

Father O'Shea's Diocesan Reflections #13

Here is how one P.E.I. priest was much involved in "new evangelization" a century and more ago. He was Father Francis Kelley, born in Vernon River parish in 1870. Around age four he moved with his family to Charlottetown where his father became well established in business.

Francis went to school in Charlottetown and spent three years at St. Dunstan's College. Following three years of theology at Nicolet Seminary in Quebec he was ordained in 1893 for the Diocese of Detroit.

A month after ordination he was named pastor at Lapeer, Michigan with two missions where he remained for thirteen years. The parish was poor, run down and very weak in faith. In 1898, with his bishop's blessing, Father Kelley with boundless energy and love for speaking, joined the National American Lyceum, a well-established speakers' bureau, a powerful force of adult education in its day where some of the ablest orators participated. Topics were chosen by the speaker with Father Kelley dealing with the Catholic Church and its teachings. For a few months each year over seven years the young Island priest used this ideal pulpit across the south and west of the United States.

Father Kelley described this speaking adventure as a form of torture with missed trains, long buggy rides often on the worst of muddy roads, hotels of horror, audiences with hecklers, tremendous bigotry at times aimed particularly at Catholic priests, blizzards in the Dakotas, slow and stalled trains in the Adirondacks and more of the same.

But in this strange way of sharing the Gospel, Kelley saw the country as no one else might have seen it, his territory being the whole U.S. nation all along the southern border, speaking in halls, school houses, vacant shops and summer tents. Despite the physical hardship, the Islander found the people quite special, generally anxious to listen with many wanting the "religious and Bible stuff." There he saw the real America, not that of the great cities but that of the small towns, villages and countryside. He saw so many Catholics filled with indifference, a pastorless and too often a churchless people, badly neglected by Church leaders from the more wealthy north and east of the U.S.

In brief, Father Kelley, out of this remarkable experience of a few months a year over seven years, became the founder, with many helpers, of the Catholic Church Extension Society of the United States, an organization still flourishing today a century later and centred in Chicago, all aimed at the poorer missionary areas of the country. Chapel railway cars were a real novelty, along with the building of endless churches in out of the way areas. Funding for many seminarians who one day would staff those forgotten regions was a real blessing arising from the well-stocked coffers of this new Extension Society. Their mission magazine reaching millions soon became a great catechetical instrument as well.

Father Kelley introduced also a third way of spreading the Gospel in season and out. That was through the wonders of radio all across the country with Catholic teaching and other pleasant remarks, usually with the well-spoken Kelley at the microphone.

These three examples of “new evangelization” are quite special for any age and challenge us today. People of Kelley’s stamp seem to come on the scene about once in a century, casting their bread on the water and having it return manyfold.

Father Kelley became Bishop of Oklahoma in 1924 and died in 1948.

The Word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword. (Heb. 4, 12)

PRIESTALK

Ageless pastors around Atlantic region with no end in sight:

Antigonish

Angus Morris, 80, PP Mabou

Doug Murphy, 81, PP Westmount

Norman MacPhee, 82, PP Glace Bay

Frank Abbass, 85, PP East Bay

Hugh MacDonald, 91, PP Creignish

Gerald LeBlanc, 81, PP Pubnico

Grand Falls

Eugene Morris, 81, PP Bishop’s Fall’s

Saint John

Kevin Barry, 83, PP Hampton

Joe Woods, 95, PP Renous

Halifax-Yarmouth

Vernon Driscoll, 81, PP Amherst

St. John’s

Peter Golden, 80, PP Trepassey

· Island priest who died on his birthday: Wendell MacIntyre (78th), 2006

· Island priests who died on anniversary of ordination:

- William Hogan (45th), Portland, Oregon, 1934

- Patrick McElmeel (7th), Kelly's Cross, 1895

· Same funeral Mass at cathedral for two Island priests on November 28, 1922:

- Ronald B. MacDonald, 78 and retired, buried in Souris.

- Pius MacDonald, 44, buried in St. George's.

St. Dunstan's Parish, give it a hug: 200 years with a church by that name on the same location, 1816 - 2016.

May 10, 2016