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Remembering a parish priest in the midst of papal upheaval

Sr. Rose Pacatte | Mar. 1, 2013 NCR Today

On Feb. 20, associate pastor Fr. Richard Gleason, 71, celebrated the 5:50 p.m. Mass at St. Augustine Parish in Culver City, Calif. After, he walked across the parking lot to the newly refurbished rectory and upstairs to his room. Trish Gusman, the parish business manager (or the glue that holds things together) was supposed to have gone home already, but she told Fr. Chris Fagan, parish administrator, that she wanted to finish up some things first. Her phone rang; it was Father Richard, saying he couldn't breathe. The paramedics were called, and Father Chris followed the ambulance to the hospital. But after a half-hour of the doctors' efforts in the ER, Father Richard was pronounced dead of apparent heart failure.

Here's what you have to know about Father Richard: He loved being a priest. He grew up in Long Beach, Calif., went to Catholic schools, entered the seminary for the Los Angeles archdiocese and was ordained April 29, 1967. I first met Father Richard when I was assigned to our Pauline community here in Culver City in 2002, not long after he was assigned to St. Augustine's, our local parish, that happens to be located across the street from Sony Studios. And I soon discovered that this lovely, good man with a twinkle in his eye could not give a sermon to save his life.

At the vigil and rosary for Father Richard on Thursday, Father Chris told the packed church, "He did not preach such long sermons so he could bore us to tears, but because he had so much to share." The packed church exploded in laughter because after Father Richard's 11 years at the parish, we all knew how he was. Here and there, people would try to motivate him to limit his homilies to no more than 10 minutes. It might work for a week or two, then whatever stories he had read had to be shared. He was a voracious reader and loved history and theology in particular.

I will never forget one New Year's Day Mass in 2003, when Father Richard announced that Jan. 1 used to be the feast of the circumcision of Jesus, and that he was going to explain the history of that feast. My eyes glassed over and I thought, "Oh no! 2,000 years? We'll never get home today." But then he said he was only going back to 1950. Imagine my relief.

Father Chris then asked people what they remembered most about Father Richard. They called out: "Notre Dame football," "visiting the sick," "history" and "theology." Father Chris added the television show "Dr. Who"; Father Richard loved it, and kept the volume turned up so high, Father Chris could hear it in his room. Father Chris noted that Father Richard loved people, especially the ones who shamelessly fed him goodies.

At the Mass of Christian burial Friday, Msgr. Norman Priebe, Father Richard's friend from their seminary days, gave the homily. He spoke warmly of his friend, of the many vacations they took together that often turned into adventures, like the time they almost had to walk 30 miles back to London because Father Richard got lost and they missed the tour bus back to the hotel. Monsignor Norm said Father Richard was content to be a parish priest all his life because the main worries of a pastor are the "five L's: lights, leaks, locks, lawns and lawsuits," and he didn't think he could do those well. He preferred to be available to serve the people. As a young priest, Father Richard had been assigned to teach in a girl's high school. It didn't take long for him to realize that parish ministry was his true calling. Monsignor Norm also mentioned that given Father Richard's personality, he had

no need to kiss the Blarney Stone, but that he did so on a visit to Ireland one year, and we all suffered from that every since.

Father Richard heard confessions, visited the sick and the worried, was involved with the school, and he came to the "Cinema Divina" nights at our Pauline Center almost every month since we started them about eight years ago. He loved movies. We liked it when he came because while he might be able to answer a delicate theological question, it was his ability to dialogue about what the Scripture and movie meant with everyone else, without dominating the conversation, that was so refreshing. His presence told people that faith and culture do go together, that everyone's opinion matters, and we do encounter the divine in stories. His homilies may have been long, but when Father Richard was part of a group -- well, he was just one of the bunch.

There is so much big news out there. Our Holy Father Emeritus, Benedict XVI, announced his resignation Feb.11. Since then, everyone has been talking about it in the news nonstop. The clergy abuse scandal continues to dominate. Yet despite the bad news, the archdiocese of Los Angeles Religious Education Congress last weekend hosted more than 30,000 catechists from every state and several countries when we gathered to celebrate our faith. We just keep on going.

On Thursday, as the eyes of the world watched Benedict take a helicopter to Castel Gandolfo to begin his retirement, Los Angeles Archbishop Jose Gomez, several auxiliary bishops, numerous clergy and a huge church packed with Father Richard's sister, nieces, cousins, parishioners, students, catechists and his dear friends from near and far at St. Augustine Church in Culver City to celebrate his life of faith as a brother and priest, and to say goodbye. We are sad, yes, but our faith has been engaged and strengthened because of the life and ministry of this parish priest in a small pocket of a town surrounded by the city of Los Angeles. The world will not know about Father Richard, but we know, we will remember, and we are so blessed by this life of a happy priest.

Video footage of the entrance procession for Father Richard's burial Mass:

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