind.

Both Monsignor Stessman and Father Kiernan have been described as a “priest’s priest.” Without a scintilla of pride and without judgment they set the standard of priesthood for all of us. Moreover, they loved each of us with unstinting loyalty and would go to all lengths to personally support their brothers in the priesthood.

Pope Francis was asked by a youngster recently what he thought about being Pope. In his inimitable direct fashion, the Pope replied. “I believe as a priest and bishop, I have been doing what God wants me to do and trying my best to do good for others.” The Pope confided that in doing so he was at peace and experienced satisfaction in his ministry.

No doubt, Monsignor Stessman and Father Kiernan felt they were called by God to serve him and do good for others. Quite simple, this is a formula that is applicable to all of us in every state of life. In their case it was exercised for the benefit of all in the Diocese of Des Moines. Their generous responses to God’s call eventuated in their being TWO GREAT PRIESTS. We are indebted to God for this abiding blessing.