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Listen to Mrs. Murphy

By Jeannette Cezanne

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On a very sunny Sunday afternoon this past October, I was back in New Haven, more than 20 years after graduating from the Yale Divinity School. I wasn't back for a reunion --- I've never quite gotten the point of those -- but rather for a memorial service.

The world became smaller this year: Aidan Kavanagh, OSB, is no longer in it.

Perhaps the single most significant figure in American Catholic liturgy, Aidan Kavanagh founded the doctoral program in liturgical studies at Notre Dame and went on to become professor of liturgics at Yale University and acting dean, at different times, of both the Yale Divinity School and the Institute of Sacred Music. His texts on liturgy, on rites of initiation and on liturgical theology remain among the finest and most clearly articulated descriptions and analyses of the community of faith transacting its business and life before its God.

"To know Christ only in terms of bread and wine can be to know him only in the dining room as guest and host," he wrote in 1978, of the need to celebrate both Baptism and Eucharist. "It is a valid enough knowledge. But it is inevitably partial and perhaps too civil -- easily layered over with a brittle etiquette soon rendered obsolete when cultures change. It is a knowledge prone less to robustness than to niceness, reducing Eucharist to a sort of ecumenical high tea. The Lord as guest is readily sentimentalized. The Lord as host is readily transformed into an indulgent therapist of whatever lusts are monetarily ours. This produces arrogance in the young, depression among the old, and apostasy for the Church."

Born in Mexia, Texas, on April 20, 1929, Aidan Kavanagh attended school in Waco and went on to study at the University of the South at Sewanee, Tennessee, and at Saint Meinrad Seminary in Indiana. He was invested as a Benedictine novice at Saint Meinrad, took his simple vows, and by 1957 had been ordained to the priesthood. His licentiate in sacred theology was

received from the University of Ottawa in 1958 and his doctorate in sacred theology from the University of Trier (Germany) in 1964.

In the 1960s, Kavanagh taught courses in liturgy at the Saint Meinrad School of Theology before going on to Notre Dame to direct the graduate liturgical studies program in 1966. He went to Yale in 1974 where he remained until his retirement. At age 77, he died at his home following a long illness, and a funeral Mass was held on July 14, 2006, in the church at the Saint Meinrad Archabbey, with burial in the Archabbey cemetery following the Mass.

And we care about this single death . . . why? When Kavanagh was given the McManus Award in 1999, John Burton described him, and his words start to give us a clue: "He kindled in hearts a fire which burned through liturgy's mechanics to the life-giving celebration of rite. He taught us that doctrine derives from doxology, not the other way around. He showed us how to use liturgy's rhythm to help us stand awestruck in the presence of God." And perhaps that remains the best description, not only of the position of the community of faith vis-à-vis its God, but also of Aidan Kavanagh's students vis-à-vis him.

A stickler for proper communication, Kavanagh was known to give copies of Strunk and White's *Elements of Style* when returning papers, requesting that next time they be "written in English" (when this was remembered at the memorial service, my husband nudged me knowingly, having seen the same supercilious traits in my own attitude as an editor). He abhorred the inappropriateness of an unbalance within church buildings and church communities alike, and exhorted his students to think first, second and always of his mythical Mrs. Murphy, sitting faithfully in her pew and understanding far more theology than the priests and ministers who preached at her.

He was also rather infamously hard on women: when I was at YDS, few of us dared take his classes, and many left. I stayed initially, I think, out of sheer determination, and later because I realized how much I had to learn from him. Once in class I feebly tried to dispute a point that I subsequently let go, and he challenged me on it. "What was that about?" I shrugged, embarrassed. "I was just trying to be nice," I said. Kavanagh looked at me and spoke words that have resonated in my life ever since. "Young lady," he said coldly, "the world was not saved by being nice. The world was saved by someone dying on a cross."

He was equally unequivocal about the world: "Genesis says," he wrote in the seminal *On Liturgical Theology*, "that we began in a swamp teeming with life, but that something went vastly wrong

one evening at dinner. Apocalypse says that the difficult was finally resolved into something called the Banquet of the Lamb. Hebrews tells us how the resolution was accomplished, not in an orchard set in pleasant countryside but in a butcher shop located in the city's center. The World's story from beginning to end pivots upon this resolution, a resolution the faint of heart, the fastidious, and the squeamish find hard to bear. Suburbia prefers its meat wrapped in plastic, all signs of violence removed so as to reduce the necessity of entering into the dark and murderous transaction with reality which one creature giving up its life for another entails."

Kavanagh never advised leaving the development of liturgical rites to either the academic elite or church leaders. He posited, instead, that it is the interaction of Christians with the world that creates a liturgy reflecting and sustaining meaning within the chaos of human existence. In *The Elements of Rite: A Handbook of Liturgical Style*, he rejected carpeted churches, the clericalization of the liturgy, and disorder and last-minute makeshift; he applauded finding serviceable places for altar and font and leaving them there, making the lectern a place for reading not in competition with the altar, and designing liturgical things for the assembly's purpose.

In 1994, as he prepared to retire, Kavanagh wrote of what he had himself learned: "The World is not without its follies, some of them lethal; academics are not immaculately conceived; religiosity is a form of immaturity that is rarely innocent; do not argue in footnotes; dress for dinner; use adjectives only as a last resort; don't take theology too seriously; listen *hard* to Mrs. Murphy; bean sprouts and tofu are overrated; respect authority and keep your vows; things you can afford are usually not worth it; tradition and language don't mean much unless you master them; grow up; love God, honor the Church, suffer bishops; stay off television; read the *New York Times* only for its comics . . . do something politically incorrect every day to stay in shape for the Eschaton."

The last rays of the sun were touching Marquand Chapel as Palestrina's *Sicut cervus* was sung by a small ensemble of present-day divinity students. *Sicut cervas desiderat as fonts aquarum, ita desiderat anima mea ad te, Deus.* Aidan Kavanagh's soul was eternally aspiring to God while he was on earth, but his feet and his being were firmly rooted in the clay and air and water of God's earth, experienced through the work - the liturgy -- of the gathered community of faith.

And now that he is no longer in it, the world is indeed a smaller place.

(January 2007)

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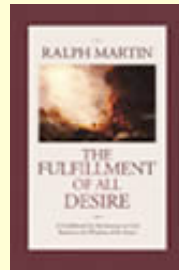
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Pick of the Week



The Fulfillment of All Desire: A Guidebook for the Journey to God Based on the Wisdom of the Saints, by Ralph Martin, Notre Dame Class of 1964 (Emmaus Road Publishing)

Saints Augustine, Bernard of Clairvaux, Catherine of Siena, Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, Francis de Sales and Thérèse of Lisieux: The author draws on the writings of these seven saints in this guide to ways of knowing God more deeply.

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