

JUSTINIAN McGREAD C.P. – RECEPTION OF REMAINS
HOMILY PREACHED BY FR FRANK KEEVINS CP

Coming together this evening as members of the Passionist family, along with Justinian's brothers Jim and Gerry, sisters-in-law, Anne and Pat, and connecting with his other sister Joey in America on the live-stream, as well as other extended family members, also with parishioners, with lay-Passionists, and with other of Justinian's many friends and connections, and those he made strong bonds with over the years through the various aspects of his kaleidoscopic life, I know that we are all still saddened by the relative suddenness of his death, and still a bit unbelieving that he has gone from us. Those of us who lived with him, however, and those family members who regularly came to see him, had witnessed a deterioration in the last few months, and so perhaps it wasn't so much of a surprise to us.

He was 93 years young and, until recently, despite underlying health conditions, he remained remarkably sharp of mind and, whenever tests were done on his vital organs, nurses and doctors would be amazed at just how strong and functioning everything was. But then he began to sense in himself that something wasn't right. He went into hospital just before Christmas and, after a bit of a miserable time, came out again a couple of weeks later. He settled back into the house, but it wasn't the same Jus. There wasn't the old spark. On Thursday 30th January he went into hospital again, and he died a few days later, on Sunday 2nd February, appropriately on the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord, and the World Day for Consecrated Life, Justinian having lived over 72 years as a consecrated religious. He had received the last sacraments of the church from both myself and Father Gareth, so he was well prepared for his final journey, and very much ready for it in himself, as he had often expressed his readiness, and indeed his desire, to go to God. Many family members, and all of his Passionist community, had been at his bedside at some stage in the days and the nights before his death, and Brother Conor was with him when Justinian passed away at around 2.30 that morning, having held his hand and recited the 23rd psalm, the Lord is My Shepherd, as Jus had always requested. We will have that psalm at the Mass tomorrow.

He was 68 years a priest, ordained on 21st December 1957 along with eight others, and with Jus's death, all of them have now gone to God. Jus was the last. Prior to Jus, the last of his classmates to die, around 14 months ago, was his great friend, Father Ralph Egan. In 2017 we had a lovely celebration here in the church with both Justinian and Ralph for their diamond jubilees of ordination, and then a nice meal afterwards. They were both renowned for their love of a good meal. Another of their classmates was of course, Father Eustace, well known to all at St. Mungo's, and still much missed.

On a personal note, I first met Jus at our Passionist Retreat House at Coodham in Ayrshire in the early 1970's. He was the guestmaster, having just returned from what was called frontier apostolate in Canada. Prior to that he had been in Musselburgh, and prior to that again, he had been a young chaplain in the Glasgow Royal Infirmary where, I am reliably informed, he was the one who initiated a Sunday evening Mass in the hospital which lasted for many, many years after. At Coodham I was a lay member of the retreat organizing team. I well re-member our planning meetings down at Skelmorlie, when the team would arrive on a Friday night and Jus would always be there to welcome us with a huge pot of Spaghetti Bolognese and I used to look forward to it immensely. His spaghetti was legendary, and I was delighted to discover, when I returned to Glasgow in 2016, that he was still making spaghetti, usually on a Saturday night, to warm us on our return from the Vigil Mass. He made fantastic chips too, going back to when that was his main role in cooking for guests at the family hotel in Girvan in his earlier years.

He was 19 when he joined the Passionists, and he had many a story to tell about his years in formation when the life could be very tough for novices and students. In later years he would assume roles in formation himself, as Director of Postulants and Master of Novices, avowing to be much kinder to those who would be in his charge. As is the way of things, most of those young men in his charge left the Passionists and went on to do other things in their lives, but a number of them kept touch with Jus over the years and would even come to visit him when possible.

He was great at keeping in touch with people, family members of course, fellow Passionists, people he had met during his time ministering in Canda, or in Paris, or during a sabbatical while taking part in a spiritual leadership course in Chicago at the end of the 1970's, or just people he had known for a long time as family neighbours, friends, and so on, far too many to mention. He had a whole list of people that he regularly contacted all over the world, on Facebook; on WhatsApp; on Facetime; on Messenger, and on Skype. He was a people person who thrived on company, whether in person or online.

His closest bonds though were with his family. He loved his family, his siblings and all the generations that followed after. He was one of 11 children born to James McGread and Ellen O'Brien. He grieved those siblings who went before him, his brother Tommy who was a priest in the Galloway diocese; his brother Vincent, who among other things was a bit of an actor; his sister Laura who was the most recent to die in America; there was also Mary, Anna and Eleanor; but above all Sally, who died back in 2016. He wouldn't ever pretend that he had no favourites. Sally was his favourite, and everybody knew it and accepted it. I imagine that will be a joyful reunion in heaven. Jus had his own unique place in the family, with all the generations; he loved them and they loved him, and they included him; there was many a meal out in one of the houses or in a local restaurant, and he would always praise the culinary skills of a number of his family members. He will be a great loss to all of them.

Father Jim Sweeney, our Provincial, will have more to say tomorrow at the requiem Mass, but for tonight we can let ourselves be drawn to these symbols which reflect Jus's life as a Christian, as a Passionist, and as a priest, all of which meant a great deal to him. The paschal candle reminds us that from his baptism he began a journey through life with Christ, and in faith we believe that that journey does not end now in death, but that Christ now comes to meet him and lead him into the eternal home of God's kingdom.

His Passionist sign reflects his life as a religious, as a man of prayer who tried his best to steep himself in Christ's Passion so as to be better able to proclaim it in his many works in different roles and in different parts of the world. The crucifix brings to mind the centrality of the cross in his Passionist vocation, the share that he had in Christ's sufferings, particularly through his final sickness unto death, but also affirming Christ's victory over sin and death in which Justinian now shares; and the stole and chalice and patten symbolising his service at the altar as a faithful priest for almost 70 years, and his great love of the Mass and of the Blessed Sacrament. There is a room through from our kitchen in Bishopbriggs that we adapted as our prayer room for reciting the prayer of the church together as a community. After morning prayer, Jus would remain on to celebrate Mass while the rest of us headed out to do our various ministries; he would spend a number of hours in that room each day praying; and when we gathered at the end of the day to pray night prayer together, after singing the anthem to Our Lady at the end, we would all turn to Jus, and he would always say "Good night, God bless, and sleep well" – and that would be our final word for the day.

As Passionists we join with Jim and Anne; Gerry and Pat, Joey and all the family this evening in sharing their sense of loss, in drawing comfort and strength from these symbols of faith, and in looking forward to all there is to remember and celebrate tomorrow. Together we thank his home care team, district nurses and others for their great care of Justinian this past while, which augmented the care of his family and his community; and we thank you all here tonight, whether in the church or on the live-stream, people he has known, people he has ministered to in the eucharist, in the sacrament of reconciliation, in the anointing of the sick, or whatever it may have been, people he has befriended, and been befriended by. Thank you for giving us the support of your presence and prayers at this time. Perhaps we can all, in the quiet of our hearts, join together in saying to Father Jus this evening, echoing his nightly mantra – Jus, good night, God bless, and sleep well. Eternal rest...

