

Sean Keefe Funeral Homily
14 January 2021

Early in the morning on the day before Sean went to hospital for the last time, Sunday 3 January, where he died 3 days later, Sean called me to his room. He was in bed in extreme pain and he wanted me to administer him pain relief medication. He had entrusted its management to me as he felt he was beyond doing it properly himself. I gave him the medication and he wanted time to let it take effect. Sometime later I came back to see him and he was sitting on the edge of the bed talking to someone on the phone. Later he told me he'd been on a video call with Tony Streit, a long-time friend from Chicago, and he'd pointed out to Tony the T-shirt he was wearing. He then told me it depicted Harold and Maude from his all-time favourite movie. Being a cinematic Philistine, Sean had to tell me that this was a great movie because it was a parable on life and how it should be lived. He said he'd inflicted it on thousands of kids, primarily in the U.S., throughout his long teaching and campus ministry/chaplaincy career both in the U.S. and Australia. Tony was very familiar with Sean's enthusiasm for this movie and to see Sean wearing this T-shirt resonated strongly with him.

A few days later, after Sean had died, I was looking through his Facebook page and came across the following message:

Last night, my friend of 40+ years and the mentor who gently guided me toward a life of creativity and service, Bro. Sean Keefe, O.Carm., passed away peacefully in Melbourne, Australia. When I was 15 or so, Sean convinced me to start a film club at our high school. Though a teacher there, I don't think I ever took class with him. But he and I were partners in making the agony of high school fun, hosting numerous volleyball parties, chili cook-offs, and film nights, where I first experienced the poetic magic of "Harold and Maude". He continued to dispense kindness, humour, and free therapy for me throughout life, becoming a true member of our family and a presence at every major event. I will miss him immensely but will try to follow his path and continue to model his kindness. In our last conversation this week as a kind of good-bye, I reminded him of the central message of "Harold and Maude":

Harold: Don't die, Maude, for Christ's sake.

Maude: Oh, Harold, don't upset yourself so.

Harold: But, I love you ...

Maude: Oh Harold ... That's wonderful. Go and love some more.

I strongly suspect Tony and his family, including his father Bob and sister Lynn are among the family and many friends of Sean's, both in the U.S. and Australia, who are with us via livestream this morning (Wednesday evening in the U.S.). I hope Tony doesn't mind my plagiarising his Facebook post, but I've done so because I think it speaks for the many, many people who could tell similar stories about what Sean meant to them and because, in quoting from Sean's favourite movie, "Harold and Maude", it leaves us with a reminder of what Sean did with his life and what he devoted his life to urging others to do with theirs ... *Go and love some more.*

I think we're often struck by the fact that, at funerals, we learn something about the person we are farewelling that we never knew before. Sean's brother, Bob, provided me (and

possibly you too) with one such insight when he shared with me that Sean was born John Michael Keefe and, growing up, was known in the family as Mike. Now this was something that Sean fought valiantly and very successfully to suppress. He took Sean, an Irish name for John, when he joined the Carmelites in 1964 and never thereafter presented himself as anyone other than Sean. I knew he was very proud of the fact that he managed to have all his official documents, including both his U.S. and Australian Passports, name him Sean without ever, as far as I know, going through the bureaucratic process of officially changing his name. Circumventing bureaucratic processes was something of an art form that Sean assiduously worked at and, proudly, mostly mastered. He just wanted to get done whatever it was he wanted done ... and the less red tape the better. And so ... as Sean he lived and as Sean he died.

As we know, Sean had a very productive life, with which he was very happy and satisfied. After making his Profession as a Carmelite in 1967 and completing some further studies for the Religious Life, Sean was assigned to chicken farming at the Carmelite farm in Akron, Ohio. Whilst I don't think this was the favourite time of his life, he acquired a knowledge of and interest in chickens which ultimately led to his bequeathing a flock to his last community here in Donvale. Fortunately, other members of this community are more interested in and adept at caring for the chickens than me, so the chickens should continue to prosper to a ripe old age.

In 1970, Sean moved to Niagara Falls, Canada, and there completed his Masters of Education degree, majoring in Counselling. This set him up for a lifetime of teaching and/or counselling, which over the years took him to De Sales High School (the school of his boyhood) in Louisville, Kentucky, Carmel High School in Mundelein, Illinois, St Elias College in Joliet, Illinois and ultimately here to Whitefriars College Donvale, where he first came for two years in 1991 and 1992 and returned in 2001, remaining here, to our great joy and blessing, until his death on Wednesday night last week.

I believe he was a gifted teacher of History, Religious Education and Psychology but his greatest gift to the people he encountered wherever he went was the personal connections he made with them. Tony's testimony, which I quoted at the beginning of this reflection, bears witness to this and to Sean's capacity to hear people's stories, to journey with them in their joys and struggles, to support and encourage them, to challenge them and to empower them to make the most of their own lives by reaching out in love and service to others as he did.

Sean died on 6 January, which traditionally is the date of the feast of the Epiphany, commemorating the visit of the 3 kings from the East who visited the newly born Jesus in Bethlehem and "paid him homage" as the Scriptures say. This feast celebrates the fact that Jesus came into the world, not just to draw the Jews into lives filled with and reflecting God's love, but Jesus came for all people. Sean certainly grasped and lived out this fundamental aspect of what being a follower of Jesus means. He was unstoppable, whilst physically capable, of reaching out in love and service energetically and very happily to people of all sorts of religious or non-religious, ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds, urging and inspiring them to do the same.

The epithet at the beginning of our Mass booklet today and on the Memorial Card for Sean – *anyone who lives in love lives in God, and God lives in them* – comes from the Reading for Mass on the day Sean died. As I reflected on that Reading that morning, I wondered whether this might be Sean’s last day on earth and thought how fitting this Reading was if it proved to be that way ... and so it did!

As I remarked in one of the updates I circulated on Sean’s deteriorating health over his final days, I was privileged to be privy to all sorts of messages he was receiving through emails, text messages, Facebook posts and written cards. I was very moved by the extraordinary number of these, all offering thanks and paying tribute to Sean for the impact he had had on their lives through his kindness, his humility, his readiness to help, his empathy and encouragement and his capacity to help people develop their lives in ways that were loving and fulfilling. His circle of influence was immense and the outpouring of love, gratitude and affection for him was almost overwhelming to encounter. He has certainly left a legacy of a life lived in love, inspiring countless others to do the same.

When I was talking with Sean just a couple of days before he died about all that he’d done and all the places he’d served in his life, I asked him if there was any period that stood out as particularly significant and fulfilling. With a twinkle in his eye, he said: “The day I met you”. I laughed, of course, and assured him that whilst his body might be weakening, his capacity for spinning B.S. was as good as ever. He then laughed and replied seriously that coming to Australia was particularly significant for him. He said it had given him the opportunity to reinvent himself, leaving whatever may have been disappointments and setbacks in his past behind and start afresh in a context where he could present to people, who had no pre-formed images or judgments of him, as he was and be accepted for it. It was a response that was humbling to hear, but one for which, on behalf of all the people he has touched in Australia and Timor-Leste, I felt proud and grateful. To think that we, in Australia and Timor-Leste, along with all the people he had touched in the U.S., had given him a gift which he appreciated so much was spine tingling. Sean wouldn’t want us to underestimate the gift that we were to him even as we appreciate so much the gift he was to us.

I mentioned Sean’s outreach to the people of Timor-Leste and I want to underline it. When the Carmelites in Australia were asked to reach out to the Order and the people in Timor-Leste back in 2001, just when Sean returned to Australia, he embraced the opportunity wholeheartedly to reach out personally to them. With his characteristic enthusiasm and energy, he involved others in a “mission” of fundraising and practical support. He personally visited Timor-Leste many times and involved others in projects there to improve access to water and electricity in the remote village of Zumalai where the Carmelites had responsibility for the parish. He ran many events here at Whitefriars College, mainly concerts, with the support of the Kiwanis club and staff and students of this College to raise funds for these various projects, but particularly to support the education of young Timorese people. He established the annual College Walk-for-Timor as a major fundraiser and supplemented it with the generous support of his many friends in the U.S. who were co-opted to the cause. He instituted and accompanied visits by staff and students of this College to Timor-Leste. These were life changing experiences for some of these people, but I suggest, eye opening and challenging in positive ways for all who participated. He

developed a great empathy with and affection for many Timorese people and, as was typical of the people Sean connected with, they reciprocated with gratitude and affection.

I have mentioned the Kiwanis club - and his service to and through this community service organization needs to be honoured. He was a member of the Manningham branch for 19 years, for many of which he held the office of President. Through his involvement with Kiwanis, he reached out to many needy people and causes, particularly in our local municipality of Manningham. He came into contact with many of the officials and support workers of the Council and sat on many committees. He was indefatigable in his commitment to the support of many of the community outreach services and initiatives of Manningham Council, including organizing a major community raffle each year. Recognition of his extraordinary service came in the form a Manningham Citizen of the Year Award and ultimately an Order of Australia medal. Being very self-effacing and wanting to deflect attention away from himself and on to others, Sean played down these Awards, to which was added one of the highest Awards that the Kiwanis club can bestow (the Walter Zeller Fellowship Award) and which is exhibited here today, along with his Order of Australia medal and citation. I'm sure he was quietly – and justifiably - chuffed with these Awards, but I didn't let him forget that as a good American and staunch anti-monarchist, he was, nonetheless, indebted to Her Majesty, the Queen of England for his Order of Australia award. I didn't labour the point, however, as I didn't want to jeopardize the great friendship we had formed over the 17 years we lived together.

Throughout the course of his twenty-one years here at Whitefriars, Sean was involved in many and various activities, apart from the day-to-day role in supporting staff, students and parents. One particular activity I want to highlight, however, was his involvement in the Kairos retreats for Year 11 students. Until his deteriorating health dictated, just a couple of years ago, that the salubrious accommodation and the unsociable hours of these retreats were more than his body could manage, he participated in almost every one of the three which were conducted every year. He had been involved extensively in these retreats in the U.S. long before coming here and so had hundreds of them notched up on his Kairos belt. The Kairos retreat draws the participating staff and students into a special relationship as they openly share their joys and struggles in the journey of life, discovering that God is with them in the journey. Sean's undemonstrative but deep faith was revealed to those with whom he shared the Kairos experience. They discovered a man for whom God was real, love was real and practical, faith was essentially simple and didn't have to be complicated by lots of rules and rituals, Jesus and his way of life was the touchstone of a relationship with God, it was the spirit not the letter of the law that was important and what really mattered was the giving and receiving of love. It was a profound message which he taught by words, but more tellingly by the example of his own life.

Family was important to Sean and he worked diligently on and was very knowledgeable about his family tree. His father died when Sean was only 6 or 7 years old. Being the oldest of 3 boys, and as his brother Bob tells it, after their father died, "Mike considered himself head of the house. That didn't go over very well with mom and they fought that battle in amusing ways". I'm sure if Sean was here to defend himself from this charge, Bob and he would fight that battle in amusing ways! Sean had a deep affection though for his mother and his brothers Steve and Bob, to whom we extend our sincere condolences, as well as to

the members of his extended family in the U.S. Sean had a great admiration for his mother, who obviously influenced him greatly. She brought up her three young sons on her own in very poor circumstances. This introduced a lifestyle of frugality to Sean, which he retained right through his life. He often spoke about how his mother would do any plumbing, electrical work or building maintenance work that needed to be done around the house herself, improvising as necessary. Sean mimicked this way of doing things very closely. He loved to tinker, to work out how to fix things or create them – and how-to manuals were never Sean's style. Do it yourself in a way you figure out for yourself was his mantra. It made for some interesting creations!

Sean didn't find it easy to accept people doing things for him, but it was one of the lessons he had to learn as he grew progressively weaker from chronic and debilitating health issues. He learned that lesson very well, however, particularly in these last couple of years in which he needed dialysis in hospital three nights every week. He was immeasurably grateful to the Doctors who cared for him, particularly his GP, Pat Crowe, and his Renal Physician, Cos Stambe. He loved the nurses who cared for him in dialysis and he formed a special and touching bond with them and with the Doctors I have mentioned. I cannot thank them enough, on behalf of the Carmelites and all Sean's family and friends, for the support they gave Sean and the way in which, in the midst of all his health struggles, they brought him joy and comfort.

Before concluding, I would like to refer specifically to the Readings and hymns that Sean chose for this, his Requiem Mass. You will notice that they are all uplifting. They express joy and thanksgiving. The Reflection we will hear after Communion reminds us of the importance of Mary, the mother of Jesus – and our spiritual mother – to Sean, as a *gentle woman, a quiet light, so strong and bright; a gentle Mother, a peaceful dove*. We will join Sean in praying to her: *teach us wisdom; teach us love* - as Sean learned so well.

Our 1st Reading speaks of the Prophet Elijah who is very significant for Carmelites. He was a model of social justice and a man very much of action. It's easy to understand, on this basis, his attractiveness to Sean. Tellingly, however, the point of the section of the Elijah story which Sean chose for us today is that Elijah wasn't significant just for being a man of social justice and action, but because underlying this active love and zeal for God was his contemplative experience of God, as revealed in the gentle breeze he experienced on Mount Horeb. Elijah had a deep personal connection with and love for God and a profound awareness that he was loved by God. This is what drove him to social justice and action. Sean's contemplative nature was revealed, not just in his great commitment to social justice and action, but in his profound respect for, interest in, attentiveness to and love for people and his capacity to reflect on and interpret life's experiences both for himself and others. This was a gift he shared with very many people. I believe this was what drew people to him and in sharing himself so generously with others and in allowing them to share themselves so comfortably with him, he shared God's love with them and received God's love from them. I believe, too, that Sean's contemplative capacity enabled him to bear the struggles of his ill health so cheerfully for so long. He knew God was with him on the journey. This gave him the strength to carry on.

And finally, our Gospel Reading recalls the Beatitudes which were the hallmark of Jesus' life and the hallmark of those who are called to be one with Jesus in building up, proclaiming and inheriting the kingdom of God in all its fullness. The Beatitudes speak of such people as being happy with their lot in life, not seeking security in material things, people who are gentle, who can empathize with others, who hunger and thirst for what is right, who are merciful, genuine, peacemakers and willing to accept the struggles of life as part and parcel of life; people who aren't afraid to speak their minds and take a stand for what they believe in. Sean Keefe, Carmelite, son, brother, relative, neighbour, mentor and very dear friend and esteemed colleague to so many was a man of the Gospels – a man of the Beatitudes. May he now enjoy the fullness of eternal life in the Kingdom of God, to which he witnessed so eloquently. May he rest in peace.

Paul Cahill, O.Carm.