

NEWS

New pastor helping Tenafly parish recover from predecessor's stunning death

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TENAFLY — By calling, Father Dan O'Neill delves into the mysteries of faith. But he knows he can't avoid the obvious, too.

"I'm very bald," he shrugs. "So I have to wear a hat all the time."

Over the years he's amassed a collection of some 40 caps from schools and sports teams. "One thing I don't need is more hats," he quips.

But those caps have now become useful in projecting a folksy, genuine manner that is guiding Our Lady of Mount Carmel's congregation past its darkest period.

The previous and much-beloved pastor, Leonard Gilman, was found dead in the rectory on June 1, 2015. The County Medical Examiner ruled the death a suicide. Church members could not fathom that their energetic, faithful and joyous pastor of nearly 12 years would have taken his own life. Grief counseling and discussion groups were held for church members.

Related: Father Leonard Gilman, pastor of Our Lady of Mount Carmel in Tenafly, dies at 68

"We loved Father Leonard and we couldn't believe what happened," said Alida Kratnoff, a longtime member, adding that Gilman's final hours will always be a mystery. Plucked from retirement, the 73-year-old O'Neill arrived at the church several weeks later. "It was a big shock to them and they needed someone," said O'Neill who also has served as pastor at

Church of St. Anastasia in Teaneck, Saint Joseph's in Demarest, Saint Mary's Church in Closter and at an inner city church on the South Side of Chicago.

"We prayed for our deceased pastor regularly," he added. "I frequently expressed gratitude to him for the good job that he did."

O'Neill, who greets worshipers on the front steps before and after mass topped in one of his trademark caps, quickly gained a following. And a new calm descended on the parish.

"His maturity and empathy for others showed right away," said long-time parishioner George McKenna. "It was very reassuring for us to have him around."

"It's a model of holiness that's very approachable," said Elliot Guerra, director of mission development for the parish. "He's this working-class guy who teachers can talk to over a beer" — and who'll don 3D glasses to entertain the students.

O'Neill likes to surprise churchgoers: He has admitted during sermons that he occasionally gets bored in church. He punches the air like a rock concert spectator to finish off a sermon. The longtime Yankees fan also throws around sports references: At the recent funeral for someone in their 80s, he said, "He had a good swing at the pitch," meaning that the deceased had been blessed with a full life.

McKenna describes the homilies as lively, colorful and even hilarious. Yet, the moral is always clear.

"I try to be entertaining," O'Neill said, adding he became a more-animated speaker after serving at an African American church in Chicago. "It's a way to keep people tuned in as long as possible." He always gets to the scripture, but never begins with it. Instead, he starts out with a story, joke or the latest headlines. "Then I pose the question that we really need to be chewing on."

One such question is that of faith, and he often quotes his favorite scripture, Philippians (4:7). "...and the peace, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds..." "So much of our faith is a mystery that surpasses our understanding," he explains. "We don't understand how it can be, but we surrender to it. ...It's a huge issue these days, because more and more people say it's a lot of hogwash."

A common theme is the need for people to connect with one another — “That’s a core message of Christianity,” he said. “I want them to be connected with each other as we all follow in the footsteps of Jesus.” He hopes his congregants connect with him, too, comfortable in turning to him with their struggles.

O’Neill’s energetic style has included launching a film series — including a film about sexual scandal among priests — as well as a book club, which most recently discussed “The Light Between Oceans,” now playing in theaters. “We have to try to stay connected to the larger world,” he said.

He has also made an effort to plug into other cultures, such as the Filipino community’s Christmas tradition of Simbang Gabi, which calls for a sunrise mass followed by a lavish breakfast.

Next, O’Neill said he hopes to involve the parish and its many medical professionals in a medical mission to a needy country — “This is a blessed community with many resources and great people power,” he said, “so we should share our blessings with those who are not as well off.”

And among his personal missions is to learn the names of all 1,200-plus parishioners. The good thing, he quipped, is that “They all know who I am.”

Outsiders seem to know who he is, too, and the pastor has already drawn raves reviews from other faiths: The Reverend Eileen Linder of the Presbyterian Church at Tenafly praised him for his activism in the Tenafly Interfaith Association, as well as for his humor and warmth. “For the first few months he was here, he’d get up at meetings and say, ‘I’m delighted to be here in Teaneck,’ and nobody laughed harder than he did.”

Tenafly Mayor Peter Rustin noted that O’Neill came into a very difficult situation, replacing the very popular Gilman, and “He connected well with his church and with the larger community.”

O’Neill’s persona contrasts from his predecessor’s:

Gilman was born in Massachusetts, the offspring of a Jewish father and Christian mother. He attended Boston University, where he earned a master’s degree and enjoyed a successful career as vice president at the Lockheed Corp. before trading in a luxurious lifestyle for the spirituality of the church. He was ordained a Carmelite priest at age 52, and Mount Carmel was

his third assignment. His tenure was a period marked by growth for the parish and he has been credited with presiding over the facility's renovation. Congregants recall him as intellectual, thoughtful and warm.

Gilman's final message to his congregants, written on the church blog several days before his death, carried a strikingly different tone from O'Neill's favorite scripture about the mystery of faith: Gilman wrote that the divine can be found "through other people. An unexpected phone call. A random act of kindness! An apology! He talks to us all the time!"

O'Neill grew up in Englewood, the son of Irish immigrants. He attended the Carmelite-run St. Cecilia's Grammar School and entered the Carmelite high school seminary before age 14. An avid athlete, he played on the college seminary's basketball team. He never wanted to be anything but a Carmelite priest, he said firmly.

At this year's 9/11 event in Tenafly, O'Neill delivered the shortest speech, but it packed a punch. "We're not really gone from this world until people stop saying our name," he said, and recited the names of the residents killed.

The church had its start after the Civil War, as Catholics moved into the Northern Valley of Bergen County. In 1873, a group of Catholic families organized Our Lady of Mount Carmel. The first mass was held in a wooden barn. The school opened in 1879 where the Tenafly Racquetball Club is now. The current church at 10 County Road was built in 1952, and now has 1,200 member families. The school has 275 students in grades pre-K through eighth.

Our Lady of Mount Carmel has four weekend masses, regularly drawing nearly 1,000 faithful, said Guerra. Since Father Dan arrived, more out-of-towners are coming, he said, adding that today's trend among worshippers is to shop around for a church where they are most comfortable. "He's such an authentic guy and so relatable, more people are coming."

The Catholic Carmelite order began more than 800 years ago in Mount Carmel in Israel. Its spiritual focus encompasses prayer and community service. It spread through Europe and came to America in the mid 1800s. Its main branch in New Jersey is in Englewood. Carmelite pastors take a vow of celibacy and reside on their church grounds.

Kratnoff said she's grateful to O'Neill for coming out of retirement during a rough time.

"Father Dan stepped up to the plate to heal us," she said. "He embraced the job and our community — the year went by so fast. I feel like he's always been here."

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