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Monsignor Charles Kelly

This time last year, Monsignor Charles Kelly prepared the Cathedral parishioners for the upcoming Lenten season. With his usual eloquence, Charlie reflected on the words of Jesus' call to repentance: "Die with me, so that you may rise with me. Embrace God's unconditional love and let that love recreate your heart." Little did Charlie know then, little did any of us know that God would soon be calling Charlie Kelly to begin an entirely new journey, a journey which would call him to embrace the cross – to die with Christ – in order to rise with Christ for all eternity.

Five weeks ago, the doctor informed our beloved Monsignor that cancer treatment would stop and that Charlie would begin a hospice program that would not prepare him for death, but would prepare him for life until he died. A couple of days later, I had lunch with Charlie at the Bishop's house. He ate only a morsel, but kept saying over and over again, "I am at peace." After lunch, Charlie and I stood on the street corner waiting for his ride. He looked me straight in the eye and said, so very clearly and indelibly, "Walter, I have had a most wonderful priesthood." He repeated a second time, "I have had a most wonderful priesthood."

For me, these few words aptly sum up the life of Monsignor Charles Kelly. His life was always that of a priest. Priesthood was not a job to be done, not a career to pursue, not a profession to enjoy for himself. Charlie identified his priesthood with the person of Jesus, the eternal High Priest. Jesus was not an ideal to imitate, but a living person to love and to share with others. Charlie's life was one of self-offering and self-giving. Charlie Kelly was nothing but priest – every day of his life – a priest who offered gifts and sacrifices and proclaimed God's Word in season and out of season. His whole life was a prayer in praise and thanksgiving to God.

The first reading for this Mass of Resurrection was Charlie's own choice. He chose it because he saw himself on God's mountaintop, ready to celebrate an eternal feast of rich foods and choice wine. His priesthood

led him to God's mountaintop, gave him a hunger for that eternal feast. As he came to the end of his life, Charlie looked forward to the day when God will destroy the veil that veils all people, when God will destroy death forever. He saw the victory of Christ over death through the eyes of his priesthood. Yes, Charlie Kelly truly had a most wonderful priesthood.

Today is sort of a homecoming for Charlie. His spiritual rebirth at baptism took place here at the Cathedral. He was a schoolboy at the Cathedral's grade school. His love for God was grounded in the love that he experienced from his dear parents and shared with his family. To his parents – Charlie and Grace; to his sister and her husband – Mary Jo and Alan; to his nephew and his wife - Sean and Crystal, I express in the name of all here present our deepest sympathy at this time of loss. We are all saddened, but you the family most of all, because as someone wrote to me, "his place will be empty."

I just recently learned that priesthood was in Charlie's heart from an early age. At home he would set up an altar and imitate being a priest at Mass. Charlie had a brilliant mind and spent his high school days at Benedictine where he headed up the Cadet Corps and was valedictorian for his graduating class. He responded directly to God's call by spending four years at St. Mary's Seminary in Baltimore and four years in theology at North American College in Rome. On Dec. 21, 1967, Charlie Kelly was ordained at Saint Peter's Basilica in the Vatican. That was the beginning of his 33 years of priestly ministry.

I remember distinctly the excitement of my predecessor, Bishop John Russell, when he appointed Charlie his secretary and the assistant chancellor of the diocese. Charlie loved to reminisce about the three years with Bishop Russell, who was his spiritual father. I remember well that memorable moment in July of 1971 when Bishop James Hickey, now Cardinal Hickey, came to Bishop Russell and asked that Charlie be allowed to serve on the faculty and become vice-rector of the North American College. Bishop Russell gave an immediate "yes," but in doing so reminded Bishop Hickey that he was giving up, as he called Charlie, "his most precious jewel." Every time I have spoken to Cardinal Hickey since then, he has inquired about "our most precious jewel." What a wonderful priesthood Charlie had in forming, encouraging, and inspiring for eight years, young men preparing for priesthood. His vision of priestly ministry was undoubtedly implanted in the lives of countless seminarians.

In 1979, Father Charles Kelly returned to the diocese where he served for six years as pastor of St. Mary's Parish in the west end of Richmond. Parishioners at St. Mary's remember to this day his dedicated, life-giving ministry which included the building of their present church. His wonderful priesthood continued in the service to young people when, for eight years, Charlie Kelly was Campus Minister at the College of William and Mary and Vicar for Priestly Vocations. Students at William and Mary came to know and love the Christ that Charlie revealed to them by word and example. Charlie took pride in the fact that 33 of our priests now serving in the diocese came to us under his tutelage.

Like Bishop Russell, I asked Charlie Kelly to return to the Cathedral as its rector. For five years, he served you the Cathedral parishioners and served the diocese as vicar general and episcopal vicar. With pride, he would speak to me about the new lighting in front of the Cathedral, the lighting of the dome, the repairs to this and that, the New Century Fund. I recognize these are only tangible, material improvements. But just think of all the spiritual improvements he has made in your lives at the Cathedral as he inspired you to greater heights in your spiritual journey.

Today's gospel from Matthew that portrays the Last Judgment scene certainly reflects the life and ministry of Charlie Kelly. He saw Christ in the lives of the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger and the imprisoned. He literally met Jesus in the lives of the least of our brothers and sisters and inspired us to do likewise. I remember, for example, his personal efforts to ensure that the Stuart Circle parishes could continue to feed the homeless. Under his guidance, the Cathedral became the home for the homeless during the Christmas season. Charlie is now certainly hearing the words of Jesus spoken to him – "Come, you blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you." Monsignor Kelly touched each of our lives here at the Cathedral, and the lives of so many throughout the Diocese, in multiple and different ways.

That wonderful priesthood also extended to us the priests of the diocese. We are all better and more dedicated priests because of his example. In a real way "his place will be empty," but our memory of him will be lasting.

Around 1990, Charlie Kelly gave us a talk titled "25 Years into Renewal of Priestly Ministry in a Changing Church." His thoughts were most inspiring. Charlie described the priest as "one to whom the Word has been entrusted in its full sacramental power." Charlie described the Eucharist as the place where Christian people deepen their sense of

being God's people filled with a sense of mission. And then he said directly to us, "I hope I can testify to the power of our ministry and to the power of the Lord. Our ministry is indeed relevant to the deepest hungers and quests of the human heart, for God, for community and for discipleship." Then he concluded his talk by saying that when you find a priest who is doing what he should do, and is where he belongs, he looks like a man madly in love. Charlie Kelly was that man. What an example and legacy he left for each of us priests. His life could be summarized in the words of Paul to the Philippians: "I have come to rate all as loss in the light of the surpassing knowledge of my Lord Jesus Christ. For his sake I have forfeited everything. I have accounted all else as rubbish so that Christ may be my wealth." That to me describes a priest who proudly said, "Walter, I have had a wonderful priesthood."

The last time that our Monsignor Kelly celebrated Mass here at the Cathedral was on New Year's Day. Even though he was not physically present these past two months, we can say, "He has never stopped ministering to us. Even in his dying, he was teaching us to live." His last message to us was on Feb. 7 when he wrote: "Because continuing chemotherapy at this point offers no reasonable benefit, we have decided to refocus my care to support and comfort as I prepare for my passage into Eternal Life. I am surrounded by love. I am not alone in those times of fear, frustration and anxiety. Our God, Mary, and the cloud of witnesses in heaven and you saints with whom I have been privileged to share this journey are with me. A deep peace prevails at this point in my life."

Whenever you called Charlie at his home across the street, you might get a recorded message of Charlie's voice – always ending with the word "peace." We end our thoughts of him with words of peace. We pray for you and with you, Charles Kelly. We ask you to continue to pray for us and intercede for us before God's throne. You have been a son, a brother, a friend, a priest, and a man who enjoyed a wonderful priesthood. May you, dear Charles – always and forever – rest in Christ's peace.

+ Walter F. Sullivan
Bishop of Richmond