

IN MEMORIUM:
JOHN CARDINAL O'CONNOR
1920 - 2000

-by Rev. Robert J. Batule

Soon after Cardinal O'Connor's death on May 3rd, 2000, a priest who had worked with the New York prelate observed for a television news audience that His Eminence only wanted to be remembered as a good priest. One quickly realized that this was not a private revelation because many others recalled the cardinal saying the very same to them. Scripture scholars refer to this as multiple attestations. And multiple attestations, the exegetes contend, argue in favor of an event's historicity. That's all well and good but some would surely want to know more than whether or not these words passed the cardinal's lips. Some would want to know if the words the cardinal spoke matched the way he lived his life. Was he indeed a good priest?

John O'Connor became a priest on December 15th in 1945. The early years of his priestly ministry were spent in his native Philadelphia. There he was a parish priest, a teacher on the high school level, and worked with the physically disabled until he entered the United States Navy during the Korean War. Over the next twenty-seven years, Father and then Monsignor O'Connor exercised a varied priestly ministry in such places as Washington, D.C., Annapolis, Maryland, Okinawa and Vietnam.

What made John O'Connor a good priest was his consciousness that he was carrying out the work of Christ the High Priest. Whether he was baptizing infants in a parish church or counseling sailors and marines aboard a ship, John O'Connor was keenly aware that he and the others to whom he was ministering were heirs of God, heirs with Christ if only we suffer with Him (Rom 8:17). The cardinal suffered bravely as he fought brain cancer the last few months of his life. But physical suffering was not the only kind he endured. For a much longer period in his life, the cardinal knew the suffering which accompanies truth telling. In season and out of season, Cardinal O'Connor told the truth about the sanctity of human life at all its stages. For this he was assailed as being out of step with his flock and insensitive to women and their reproductive choices. He was criticized as intolerant to homosexuals and lesbians and was thought to be out of touch with the quest for liberation.

For his part, John Cardinal O'Connor ignored the characterizations that he was out of step and out of touch. Never did he waver in defending the positions which drew so much protest and anger in the media capital of the world. This of course astonished many who just thought the cardinal was being personally stubborn and intransigent. What the cardinal was at pains to show in New York and elsewhere was that the positions he argued for intelligently and passionately were not his own. These, he insisted time and again, are the teachings of Christ and the Catholic Church. Like Our Lord in His interrogation before Pilate, the cardinal testified to the truth (Jn 18:37).

I first met John O'Connor in January of 1985, five months before he was elevated to cardinal. He and the bishops from the New York Province were making a retreat at the seminary I attended. I was bold enough at the time to approach Archbishop O'Connor and ask him to break from his retreat and speak to the seminarians. The archbishop agreed to my great delight. He spoke among other things, about the transformation which occurs when a man is ordained a priest. The Church refers to this as the ontological character of the ministerial priesthood. The Second Vatican Council teaches this point, using the words that the ministerial priesthood differs not just in degree but in essence from the priesthood of the faithful (*Lumen Gentium*, 10). Witness like this was never reported on the evening news or in the pages of the *New York Times*; it was not considered controversial enough for the public square. But that doesn't mean it was uncontroversial in the Church, especially in priestly formation circles. Ever since the 1960s and the arrival of the activist priest on the pastoral scene, the emphasis in many seminaries (my own included) has been away from the ontological nature of the priesthood and has centered on the functionality of the ministerial priesthood. Before concluding his presentation to the seminarians fifteen years ago, Archbishop O'Connor referred to Cardinal Suhard's pastoral letter *Priests Among Men*. Not a few times since the archbishop's recommendation have I found inspiration for my own priestly ministry in this wonderful little volume.

For more than fifty years, Cardinal O'Connor was a busy and engaged priest. His interests and his knowledge were far-ranging, and his academic accomplishments were nothing short of outstanding. Jeanne Kirkpatrick, the former United States Ambassador to the United Nations and professor at Georgetown University, regarded the cardinal as one of the top three graduate students she had ever observed. Besides his doctoral degree in political science, the cardinal also held an advanced degree in clinical psychology. This made him a natural for the Society of Catholic Social Scientists. Indeed, he was the first bishop to join our Bishops' Board. With pride, I note that the Holy Father chose as Cardinal O'Connor's successor in New York another of the Society's episcopal members, Archbishop Edward M. Egan.

When Cardinal O'Connor drew his last breath, it was evening on the Feast of Saints Philip and James, Apostles. The sun had set for the day and darkness had already descended in New York.

The first apostles did not acquit themselves too well at night. On a night most important to their Master, before His arrest in the garden, they could not remain awake. They fell asleep from grief (Lk 22:45).

Cardinal O'Connor was something of an insomniac when he was in good health. Even with a demanding schedule of liturgies and meetings on most days, he could not sleep more than a few hours before awaking to his responsibilities.

Cardinal O'Connor awakened in others a sense of duty, moral courage and apostolic responsibility. He reminded us to be ever watchful in the face of still escalating threats to compromise the dignity of every person made in the image and likeness of Almighty God.

At every Mass the priest is privileged to offer, he prays that the Lord free us from sin and protect us from all anxiety as we wait in joyful hope. Death delivers us from sin and anxiety. May the eternal High Priest grant unto Cardinal O'Connor the fulness of joy, a completion of the joy (Jn 16:24) which belonged to His Eminence at the earthly altar of God (Ps 43:4).

Tu es sacerdos in aeternam!