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The life and death of a Jesuit suffering servant

BY TIM TOWNSEND • > 314-340-8221

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On a miserable, cold night this week about 350 people huddled in the pews of St. Francis Xavier (College) Church across from Jesuit Hall to remember the life of a friend, teacher, preacher and priest — the Rev. Francis X. Cleary.

Most knew him simply as Father Frank.

This was a memorial Mass, not a funeral. Cleary was 81 when he died last week. He donated his body to the medical school at his alma mater and employer, St. Louis University. A theologian and biblical scholar, Cleary began teaching at SLU in 1969, and only stopped in recent years after realizing the various maladies wracking his body were limiting his effectiveness in the classroom.

Cleary was, according to the school's president, the Rev. Lawrence Biondi, "a devoted member of our faculty for more than three decades and was beloved by generations of SLU students."

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Many of those former students came to College Church Wednesday night to sit together and cry a little over the death of their teacher. Friends from the various scriptural study groups he led were there, too.

About 50 priests, dressed in white albs, sat at the front of the church as eight purple Advent banners fluttered above their heads and the only sound intruding on silent moments came from the church's burbling baptismal font.

The Rev. Fred McLeod, a classmate and friend of Cleary's and a fellow theologian, read a scene from the Gospel of Luke. The scene, in the aftermath of Christ's death, depicts two of Jesus' disciples as they walked to a village outside of Jerusalem called Emmaus.

"While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him," the narrator of Luke writes.

The disciples express surprise that this stranger seems to be the only person in Jerusalem who is ignorant of "the things that have taken place there in these days."

With a presumably straight face, Jesus replies, "What things?"

"The things about Jesus of Nazareth," the disciples say, and then describe who Jesus was and how he died. "We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel."

Later, as they break bread with Jesus, the two disciples finally recognize him. But then Jesus vanishes, and the disciples run to Jerusalem with the news that Christ has risen from the dead.

It's the kind of passage that Cleary was expert at talking about. In fact, it was the exact passage Cleary talked about to this reporter five years ago. The story was about how early Christians saw the promise of Christ in parts of the Old Testament, primarily through the eyes of the Hebrew prophets.

The book of Isaiah includes a series of verses that biblical scholars refer to as "the suffering servant," and that some Christians see as foretelling the life of Christ more than 500 years before his birth.

"For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground," wrote Isaiah. "He had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering"

Most scholars today acknowledge that Isaiah was not predicting the birth and death of Christ but was using the suffering servant to discuss God's relationship with Israel in the Babylonian exile in the sixth century B.C.

Cleary said that since early Christians were mostly Jews, it would have been important for early Christian leaders to show how Christianity related to Judaism. Using passages from the Hebrew Bible that would have been familiar to Jews "was a very good way of explaining that relationship," Cleary said, adding that Jesus would have been "aware of the appropriateness of the suffering servant stories" to his ministry.

In the scene at the end of Luke, Cleary pointed out, as the resurrected Jesus walks with the two disciples toward Emmaus, Jesus talks about himself as the Messiah.

" 'Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared!, ' " Jesus says to them. " 'Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?' Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the Scriptures."

Friends describe Cleary as a captivating preacher. He paired his expertise in biblical scholarship with an engaging delivery that brought people from miles away to the churches where he preached, they said.

One year, as he was riding his bike around Forest Park, Cleary was attacked, bashed full-force in the mouth with a baseball bat. He lost all his teeth and doctors had to reconstruct his jaw and mouth.

"It was a burden for him, because he was a beautiful speaker," said his friend and theology department colleague, the Rev. J.J. Mueller. "He tried to get his speech back to what it was, but it was never the same."

Cleary knew about suffering in his life, McLeod said during his homily Wednesday night. His only sister was severely disabled. And eight years ago, Cleary's own body began giving way. First he needed a walker. Then a wheelchair. He lost the ability to talk. His mind remained sharp, trapped in a failing frame.

"His former life came to a screeching halt," McLeod said. "He went from prodigiously active to a total invalid."

Because of Cleary's suffering, McLeod said, his death came as a blessing. "We are pleased and grateful that Frank is now finally at peace," he said.

Christ's message to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus was that his death was necessary, McLeod said. "He was explaining why dying is so essential to life."

"Like the two who ran to Jerusalem to testify to their brethren that Christ was alive," McLeod continued. "We can know that Father Frank is alive with Christ."