



DIOCESE OF ST. AUGUSTINE

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Father William “Bill” Kelly, longtime Jacksonville Beach pastor, dies at 90

Jacksonville Beach, Fla. – Father William “Bill” Kelly, a beloved Catholic priest whose ministry spanned more than half a century in Florida, died Feb. 25, 2025. Father Kelly was best known as the pastor of St. Paul’s Catholic Church in Jacksonville Beach for nearly 40 years, where he oversaw tremendous growth and became a cherished leader in the community.

Born in Castlerea, Ireland, Father Kelly came to Florida in 1959 to begin a lifetime of service to the Church. Though he spent more than six decades in the United States, he never lost his lilting Irish brogue, a musical reminder of his homeland that endeared him to those he met.

Father Kelly’s first assignment was as associate pastor at Good Shepherd Parish in Orlando. He then served as assistant pastor of Incarnation Parish in Sarasota before joining the teaching staff at Cardinal Mooney High School. Later, he moved to St. Petersburg, where he served as assistant pastor of St. Paul’s and Immaculate Conception parishes while also teaching at Bishop Barry High School. He went on to serve at Epiphany Parish in Venice before being assigned to the rural North Florida parishes of Epiphany in Lake City, where he was pastor for 12 years, and St. Francis Xavier Parish in Live Oak, where he embraced the unique challenges of ministering in an area where Catholics were a small but faithful presence in a predominantly Protestant community.

In 1977, Father Kelly was assigned as pastor of St. Paul Parish in Jacksonville Beach, where he would serve for nearly four decades. Under his leadership, the once-small beachside parish flourished, growing from just a few dozen families to one of the area’s largest Catholic communities. St. Paul’s, during his tenure, actively supported Mission House (a Beaches-area organization aiding the homeless) and maintained a dynamic St. Vincent de Paul Society to assist those in need. Father Kelly himself was often on the front lines of charitable efforts—he enthusiastically participated in the annual “Crop Walk on the Beach” fundraiser to fight hunger, frequently outpacing many of his fellow walkers.

Father Kelly also played a key role in broader community service. He joined the Beaches Ministerial Alliance at a pivotal time, as the group had recently built Pablo Towers, a retirement community. Recognizing the need for continued support of low-income residents, he served on the board and as president for two years. In 1985, he helped the alliance launch the Beaches Emergency Assistance Ministry (BEAM), which continues to serve local residents facing financial hardships. Reflecting on its success in a recent article, he said, “The ministers aren’t involved in it anymore. The laypeople took it over and have done a tremendous job.”

Known for his humility, humor and approachability, Father Kelly endeared himself to people of all faiths. He was repeatedly voted “Favorite Minister at the Beaches” in local community polls, and the Jacksonville Beach City Council honored him for his outstanding service to the city’s residents. In the Diocese of St. Augustine,

he also took on important leadership roles, among them, he served as Vicar General under Bishop Victor Galeone, helping to oversee diocesan affairs, and in 2018 Bishop Felipe Estévez appointed him to the College of Consultors, an advisory council of diocesan priests. Even after retiring from full-time ministry on June 26, 2015, Father Kelly remained deeply involved in pastoral work. He served as Bishop Erik Pohlmeier's Vicar for Senior Priests, advocating for and ministering to retired priests. In "retirement," he continued celebrating Masses, officiating at funerals, and visiting retirement and assisted-living homes, never truly stepping away from the vocation he loved.

Father Kelly's personal style of ministry made a lasting impression on countless lives. Parishioners remember his engaging homilies that brought Scripture to life and his remarkable ability to remember everyone he met by name. He approached his more than 60 years of priesthood as a calling of joyful service to others. At his 50th anniversary Mass in 2009, celebrating his Golden Jubilee and 38 years at St. Paul's, Father Kelly reflected on his vocation with gratitude. "This has to be a Mass of thanksgiving. This is a great parish. For that, I give thanks to God," he said, emphasizing the joy he found in serving his flock.

"The priesthood is a difficult but rewarding life," Father Kelly once said. "I'm glad I could be involved in so many people's lives and be there for them when they need me. I've tried to make the world around us a little better. Working with other people to do this is especially rewarding. You meet some great people."

Reflecting on Father Kelly's legacy, Bishop Felipe Estévez remarked, "His rectory was always a home for his brother priests; he was welcoming and hospitable to all cultures, languages, theologies and personalities. No one ministered to the sick and elderly in the diocese better than Father Kelly. School principals have shared how he visited the school every day and was very supportive and affirming of them. Father Kelly came to Florida from the Emerald Isle with dreams and lots of energy. What a difference he has made! How will we remember this great priest, this outstanding pastor? As one who is truly faithful."

He is survived by three sisters: Dominican Sister Attracta Kelly of Adrian, Mich.; Ursuline Sister Katherine "Kitty" Kelly of Dublin, Ireland; and Mary Kelly Beatty of Castlerea, Ireland, as well as several nieces, nephews and extended family in the Chicago area.

Father Bill Kelly leaves behind a profound legacy of faith and service. He will be remembered for his unwavering commitment to serving others and his deep faith in God, evident in every aspect of his ministry. In the words of those who knew him, his life was a testament to the power of humble service, compassion and a joyful heart devoted to God. His impact will continue to be felt in the communities he served, and his example of selfless dedication will remain an inspiration for years to come.

Funeral Arrangements:

Monday, March 3

Visitation will be from 3:00 to 7:00 p.m. at St. Paul Catholic Church, 523 Pablo Ave., Jacksonville Beach. There will be no visitation after the Vigil.

The Vigil Service, also at St. Paul's, will begin at 7:00 p.m. The presider and homilist will be Father Thomas Willis.

Tuesday, March 4

The Funeral Mass will be held at 11:00 a.m. at St. Paul's, with Bishop Erik Pohlmeier as the presiding celebrant. Msgr. Vincent Haut will be the homilist. The Mass will be livestreamed with a link posted on St. Paul's website.

Committal will take place at Our Lady of Hope Catholic Cemetery at St. Peter Mission following the funeral Mass.

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