

**Fr. Michael J. Collins**  
**Memorial Funeral Mass**  
**Homily**  
**(Fr. Trey Nelson)**

Mike was a true brother to me. For this I will always love him. For this I will be always thankful. As a brother, priest, and friend, he brought me to a better place. He made me laugh, often. And he made me stronger. In my years as a priest, I have been blessed with 3 great priest-mentors: Fr. Jerry Young, Fr. Tom Ranzino, and Mike. These past few days, especially, I again realize how lucky I am.

Many of you don't know this, but from May of this past year, on, it wasn't just Mike and I living together. It was me, and Mike—and Duke. Duke was my youngest sister's family's dog, a 14 year old Golden Retriever. He was staying with us until they finished renovating their new house. Soon after Duke moved in, though, he quickly became Mike's dog. Duke sat right at Mike's bedroom door all day, every day, literally. Because of his age, Duke died a few months ago. Last night, when I was beginning to feel a little nervous about this, I spoke on the phone with my 11 year old niece, Aubrey. (Duke was their dog). I told her I was a little nervous, and she said, "yeah, I think I would be too." I then asked her, "any advice?" And she responded, "um, no, not really." But she paused and then said, "well, I guess you could say Duke is really happy now."

Most of us know that Mike had an expression that he was fond of using. ***"Behind every Good Friday there's always Easter Sunday."*** This was echoed in the words of the Preface for this past Sunday's Mass: ***"...through Jesus, we are reminded that the passion will lead to the resurrection."*** This was more than expression for him. It was his basic philosophy about life and about suffering. He said it. He believed it. He lived it. It was a challenge for him, however, these past several months. Telling us at one point, "I think I'm just going to give up," he showed us what it meant to be honest about your pain. He had his bumps in the road, but he was most courageous. We too believe in these words, but right now it's difficult. Dr. Bill Hagemann of St. Jude Parish posted, "I am sad beyond words." If we can recall him saying them to us, perhaps that helps.

Please allow me to express a few words of thanks: first, to Bishop Muench, our brother priests and deacons, the religious sisters and brothers who knew Mike along the way (especially the Sisters of Our Lady of the Lake and Ollie Steele), the staffs and personnel of Most Blessed Sacrament and St. Jude Parishes, and, of course, the hundreds of lay faithful here with us today. If you look at the places where Mike served in our diocese:

- † St. Louis King of France
- † St. Mark
- † St. Charles Borromeo
- † Our Lady of Mercy
- † St. Jude
- † Most Blessed Sacrament

...you see that he has served in pretty much every part of the diocese. And, most valued to him, St. John the Baptist in Zachary, where Mike first met a very special family who took him in as their own, who he embraced as his own, and who loved him from his first days in Louisiana, and cared for him daily this past year, right up until his passing. Peggy, Katy, Mollie, and Dan—and many others of your family—Mike often referred to you as his "extended family," but, trust me, you were, in fact, his family. (And who could forget Sparky?! That's their family dog. Now here's a man who, as I recalled, never liked pets, but Sparky became a house hold word. How many times did Mike come to me asking to adjust the daily Mass schedule, because he had to go tot he doctor—only to find out that it was not for him, but because he had to take Sparky to the vet!) I am told that Mike and Mollie, who attends St. Joseph Academy, had a little thing that they would often say to each other. "I love you a trillion." I know that, to you, more than any of us, it may feel as if he is a trillion miles away. But Mike, your Poppy, your Uncle Mike is with you now—and always will be. I can say this about all of you: Mike certainly loved you. He was extremely comfortable with you. But, as I listened often to him speaking of you, I could tell that he felt safe and

secure with you. We thank you—I thank you—for providing him this sense of security and hope, especially during his final months.

May I share with all of you a brief history of my personal relationship with Mike. My family and I first met him when I was 11 years old, when he served as associate pastor at our parish of Our Lady of Mercy. Yes, it's true, I served Mass for Mike when I was a kid—an I took every opportunity to remind him of that. Then, little could I have known then that, not only would I be ordained a priest, but would also come to serve as his associate pastor when he was at St. Jude. And it did not stop there. One day in 2011, having served almost 2 years as pastor myself at St. Jude, I received a letter in the mail one day, with the return address of Most Blessed Sacrament Church. Right away, even before I opened it, I could tell that it was from Mike. How? His handwriting! Now, those of us who have known Mike—and especially those of us who have worked with him—know that his handwriting was unique, to put it nicely. To be direct, it was, simply, bad. There's no other way to put it. He could have definitely been a doctor! It was so bad, that, one day, after he had moved in with me, the conversation went like this:

"I didn't know you wrote in Gaelic."

He said to me, " 'tis English, you idiot."

I said, "the King's English?"

to which he responded, "no, thank ya very much, fah-ther, I'm from the Holy Land!"

Mike always attributed his returning to St. Jude in retirement to my mother. In his letter to me that day, he had asked if I would be open to him moving in and living with me and helping out. I told no one, except my mother. She asked me, "what does the letter say?" I told her, "I think he's asking if he could retire here." She said, "what do you mean, you think?" I said, "I can't read the damn thing!" Moments later, after asking me what I was going to do, I told her, "I think I'm going to take some time to think and pray about it." Without hesitation, she said, "what's there to think about?!" Shortly thereafter, he retired, moved in, and I came to see up close and personal why many called him "the white tornado"!

I and many of us could share story after story. And we would, no doubt, laugh. But most importantly, we must give thanks for his love of Jesus the Good Shepherd, the Eucharist, and the many ways in which he showed us who Christ was and what it meant to trust him. One of my seminary professors from my years in New Orleans, the late Fr. Warren Dicharry, wrote a prayer, entitled, "Prayer of a Priest," in which he asked, "Jesus, shepherd of my soul—live in the soul of your shepherd." Truly, THE shepherd lived in THIS shepherd. He loved and was humbled by the people he served, stating in a 2011 interview for the Catholic Commentator: ***"people are living in a complicated world. Their priest needs to be loving, forgiving, compassionate and patient. It humbles me to see the faith people have when they face the issues in their lives and actually minister to me."***

Our second reading today from St. Paul says, "I have run the race; I have fought the fight." As strong as Mike was, as energetic as he was all his life, and as much as he taught us how to fight and stay strong, during these days, there were moments when he was tired. He did not want to have the surgery. It took those who loved him the most to urge him to do so. But he was tired. I share this with all of you, because, in his illness, Mike showed us how to rise again in a new way. He showed all of us what it meant to find Jesus our Shepherd in those moments when we hurt the most. Mike was very fond of that image of Jesus (printed on the cover of your program today), especially the fact that there is no door handle on the outside of the door. "The handle is only on the inside of the door," he would say, "reminding us that it is up to us as to whether or not we will let Jesus in." In his illness, Mike showed us in a new way how to do this.

I would like to share with all of us a final quality that I and others experienced in Mike, one of which many of us may not even be aware. It has to do with us as priests. Mike and I have had many visitors in and out of the St. Jude Rectory these past years. It didn't matter who you were. He always made everyone feel welcome.

† My family

† His family

- † The leaders of our college sharing group and college students
- † The Brothers of the Sacred Heart, who would visit from time to time
- † Parishioners and staff

This was so much the case, that, whenever anyone arrived, the first thing they always asked was, “where’s Mike?” In fact, after our housekeeper, Liz, had come on board, it became apparent almost immediately that she thought HE was the pastor!

But he loved it when other priests would come to visit. And he was quite fond of reminding them of his new role, a fondness that always led to a little banter back and forth between the 2 of us. (He could give it out and he could take it.) I remember one night, when we were at the dining room table with Fr. Jamin David, Brother Ray Hebert, and a couple of other priests who had come to help with confessions for our Confirmation class. At one point in the evening, he welled up with a load of excitement, smiled a huge smile, and I knew it was coming. I looked at him and said, “don’t say it! Don’t you say it again!” And he did it anyway. He stood up and proudly announced to the room, “I am now the Pastor Emeritus!” I looked up at him and said, “well, the pastor emeritus is about to have his bedroom moved to the garage!”

But here’s a quality, as regards other priests. And he would want me to say this, because during this past year, we talked about the need for this often. Many, many people have been saying these past few days, “Mike was a good priest.” And he certainly was. But he was also a good priest— *to other priests*. Every time any priest came over or called, you could see and hear their admiration for him. They liked being with him. They made him laugh. And he was always willing to go to their parish and help out. And, so, I would like to say to my brother priests here today that which we already know: we need each other, possibly now more than ever, and we need to be the best priests we can be— *for each other*. We are already trying, very hard. But now, I suggest, we need this more than ever. Mike’s example, the love that he showed me and the courage that he instilled in me, leads me to share this with you of myself: I know that I haven’t always gotten this right. I have, at times, fallen short. For those moments, I say to you, I am sorry. The bond that we share means that much to me. I pledge to you my commitment to be as good of a brother to you as I can be. During recent years, our entire diocese has been focusing on what it means to be more **“our church...all of us...together...one family, one Body of Christ.”** You are, indeed, good priests. We are good priests to each other. Thank God for this.

On Saturday of the First Week of Lent, Mike moved back into the rectory at Saint Jude. (So much for the quiet!) He preached at all of the Masses—without breaking a sweat, I might add—because he wanted to thank the people of the parish for their love, support, and prayers. He challenged us all, as he spoke of the Springtime that will be Easter and the need, between now and then, to work on “getting rid of the weeds in our life.” He reminded us of the words of Ash Wednesday, “...to dust you shall return...” and told us that God must not have been ready for him to return to dust yet. Then, he ended his homily in what many of us felt was a very “non-Mike way.” (As one of our deacons, James Morrissey, later told me, “it was actually more like a press conference than a homily!”) He ended it by saying:

*“And, so, my good people...  
that’s all I have to say...  
here I am...  
there you have it...  
...any questions?”*

And immediately, without hesitation, at EVERY MASS, the entire assembly rose and gave him one of the loudest, happiest ovations any of us had ever heard.

We miss you, Mike.

We love you.

Thank you for helping us to know and follow the Good Shepherd.

Indeed, pray for us in God’s perfect presence,

as we will always pray for you.