Leitrim Priest Honoured

Friend of America Award speech by John E McInerney. President. District of Columbia State Board. Ancient Order of Hibernians

YEARS AGO we sung an old Latin hymn in our churches when the bishop arrived. It began with the words, "Behold a great priest who in his day pleased God". Those words apply today to the many military chaplains serving the men and women of many faiths in the armed forces. These Catholic chaplains are priests quietly serving the needs of others and rarely seek the spotlight. Our honoured guest today is such a priest. He comes to us from Ireland by way of New Zealand.

Let us take a look at the priesthood in the long view of history. At the Last Supper, Our Lord ordained the first priests and bishops of the Church. They were all too human with many faults, doubts and imperfections. Of the original 12 Apostles, one betrayed Jesus for money and in despair he took his own life rather than ask for forgiveness. That same evening another denied ever knowing Christ—not once—but three times. However, this man repented and went on to become the leader of the Church and the first Bishop of Rome. Still another Apostle doubted the Resurrection until he would see our Lord in the flesh again.

Of the eleven remaining Apostles, all served time in prison for their faith and their works. Today, we would call them prisoners of conscience. All but one died as martyrs for the Faith. Such has been the history of the priesthood down through the centuries to today. It has not been a history of otherworldly men, but rather a history of human beings trying to become saints by the way they live out the message of the Gospels of Christ. Today, the media spotlights a few priests that go astray, leaving in the shadows the thousands of priests who serve and never betray their mission and calling. Why not pay attention to the countless faithful priests who are on call serving others 24 hours a day, seven days a week? You need not look far to find many such priests.

Such a man is with us today. We are honouring a priest with the 2005 "Friend of Ireland Award" because he is true to the fullness of his calling by fulfilling one of the Beatitudes "Blessed are the merciful for they shall receive mercy." (Matthew 5:7) His name is Father Patrick Anthony Kenny, Chaplain at the Waiter Reed Army Medical Centre.

Archbishop Edwin O'Brien of the Military Archdiocese said it well in his letter when he wrote: To walk the halls of Waiter Reed with Father Kenny, and to enter those hospital rooms as I have often done, is to engage a sea of smiles as one after another, as so many return his cheerful greetings and ask for his priestly blessing. His life is one of total availability to patients and their families and, most poignantly, to young patients and families suffering the physical and emotional wounds of combat. He continues to be a living homily on God's love for His people."

Father Kenny is one of seven children born in Manorhamilton, County Leitrim. He attended Multyfarnam College in Westmeath. After completing his seminary studies at All Hallows College in Dublin, Patrick Kenny was ordained a priest in 1961 for the Diocese of Auckland, New Zealand. In New Zealand he served as a pastor and a university chaplain. Social outreach was always his primary ministry. He continued his academic studies and received a Masters in Social Sciences from the University of Waikato in New Zealand.

Father Kenny came to the United States for postgraduate studies at the Catholic University of America here in Washington DC. During this time he began serving as a part time chaplain at Waiter Reed Army Medical Centre.

Fifteen years ago his ministry as a chaplain at Waiter Reed developed into a full time assignment. Today, he serves as a civilian chaplain with the Archdiocese for the Military Services. Considering the needs of many patients wounded and injured in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, Father Kenny is on call 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

He describes his typical day as 'a challenge' as he serves the multiple spiritual, emotional and practical needs of young soldiers on the scene. His ministry is dealing with people. He is best described as a 'hands-on' priest as he provides aid to veterans and soldiers and their families who come from many parts of the United States and around the world.

We honour Father Patrick Anthony Kenny with the Hibernian Friend of Ireland Award for his over- four decades—44 years in fact of dedicated service to God and his adopted country, and, more especially, for the support he provides to our men and women in uniform and our veterans.

Father Kenny is a proud son of Erin. Ireland's greatest export has been its people. Historically Ireland has exported a multitude of priests and religious to the United States as well as to the mission fields around the globe. Down through the centuries and the decades, we have encountered these good priests in parishes, hospitals, battlefields, and academic institutions throughout this nation—daily living out the message of the Gospel by helping others.

To these priests and chaplains, the words of Saint James' Epistle ring true when we read that faith and good works go hand in hand. (James 2) The solid Faith and the multitude of good works and deeds of our military chaplains are legendary. And their eternal reward for their countless good deeds will be great.

As a priest chaplain, Father Kenny has shown the love and the mercy of God to our troops and their families.

He is there to listen and to understand.
He is there to spread light and laughter.
He is there to comfort those in pain.
He is there during the dark hours of despair to point the way to the future with hope.
He is there to forgive and to show God's endless love and mercy.
He is there in their final hours and days in preparing for eternal life.
He is there to help and strengthen a soldier's family and loved ones as they cope and learn to adjust to the future.
He is there to help a soldier's family to accept injuries and to overcome at times impossible odds and see life in future days and years.
He is there to encourage the wounded and injured to live with handicaps resulting from battle and live a full life and to earn a living to support their families.

Father Kenny is there day by day living his life, as Archbishop O'Brien wrote, as a "Living Homily on God's Love for His people".

Sometimes in tragic human situations there are no words to be said, but the presence and comfort of a priest chaplin is all that is needed for he represents the strength and promise of Christ Himself.

Father Kenny is a true friend and son of Ireland as well as a member of the Ancient Order of Hibernians. He reflects the best of what many Irish priests brought to the United States as pastors and chaplains in the tradition of Father William Corby and Father Francis Duffy of the heroic Irish Brigade. It is for these many reasons that the District of Columbia State Board of the Ancient Order of Hibernians voted unanimously to award the George Washington Park Custis 'Friend of Ireland Award' to Father Patrick Kenny.

My friends and fellow Hibernians: "Behold a great priest who in his day pleased God" - Father Patrick Kenny.