News



Fr. James Kelly laughs during an interview at his apartment in the Normandy Farms Estates retirement community in Blue Bell, Pa., on June 18. (AP/Luis Andres Henao)

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Throughout his remarkable lifetime, Fr. James Kelly has baptized thousands of people, married thousands more, ministered to the sick in hospitals, and traveled the world extensively. He became friends with an opera superstar and, yes, even with a saint.

The longest-serving priest in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia recently celebrated the 75th anniversary of his ordination and his 100th birthday. He's grateful to have reached these milestones, but nearly didn't after experiencing a health challenge last year that required life-saving surgery.

He feels God gave him some extra time and tries to make each day count.

"The Lord was wonderful to me to give me the health and the strength and the energy to travel, to meet beautiful things — God was always giving me surprises," Kelly says.

Born on Jan. 7, 1925, in the Philadelphia neighborhood of Roxborough to a devoutly Catholic family, Kelly's path to the priesthood seems ordained from the start. He loved attending church. Other children dreamt of becoming athletes, doctors, firefighters. He wanted to be a priest.

"When I was 4 or 5 years old, I'd play Mass," he says. His parents were his first congregants. "I always had a little altar in my room, and I'd have a glass, and some flowers in there, and I'd make a vestment, put a scarf on, and have some candy, and give Communion to everybody."



Fr. James Kelly celebrates Mass at his apartment in the Normandy Farms Estates retirement community in Blue Bell, Pa., on June 19. Kelly recently celebrated the 75th anniversary of his ordination and his 100th birthday. (AP/Luis Andres Henao)

Kelly wakes up at dawn to celebrate Mass at the retirement living community that he now calls home. He listens to opera. He bakes pies.

Memories, parachute jumps and climbing a bridge to save a life

Sitting in his room, Kelly flips through a photo album detailing his journey. He smiles with every page turn, pointing to black-and-white photos of him as a toddler and milestones as a Catholic — his baptism, confirmation and ordination as a priest.

"I turned down Hollywood!" he says, laughing as he points to the portrait of a dapper, young priest, his hair slicked and flashing a wide smile.

He also points to the photo published by a Philadelphia newspaper of the time when he climbed in his Roman collar to the top of a bridge and dissuaded a man from jumping to his death.

"Nobody would climb there, so I climbed up — it was 400 feet high. It was a bitter cold day," he says. "I was able to talk to him and break him down emotionally, so he wouldn't jump. I told him, 'What's your grandchild going to say one day: Papa, why didn't you take me fishing?' "

He points to other photos of the many ceremonies he proudly led during his 19 years as pastor of St. Pius X Parish in Broomall, Pennsylvania, about 10 miles (16 kilometers) west of Philadelphia.

There are images of him during a vacation in Mexico when he made a parachute jump. Or that one time, when he visited the majestic Iguazu Falls on the border between Argentina and Brazil, which he recalls as one of the most beautiful sights of his life.

"Everywhere you turned, there was a rainbow, there was a mist … the water gushing forth and spray and the colors," he says. "It was, as the kids would say, awesome."

Imagination, friends and being grateful for the simple pleasures

Imagination, he says, is one of his favorite words, recalling that he wrote his college thesis on it. "Jesus used his imagination to teach," he says. That became an example when he prepared his own sermons.



Fr. James Kelly points to a portrait of himself as a young priest in his photo album during an interview at the Normandy Farms Estates retirement community in Blue Bell, Pa., on June 18. At 75 years, he is the longest serving priest in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia. (AP/Luis Andres Henao)

He treasures other memories, such as traveling to more than 100 countries and meeting St. Teresa of Kolkata, also known as Mother Teresa. Kelly says the two became friends over the years after meeting in Philadelphia and running into each other at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem. The centenarian also shared the time when he took a group of blind children to a live performance of his friend, acclaimed soprano Joan Sutherland.

"I've been fortunate to meet some of the most magnificent, good people in this world, and they've been most generous and gracious to me," Kelly says.

These days, he enjoys simple pleasures: the taste of cherries, a beautiful song, or his favorite meal — roast chicken with mashed potatoes, fresh string beans, and corn on the cob.

He loves learning and often attends lectures on music, art history and Egyptology at the Normandy Farms Estates retirement community where he resides in Blue Bell, Pennsylvania.

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His apartment is decorated with a painting of the Virgin Mary that he drew with chalk, a portrait of his mother, and a note signed by the late Pope Francis.

On his bedside table, he keeps an image of Carlo Acutis, the Catholic Church's first millennial-era saint. Acutis is to be canonized as a saint Sept. 7. Kelly is inspired by Acutis, who died at 15 in 2006. He's especially impressed with Acutis' devotion and how he used his computer skills to create an online exhibit about scores of eucharistic miracles recognized by the church over centuries.

A humble daily Mass and the secret to a long life

Every morning, Kelly wakes without an alarm clock and says the same prayer: "Lord, what surprise do you have for me today?"

"I hope it'll be a nice one that I'll love and enjoy. I never know, but I want to thank you for whatever happens today."



Fr. James Kelly sits in his apartment in the Normandy Farms Estates retirement community in Blue Bell, Pa., on June 18. Every morning, after a cup of coffee, he celebrates Mass in his apartment for a few residents of his community. (AP/Luis Andres Henao)

After a cup of coffee, he celebrates Mass in his apartment for a few residents of his community.

"When I moved here, I never thought I was going to have a private chapel!" Kathleen Quigley, a retired nurse, said after a recent service. "I just love my faith, and he's such a stronghold of faith that it's wonderful for me to have. I just come right downstairs, have Mass, we talk, he shares his food."

Kelly once ministered to large congregations, but he feels the daily Mass in his living room is as important.

"It's not in a beautiful chapel or church. But it's here that I can offer my love and efforts to the Heavenly Father," he says. After the final prayer, he always

remembers to be grateful.

"That's all I can say — two words: thank you. It's wonderful that I have another day, and I might be able to eat some delicious cherries today, and meet people, new friends," he says. "God knows what surprises I'll encounter today."

His secret to longevity?

"I drink lots of milk," he says, laughing. "And I say lots of prayers."