News
Appreciation

by James C. Webster

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Thousands of northern Virginia Catholics knew Fr. Gerard (Gerry) Creedon for his Irish baritone and the twinkle in his eye, but many more knew him for his untiring advocacy of Catholic social teaching.

Creedon, born in County Cork 73 years ago and ordained for the Richmond Diocese in 1968 (the Arlington Diocese was created six years later), lived Pope Francis' vision of a church at the margins decades before anyone had heard of Jose Mario Bergoglio.

His death Nov. 16 of complications from heart surgery shocked admirers who now wonder who can fill the void he leaves. He was the most outspoken and persuasive voice for a wide social justice agenda in a diocese where many priests seem to focus narrowly on gender issues, not economic inequality.

"He preached as a prophet does, sometimes offending those who did not see the radical Gospel of justice and mercy," said a pastoral associate who worked with him. "Some in the parish called him 'too political.' "

Some critics were troubled by his support of Virginians Organized for Interfaith Community Engagement, also known as VOICE, an affiliate of the Industrial Areas Foundation that often takes a confrontational approach to issues such as affordable housing, discrimination against immigrants and Muslims, or criminal justice reform.

But he mollified others with his welcoming manner. "As a pastor he wanted everyone included," the pastoral associate said, adding that because of Creedon, many people "found their way back to the church, went to confession, felt forgiven and accepted and became active parish participants."

He was a pastor first but also a champion of the homeless, the immigrant, the hungry, the incarcerated and others in need in a region where many enjoy wealth and comfort. His sparks lit fires that will continue burning in organizations he created or inspired to implement Catholic social teaching.

Just two months ago, Creedon chaired the annual conference of the diocesan Peace and Justice Commission, which he founded in 2002, calling for a welcome to immigrants as the Gospels command. Through the years, he used it to speak out against nuclear war, the death penalty or drone warfare, or to seek action on climate change.

Catholics for Housing, a nonprofit he founded, reached agreement in October to buy a mobile home park for $1.4 million and save 59 low-income families from eviction.

He sparked the 1982 creation of Gabriel Homes, which operates seven residences for 23 people with developmental and intellectual disabilities.

He stimulated the founding of Social Action Linking Together, or SALT, an ecumenical group of laypeople focused on state legislative action for the poor, homeless and incarcerated.

"He understood advocacy," said SALT coordinator John Horejsi. "He seemed to know it was not enough to be aware of poverty but the only way to fully understand it was through action. I would characterize him as a social justice warrior. He helped me to link faith and action."

Creedon also chaired the official diocesan Catholic Charities, Catholic Relief Services and Catholic Campaign for Human Development campaigns. He was diocesan representative on the board of the Virginia Interfaith Center for Public Policy, also known as VICPP, and an adviser to the Virginia Catholic Conference.

"We used to call him the 'idea a minute' man," said a former colleague who worked with him at Catholic Charities. "He was always positive." One of his attributes was finding leaders who could turn his ideas into action.

He was able to persuade many to carry out his social justice vision "because he didn't insist, but instead listened carefully," said a former parishioner.

"I have been moved by his commitment to the poor, his love and concern for the needy, and his joy and zeal for priestly ministry," Bishop Michael Burbidge said at the funeral Mass.

Creedon's absence will be felt in many parts of the affluent diocese but especially in Prince William County, where he was pastor of Holy Family Church in Dale City at the time of his death. He was closely attuned to the county's Hispanic population, speaking fluent Spanish honed at a mission he founded in Bánica, Dominican Republic, where he served in the early 1990s.

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Many of his admirers remark about his musical talent — he played the fiddle and the mandolin and sang in Gaelic — and his sense of humor and his poetry. "His artistic side nourished his soul," said a friend.

Earlier this year, when he was honored by the Ignatian Volunteer Corps, he remarked that he sometimes had been mistaken for a Jesuit, adding, "I've been called worse." (He was educated by Vincentian priests at All Hallows Seminary in Dublin.)

In a parish booklet in 1988, he ended a poem this way:

> "Can I trip over the homeless woman,
>
> Can gentrification displace the immigrant
>
> without a whimper or a whisper?
>
> Fill your church with your mighty wind
>
> that we may not go silent."

[James C. Webster, a charter subscriber to NCR, is a freelance writer in Arlington, Va.]