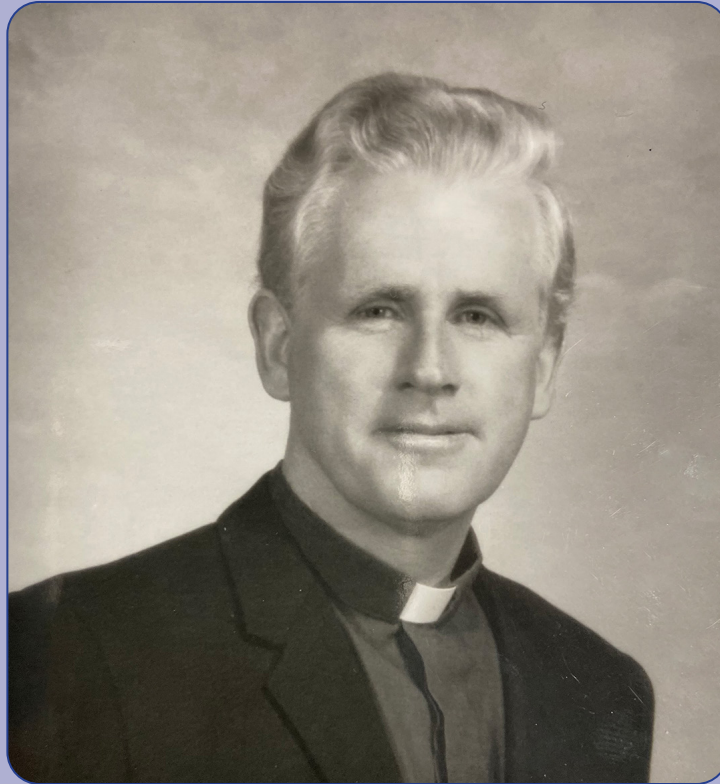




FRIENDS

The Missionary Society of St. James
the Apostle

April 2025



"Giving His Talents..."

Dear Friends,

We devote this issue to Father Eugene "Gene" Kirke, who died recently, on December 17, 2024. Fr. Gene was a missionary priest of the Society of St. James, who was born in Kilkenny, County Louth, Ireland. Gene was a priest of the Archdiocese of Boston and he served in Belmont and Chelsea before going to Peru in 1963 for eight years. He returned to Boston for three years to serve at St. Paul's in Dorchester during the early 1970s. However, in 1974, Fr. Gene returned to Peru for the remainder of his ministry.

Fr. Simon Cadwallader, fellow St. James Society member, preached at Fr. Gene's funeral vigil Mass in Villa El Salvador:

"I chose this Gospel (Mt:25:31-46) tonight because it is a passage that spoke deeply to Gene's heart. You can still catch the echo of his loud preaching through the streets of Villa El Salvador during the processions of the Lord of Miracles. Gene would shout: 'I was hungry, and you gave me food...I was a stranger, and you welcomed me.... sick, and you visited me'. This message of Jesus resonated with Gene. It drove him in his missionary life to do

Diocesan priests serving the poorest of the poor in Latin America since 1958.

everything possible to alleviate the burdens of the poorest and to encourage people to see the spirit of community built on the values of the gospel, which can overcome all adversity. Fifty years ago, in 1974, this Irishman arrived in a young town, Villa El Salvador, and accompanied Fr. Joseph Walijewski, who later founded Cristo Salvador. Gene was 40 years old. He had already begun his ministry with the Missionary Society of St. James in 1963 when he served the people of the highlands in Abancay, Apurímac and Limatambo. It was the beginning of the adventure of his life. He was captivated by the idea of participating in the construction of a new community, formed by poor people. Prior to becoming a diocesan priest, Gene had taken the name “Brother Brendan” as a novice with the Cistercians at the Abbey of Mellifont, in Ireland. That contemplative experience undoubtedly helped him to look at the wide and open expanse of the sands of Villa and imagine wonderful possibilities. He built a humble house of straw, a home that welcomed many visitors who passed by to chat or confess. To always remind him of his humble beginnings here, that original straw is still preserved within the walls of his house. In those early years, Gene adapted to the needs of those around him like any other neighbor. He became a more than competent carpenter, and had his own workshop. He accompanied the little brothers of Charles de Foucauld in their work among the poor, and he learned alongside the people, how to build a community. Without water, without light, without any kind of comfort, Gene undertook his priestly task with energy and joy with souls from all over Peru who sought to take root and build a family and community life in the desert. It was their hearts, their enthusiasm, and their



Frs. Adrian, Gene and Simon

aspirations that inspired Fr. Gene to dedicate most of his priestly life to accompany them and to share with you the paschal light of Christ. Gene called Villa El Salvador a "*university of life where I was evangelized by the poor.*" He immersed himself in the pilgrim walk of a people in search of identity, brotherhood, and the sense of God's providence.



Gene actively participated in the assemblies held in Cuaves and in community work, and accompanied people in their marches for water, drainage, and light, and visited their homes to celebrate their birthdays. Everything was, for Gene, a lesson in recognizing the dignity of your common baptism. Thus, he felt very proud to witness how his good friend, Víctor Chero, openly shared with Pope John Paul II, not far from here, the rigors of life at that time for the people of Villa. For we recognize Gene as a deeply supportive man. He always read the gospel twice, once in Spanish and once in

Quechua to ensure that everyone received the treasure of the Word of God. Fr. Gene was the first founding parish priest of the second sector parish. He energetically promoted Christian communities and youth organizations. Developing the faith communities of Christ the Risen, Virgin of Carmen, Santa Rosa, and Sacred Heart, and later, the parish of Our Lady of Peace, Gene worked with purpose, perseverance, and a smile. Recognizing the scarcity of medical attention available for the impoverished, he established the medical centers of Santa Rosa and San Martín, centers that continue to develop to this day, a huge grace for the people. He also supervised the development of a retreat center, Santa Rafaela, because he believed in the importance of reserving time for contemplation. Gene has said that the most important task of his mission has been to build a community among the suffering people through their spiritual formation.



Gene recognized the importance of focusing attention on adult catechesis as a condition for effective children's catechesis. Thus, he vigorously promoted the Family Catechesis program, with its roots in Chile, encouraging and helping parents to fulfill their non-delegable mission of being the first educators in faith. I remember accompanying Gene down the steep sandy slopes of a completely deprived area in Oasis called Upis Villa Mar. He bent down in front of a house of earth and picked up a tiny plant that one of the inhabitants had cared for diligently. Gene smiled and said to me: *"Here is hope! A plant that grows in the desert. Here nothing is impossible!"* Pope Francis asks all priests to have the smell of our sheep, to be shepherds among the people. A shepherd must bring a bit of his own fragrance to the flock and that is what Gene did. He could be very direct and blunt, but he had vision. Gene would be humble enough to admit that he could be stubborn, and if on occasion, that was his weakness, it was also his great strength to accomplish pastorally, to move forward with ideas that he considered crucial for the development of the faith community and the Church to which he was so devoted. Gene often said: *"Where there is a love of giving oneself and acts of solidarity, one can always feel the presence of the Risen Christ."* In January 2005, I drove Gene to his home, after he completed his final day as an active member of the Society of St. James. When he was about to get out of the car, he informed me that *"Now, I am going to start a new stage of my life, more contemplative, more like the monk I was in my youth in Ireland"*. I took his words with humor because I doubted he could sit still. As I suspected, he continued to be as busy as ever, helping in local parishes and communities that needed spiritual support. Gene even bought a house in the ninth sector and started a pre-academy with the hope of helping young people take the next step in their educational development. Gene did not know what 'retirement' meant! Many of Gene's friends here tonight, were present to rejoice and celebrate with him on his 50th anniversary of priesthood. It was a night of thanksgiving for the joy and fulfillment that Gene found through ordained ministry. Gene always wanted to work as a team and engage others. He was very grateful, particularly, for the support of so many wonderful women, both religious and lay, for how they supported him. Throughout his life, Gene faced health problems. Since his youth, he suffered from the pains of fibromyalgia, a condition marked by pain and fatigue. At only 47 years old, he underwent a quadruple bypass. Fifteen years ago, doctors gave up on a scheduled heart operation considering the risk too great. But Gene moved forward. He said: *"I am like a second-hand car."*



I could break down at any moment, but where there is a will, there is a way, and I have a very strong spirit." Gene reached the age of 90, and he has been honored by the municipality for leaving his mark, for his distinctive contribution to community life in Villa El Salvador. He became one of the most well-known and beloved people in this city - a father founder- one could say. In fact, Gene enjoyed such esteem here in Villa El Salvador, that, at 70 years old, he was asked if he would be interested in running as a candidate for mayor! He politely declined. Gene became a Peruvian citizen by right, as red and white were stamped on his heart, but although you can take the Irishman out of Ireland, you can never take his Irishness away. Gene comes from a land of poets and singers, and that art was always at the forefront of his pastoral ministry. When something bothered him, he would withdraw and lose himself in reading poetry. Or, he might stay awake reading past midnight until he felt at peace. A lover of good music, Gene dedicated time and energy to working with various choirs, instilling a necessary discipline and reminding members that a good song can be the best prayer. When something bothered him, Gene would take refuge in his reading of poetry, especially the words of the Irishman, Patrick Cavanagh. And, it is with an idea from Cavanagh that I will leave you, as it truly speaks of the man that Gene Kirke was. *"A man is original when he speaks the truth that good men have always known. What matters is that if you have any talent, you must give it. Nothing should take you away from that."* Nothing ever took Fr. Eugene Kirke away from the highest vocation of preaching the Gospel, of giving his talents, while bearing witness to the way, the truth, and the life here, in his beloved Villa El Salvador. Tonight, we can smile and say: Thank you, Lord, for the life of an elder brother and a priest who has made his life a gift, who gave himself for others with faithfulness, lasting hope, and joy. May Padre Eugenio rest in peace. And, more than that, may he sing and dance in eternal joy and pray for us on the way." ~ Fr. Simon Cadwallader



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