

---

Lifestyle\*

## **A beloved 'boisterous man in black'**

**By Bill McNamara**

Posted Nov 24, 1997 at 12:01 AM

Updated Jan 11, 2011 at 1:23 AM

Standard-Times correspondent

There's a movie out there waiting to be made. A contemporary Bing Crosby will play the lead role. His character -- a sterling, real-life character who seems to have touched the inner spirit of everyone he met -- will be the "Holy Family priest" who died last year at age 71.

A New Yorker, Father Justin J. Quinn called New Bedford home even though he moved around like a chess piece; he was, after all, a diocesan priest. And the ties that bound in New Bedford, though many and far-flung, were principally associated with Holy Family-Holy Name School. He was a curate at the Church of St. Lawrence, Martyr, and athletic director/inspirational cheerleader at the former Holy Family High School.

One lesson kids learned from Father Quinn was their monumental importance in the eyes of God. And who mattered more?

The Holy Family-Holy Name community is getting ready -- and excited -- for the Second Annual Father Justin J. Quinn Memorial Dance and Basketball Games this weekend. At last year's games (there was no dance; that's new this year, and next year something else will be added, like a communion breakfast) John Finni, class of 1964, gave the eulogy. Here's a tidbit

"Like any true New Yorker, Father Quinn was convinced that he was a special person, and he was moderator of a group of students and alumni who were equally convinced of their own importance. He could look us in the eye and assure us, as a group and as individuals, that the world would be a less valuable

place if we were not part of it, and we cheerfully reinforced his similar feelings about himself. The funny thing is we were both right and we knew it. We still do.”

Bristol County District Attorney Paul F. Walsh Jr., alumnus of Holy Family and the championship basketball teams that brought added fame to the school, says, “Father Quinn was a major influence in my life. Long after my school days, we would get together, and when I moved away for awhile, we corresponded regularly. Even when his health was failing and he was confined to Catholic Memorial Home in Fall River, my brother Bill and I would pick him up and take him to Cathay Temple for his favorite wonton soup.”

The pair met when Mr. Walsh was a third-grader at Holy Family and an altar boy at St. Lawrence, the church that subsidized the school. “At school, he would parade the corridors and snap his fingers to get your attention, as if he had to,” recalls Mr. Walsh. “You’d look up to his beamy face and he would snap (this time with his voice), ‘What’s the third commandment?’ He was a constant quiz. You’d fear failure, but either way, right or wrong, you’d leave his side loving him.

“This was the early ’60s, remember, and for us young people, what made him different, I think, was that he was so outgoing, even with us. Not many priests were so approachable, so the kids adored him,” according to Mr. Walsh. ” He was fun-loving and he brought us closer to church and God.”

The former Maryknoller who came to the Fall River-New Bedford diocese as an ordination candidate was not only a guy-priest. The girls loved him, too, once they shook off the intimidation factor. (Yes, somehow he was at once approachable and intimidating. And when the girls grew up, fell in love, and got those nuptial feelings, invariably, they would ask Father Quinn to “marry us.”) Even today, when these girls, now mothers, speak of him, their eyes light up.

“I was so young, and in came this loud, boisterous man in black.” Holy Family-Holy Name teacher Colleen Brightman was recalling her grammar school years in class. “He was one of a kind. I couldn’t begin to sum him up. But isn’t it amazing that he left New Bedford around 1971 and here we are, 25 years later, getting together by the hundreds to pay our respects?”

Yes, about 800 last year. This year, or next, it may be “by the thousands.”

School secretary Nora Marinelli, a Brightman contemporary, remembers the “big presence, tall and loud, entering the classroom with a bang and asking us who we thought he was, then answering himself ‘I am the kind, thoughtful, lovable Father Justin J. Quinn whose heart is overflowing with love for you.’”

Funny thing Another contemporary, Catherine Norton, recalls his entrance speeches in the same way with virtually identical words “It would be his basketball speech, and he would warm us up with his ‘heart overflowing with love for you little darlins.’” Then on to basketball, a boys’ game then, but boys who needed and deserved the spirited, undying support of the whole parish, even kids who, till then, thought they had no interest in sports. This priest won a lot of converts. And his boys won a lot of games and championships -- an astounding number when you consider the school that measured enrollment in the 200s had no gym.

Even after he left New Bedford to become a pastor in Edgartown, Fr. Quinn responded to summonses from the Whaling City to do weddings, baptisms and funerals. “We didn’t want to let him go,” says Cathy Norton. “He interrupted his vacation to come back for my father’s funeral.”

True to his Irish heritage, of which he was extravagantly proud, the displaced Yankee fan “was a great talker, on any subject,” says Kathleen Upton, who knew him from the year of his arrival, 1957. “He definitely was not limited to sports and the sacraments. With his booming voice, he relished good talk, going from one subject to another. He was very smart.”

Recalling that the popular priest taught catechism in the school, Mrs. Upton says one of the first lessons was the important feastdays. “You know, like Easter, St. Patrick’s Day and June 1.”

June 1? Whose feast is that?

“St. Justin’s.”

There are a lot of Justins around St. Lawrence parish since those catechism days, Mrs. Upton reports. One of her own daughters took Justine as her confirmation name.

For all his bombast, Father Quinn was a very spiritual man, his many friends and admirers assure us. And he recognized that his own spiritual growth issued in large measure from “a closeness to the parishioners,” in his words, “a feeling of partnership with them.”

Today the is populated with Quinn fans who are prominent in public service, in education, other professions and the arts. Some of them, like Jack Nobrega, were among his “legendary coaches” while others with names like Lawless, Manning, Gomes and Walsh were among his star players on the court and on the field.

Many of them will be present at the Memorial Dance on Friday at the Fishermen’s Club and to play or watch and cheer the alumni basketball games on Sunday afternoon at the Kennedy Center/CYO, at bargain prices. Proceeds will benefit the Holy Family-Holy Name Technology Fund.

Arrive early if you want to catch all of Matty B’s music Friday evening and, at the Sunday games, the dazzling moves of such seasoned stars as Msgr. Thomas Harrington, pastor of Holy Name Church.

At both events, Nostalgia will be the guest of honor.

Nostalgia for Father Quinn and his credo “Love of God and love of neighbor. It may sound hackneyed but if you have love, a lot flows from that. Honesty and sincerity come. Truthfulness. If you’ve got those, people can trust you.”

And nostalgia for John Finni’s tribute “Our lives were unquestionably altered by the presence of Father Quinn, and he was, to his dying breath, as much a son of Holy Family as any of her graduates. If it were not for him, we might never have discovered that sense of community, of loyalty, and of near invincibility that still pervades our lives.”

Dance, basketball games this weekend

A memorial dance and basketball games in honor of Father Justin J. Quinn, sponsored by Holy Family-Holy Name School, takes place this weekend. The dance will be at 8 p.m.-midnight Friday at the Fishermen’s Club, Orchard St., New Bedford. Donation, \$5. Call (508) 993-3547 for information or tickets.

The basketball games begin at 4:30 p.m. Sunday at the Kennedy Center/CYO, County Street, New Bedford. Doors open at 4 p.m. Donation, \$3, \$2 students.

Those interested in playing or cheerleading, call Marty Treadup at (508) 994-1456, Mark Kaeterle at (508) 997-4225, or Tom Kruger at (508) 992-1750.

Combined events to benefit HF-HN Technology Fund. Donors who wish to contribute to fund may mail donations to HF-HN Technology Fund, 91 Summer St., New Bedford, MA 02740.

Staff photos by Jack Iddon

The Rev. Justin J. Quinn was athletic director for the former Holy Family High School, where he coached the basketball game to championships and inspired great love among young people for his folksy, down-to-earth style. Father Quinn died in 1996.