

Nearly 3,000 years ago, an illustrious King of named Solomon was in his dotage, recalling his wasted years of his youth, when he dictated the following words for his book of Ecclesiasticus:

*Faithful friends are a sturdy shelter,*

*Whoever finds one has found a treasure.*

For me, and many others, John J. Conahan was that treasure.

In the official directives for priests and deacon preachers at funerals, the words are clear: a brief homily and not a eulogy. Over the years, I have noted those two commands have been largely observed in the breach.

However, when I sent word to one of my classmates to pray for John, he replied, "Gladly will offer a Mass for him; a good priest and a class act."

That opinion "checks all the boxes," as we say. It certainly follows those official directives. As Deacon Al Clay, a great friend of John and mine, remarked, "That's John in a nutshell."

But for those of us gathered here who pray for him, I believe in expressing some characteristics of this man that we were privileged to have with us for nearly 89 years.

I decided to arrange my own in three categories: first, talents; second, sense of humor, and third, spirituality.

#### Talents:

John was blessed with a beautiful singing voice, a lilting one at that. It developed from his days in the choir of the former Immaculate Heart of Mary parish in Chester. That choir was led by the late Monsignor Martin McDonogh, another gem in the shield of Philly priests.

Later in life, John founded choirs at St. Cyril's, Christ the King, and eventually coached the singers in those legendary shows at Cardinal O'Hara High School, ably produced by Monsignor Louis D'Addezio, under the watchful eye of Monsignor Michael Picard, the vice principal.

I daresay at the time, in my younger days, when so many priests served in high schools, that O'Hara students thought John and I looked alike. That's me with dark hair and no eyeglasses. Kids would congratulate me for the show. After a while, I would just smile and thank them and keep moving along with a grin.

John also had a decorator's eye for color and floral arrangements especially in the sanctuary of either the school chapel as principal at Archbishop Ryan, or here at Immaculate.

I found out from reliable sources that John would spend many a Saturday morning ironing the linens and altar frontals and arranging the flowers in the very colors that would match the vestments.

Speaking of vestments, John kept the Trappists busy at St. Joseph Abbey in Spencer, Massachusetts, where vestment making is a source of income along with their famous preserves.

For over 30 years, we made our annual retreat at that Abbey, and we both concluded that the monk's life was not for us, even with the jelly and vestment making. The epitome was a Christmas ensemble that John designed which I found out there are only three in the whole United States, all of them here in the Archdiocese.

John taught French at O'Hara was a true "Francophile". When on a trip to Paris we chanced upon an English language Mass at Notre Dame Cathedral, I remember him saying afterward, "This for a kids from Chester!"

#### Sense of Humor:

Once on a vacation we took to Northern California, he conceded to my love of trains by taking a scenic ride pulled along by a magnificent steam engine. In our nearly empty car sat a rather tout woman. Then the train stopped at a refreshment stand, this same woman came away with what had to be the largest ice cream creation. John whispered to me with anatomical reference, "Now you can see why she has such a large following."

At other times, he would repeat innocent remarks of parishioners he might meet in casual clothes at a store, "Why, Father, I didn't recognize you with your clothes on!"

Or the story of a pompous traveler who made up her agenda. When asked, "Did you see the Dardanells (a body of water)?", she answered, "See them? My husband and I had lunch with them!"

When a bird entirely unrelated to the Holy Spirit made an unwanted drop of greetings on Cardinal Bevilacqua's cassock, it fell to John to tell the man, "There's an unheavenly 'bird message' on your shoulder."

#### Spirituality:

Saving the best for last is some evidence of John's quiet but deep spirituality. He was director and confessor to lay people, nuns, and yours truly. We all caught sight of something within him that I don't believe he knew.

When he celebrated Mass, it was unrushed and deliberate. We would concelebrate on vacation, and he would offer an insight from the day's scriptures.

Later he might disappear for his "private prayers." I noticed once a well-worn, little book stuffed with holy cards.

Once, he was charged with running a summer house for chosen seminarians where they would live and pray together and go out on specific missions. He would from time to time express a desire to continue such work at the Seminary. What a good choice that would have been, but it was not to be.

Because his mother died giving birth to John, I venture to say that was the wellspring for his life-long devotion to Our Lady.

Conclusion:

On the Thursday evening of the day he died, there were two stanzas in the hymn for Vespers that grabbed by attention and fit my mood:

*Discerning rightly and judging well,  
That worldly joys and lures of sin  
Are fleeting pleasures swift to fall.  
He comes at last to heaven's joy.  
He ran with courage to the test.  
And valiantly endured the pain.  
He died to self for love of you  
and now enjoy eternal gifts.*

So, what is left to say, but:

*Eternal rest to this good priest  
And a class act.  
Amen.*

-Reverent Leonard N. Peterson

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