

Ite, Missa Est

*Sermon delivered by the Rev. Theodore M. Hesburgh, C.S.C.,
President, University of Notre Dame, at the Funeral Mass, Sacred
Heart Church, September 17, 1973.*

It was 52 years ago this month that Howard Kenna first walked onto this campus and into this church. He made his first profession in Holy Cross half a century ago, and was a priest for 43 years. That, in anyone's calculus, is a long history in Holy Cross. But it is not so much the length of years, as the quality of service that best characterizes his life in Holy Cross. I will only speak of him as I knew and loved him. If I seem too personal, I know that in the family you will forgive me. Some of you knew him longer, some better, and you, too, have spoken and will continue to speak of him until his memory fades among us and new heroes create new legends in Holy Cross. Until then, the Kenna legend will loom high above us all, to inspire and to guide.

When I told our Congressman, John Brademas, of his death last Friday in Washington, he characterized him as well as any of us might: "When you looked at him," John said, "you thought of the Rock of Gibraltar." As seminarians in Moreau, we disrespectfully referred to him, our Superior then, as "The Great Stone Face." In all the years that followed, we all came to know him, despite his occasional biting rhetoric, as one of the warmest hearts in the Community.

Some of us remember this particularly when we recall returning here to teach at the end of World War II. He was then the Director of Studies, seemingly ancient to the rest of us younger priest faculty members. We used to congregate of an evening in his book-cluttered room in the Main Building. He always sympathized with our idealistic concerns for remaking the University, although we could expect caustic corrections, bluntly given, whenever our ideas were flabby, our facts wrong, or our logic faulty. We never minded that, because at least he was listening when few others would, and he did take us seriously, despite our youth. He backed every good idea we had,

encouraged us when we were discouraged, welcomed every new movement that had promise, even seemed to enjoy our company and share our dreams.

We all called him Doc and, indeed, he was our Doctor in the best sense of that word, our Teacher, in so many almost imperceptible ways. He never ceased to be otherwise as we grew older, and he older yet. The marvel of it is that the process continued with each new generation of Holy Cross men — he was never too old, and they never too young.

Every Holy Cross man makes some special impact upon his brethren. What Doc exemplified for so many of us was a person totally given to the good of the Community, with little thought to his own desires or preferences. He lived and often, I fear, suffered through a long series of trying obediences with little reference to his own vision of his life. Educated at Notre Dame and Johns Hopkins Universities to teach mathematics, he taught very little. Six years he was superior at Moreau, six years the highest academic administrator at Notre Dame, three years superior of the theologate at Holy Cross College in Washington, assistant superior general for part of that time. Then followed seven years as president of the University of Portland. By then, he knew everyone and everyone applauded his last appointment as provincial of the Indiana Province almost twelve years ago.

It was perhaps the worst time in recent centuries to become provincial, if there ever was a good time. The Church and all religious communities were entering into a period of cataclysmic change, the pent-up stagnancies of four and a half centuries bursting upon a staid and stolid scene. It is only fair to say that Doc was not happy with all that was happening in the last decade, but as the intelligent and sensitive person that he was, he tried to understand it all. He held the line when his conscience told him to, and yet he was ever ready to give when that seemed proper, like a willow in the wind, firmly rooted, but supple.

In a word, he held the Community together and moved it forward with a minimum of tension, rancor, or division through a very difficult period in all our lives. He did this with the grace and mellowness that few grandfathers achieve when dealing with the young and not so young. It was just that his personal integrity — the Gibraltar quality — was so evident that many of the most rebellious were pacified, the most fractious tamed, by the very sight of him. And the uncertain, the uncommitted, the troubled ones draw strength from his calm commitment, his unswerving answer to the call of duty, the un-

selfishness of his service to all, young and old. Every time that even all of this failed, and someone left, part of his life went out of him.

I used to get away with him during these troubled years and learned from long days and nights of endless conversation that everyone's trouble was indeed his. He lived out each crisis of faith, each moral dilemma. No one left Holy Cross but that his heart and soul were not wrenched and wretched, as if, somehow, he might have failed to inspire enough, to solve the problem, to bring the proper help to a brother in need. Whatever concern he carried this week across the gulf from time to eternity, I am sure that no brother of ours will ever lack a potent intercessor at the Throne of God. In this, we must recognize that same concern of Our Lord for all those the Father had given Him, the suffering of St. Paul with all who suffered.

Each one of us has his own affectionate memories of Doc Kenna for he gave of himself to each one of us, in a measure far beyond that which any of us could give in return. So many bittersweet memories crowd in. The day he died, I picked up my English breviary and remembered that it was a gift from him after I griped to him one day about the Latin version. I will never forget how well he recited those psalms in his sonorous voice as we drove along in the car. The day after he died, I was offering Mass for him in an unlikely spot when I remembered that he had given me the collapsible chalice in my Mass kit that I was using. How many times we had happily offered Mass together, in many unlikely places, with this same chalice.

How he loved Latin America, but could never be free to serve there. How he hated paying bills for hotels and meals we shared, and yet would enjoy contributing three quarters of a million dollars to the University on behalf of the Community. How good he was with little children, and old ladies, and shy students in whom he perhaps saw his own inherent shyness. How he was always ready to go and do what others wanted to do, just to be with the brethren and to love them in his powerfully quiet and understanding way.

How he used to growl at his best friends at times, because he was such a highly disciplined person that, as he grew older, he did not dare allow himself to growl at those who really deserved it. He did expect his friends to understand him and make allowances when he just had to let off that pent-up emotion.

One who did not know him might have thought him a bear at times, but to know him was to experience uncommon human warmth.

My favorite remembrance of Doc is from our last vacation together, to see him early one morning sitting on the floor of a mountain lodge in Colorado, while all the rest of the family was sleeping,

playing Scrabble with my two youngest nieces, teamed up with the smaller one who couldn't even spell, but making her believe that they were winning the game together. In a very real sense, he was like that with all of us in the Community, much better than most of us, but giving us the impression that we were winning the game together, although he was carrying the largest burden by far, the care of all the brethren.

I must add a word for that vast host of friends beyond the Community, faculty, former students, friends, that he also carried daily in his heart and prayers. Long before Vatican II, he was mindful of the true role of the laity of the Church. More than of any other person, it must be said that the vital new role of the laity in the governance of our universities was his dream and of his doing.

In learning of his death, many of us had the instinctive reaction that the good Lord's timing was off for Doc. He had just finished a long and onerous series of Community tasks. Everyone rejoiced in the fact that now he could relax a little, do what he wanted to do for a change, take a trip with his loved ones. There is only one answer to this instinctive reaction, and it is, as Doc would have insisted, the answer of faith, the will of God, which was the leitmotiv of all his life. There is a quality of "Ite, Missa est" about his death. He will now be doing what all of us presumably want to do most as Christians: love God and enjoy being with Him. He has taken the greatest trip of all, to the most exciting place of all, where eye has not seen, ear has not heard, and it has not entered into the mind of man to imagine what God has prepared for those who love Him. Doc was always packed and ready to go, especially for this last and best trip of all from time to eternity, through the dark mirror of faith into the light of God's vision, from pilgrimage and exile to the eternal homeland. Thank God, he had a peaceful passage. We will all miss him, but must we not rejoice with him today at his happy homecoming?

Apart from this Mass, filled with the hope of resurrection and eternal life, how do we all say good-bye to a brother who was also a father and a dearest friend? We confidently commend him to the tender mercies of the good Lord he loved and served so well, so long. We try to rise to the measure of his great example to all of us, to serve the brethren as he did, all the brethren, unselfishly and lovingly. And doing so, may we all give thanks this day, to his family who gave him to us, to the good Lord who inspired and nurtured in him such fine religious and human qualities, and to Holy Cross which brought us all together in this company. May Howard Kenna, and all our departed brethren, rest in peace eternal.

Rev. Howard J. Kenna, C.S.C.

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