

Eulogy for the Funeral Mass of Fr. Eugene Prior, S.J.

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On behalf of everyone at Loyola School, I would like to thank you for being here to celebrate the life of Fr. Eugene J. Prior. Many, if not all of you, should also be thanked for the cards, gifts, emails, visits to and prayers for Fr. Prior over the past year and a half. I would also like to give special thanks to everybody at Murray Weigel; the professional care and love that he was offered there, during such difficult times, was beautiful to watch.

How do you describe a man like Fr. Prior? As I thought about this, it occurred to me that he loved to spin a good yarn, and whether he knew it or not (although I suspect that he did), in his capacity as storyteller, he was one of the most effective teachers any of us have ever had. So, it is in that storytelling vein that I speak to you today.

I first met Fr. Prior under rather unique circumstances. It was the winter of 1983 and I came into Loyola for a series of scholarship interviews with Fr. Fox, Sr. Nora and Fr. Prior. My mother accompanied me. We met first with Fr. Fox and then Sr. Nora, followed by Fr. Prior. When we walked into the Assistant Headmaster's office, I heard my mother say "FR. PRIOR?" and I then heard him say, "NORAH?" It turns out that when my mother, Norah Mary Murphy, first came to this country from Ireland, one of her first jobs was at a parish in the Bronx. One of Fr. Prior's first summer assignments as a priest was at that same parish. They became fast friends, but ultimately fell out of touch. I remember quite vividly walking home and my mother telling me, "Boy was he a good looking man back then. I'll tell you the church was always packed with young women when he was saying mass." Years later when that story came up, Fr. Prior enjoyed telling me thatmeanwhile, back at Loyola, he was telling Julia Sullivan that he had known my mother "as a young colleen" years ago. Mrs. Sullivan, who like my mother is from Galway, saw the name Oroszlany and inquired what my mother's maiden name was?? Fr. replied "Murphy" to which Mrs. Sullivan, or Inspector Sullivan in this case, said "The Amadán" (which is Gaelic for fool) -- why would someone give up a fine name like Murphy for a name like that."

I consider one of my life's great blessings to have known Fr. Prior -- as a student, a colleague, and ultimately as a very dear friend. Over the past year and a half we had a number of "scares," or occasions when we thought that we might lose Fr. Prior. On one of those occasions I was with Fr. Prior, and he said to me, "You know Tony I have had a Terrific Life. -- I've enjoyed getting to know our Lord here on earth and I look forward to getting to know Him better in heaven." ...we do know that Fr. Prior is now with our Lord and for that we should rejoice.

Obviously, Fr. Prior's passing does not come without pain, but we all know that Heaven is paradise.....and paradise became a little bit more perfect on July 24th when it welcomed Eugene J. Prior, SJ.

Fr. Prior did indeed have a "terrific life" as evidenced by the outpouring of love in his honor. In thinking about his terrific life I got to pondering the movie "It's a Wonderful Life" and concluded that he was like both Jimmy Stewart's character George Bailey AND also like the angel Clarence. His likeness to Jimmy Stewart aside, Fr. Prior was like George Bailey in that he made a difference in the life of everybody he ever met and none of us would be the people we are today if we hadn't known him. The similarities to Clarence are probably just as obvious, as Fr. Prior was (and is) the guardian angel to so many of us... But I am pretty sure that he got his wings quicker than Clarence did.

Friends of mine who did not attend Loyola have asked me why this "Fr. Prior" was so special and the answer is one that is so difficult to pinpoint. Fr. Katsouros talked about his amazing Emotional Intelligence and that played a big part in who Fr. Prior was to all of us, but, of course, there was so much more. It is once again as a storyteller that the essence of Fr. Prior is revealed ... his lighter side, how he approached life and the amazing effect that he had on so many. Personally many of these stories have been "Life Lessons" for me.

THE WAY HE GREETED PEOPLE

I am not sure if it was his glance, his smile, or that twinkle in his eyes certainly all were spell binding. He made the simplest of hello's special..... even to those about to be given a week's worth of JUG. Julia Sullivan recently reminded me that when asked how he was, Fr. Prior would respond, "Fine... Now That You've Asked." He could charm anyone.

Years ago, Fr. Prior used to say mass every morning at St. Ignatius's Day Nursery on 84th and Second. On his walk east on 84th he used to pass an older gentleman, who in Fr. Prior's eyes seemed to always be grumpy. In order to lighten life's load on the older gentleman's shoulders, he decided to give him a warm "good morning" as they walked by each other every day, and he did – never receiving a response back. Well, one morning Fr. Prior recounted that he himself was a bit grumpy and he did not say good morning as he walked passed the gentleman. After taking a few steps beyond the gentleman, he heard, "You know, I look forward to your "Good Morning" every day. Fr. Prior was stunned. The man then asked Fr. Prior, "Do you drive?" Fr. Prior responded, "Yes.", the gentleman reached into his pocket and pulled out keys to a car and said, "I want you to use my car whenever you would like. There is only one condition... and that is that you never fill it with gas." Fr. Prior did indeed use that car for many years, on

which I always reflect... who else could this ever happen to? But it was his warm greeting that made this possible.

ENJOYING A GOOD LAUGH...

Fr. Prior had a fondness for people who enjoyed life and all that the world had to offer and he didn't mind putting you on your heels when you said something that he disagreed with, but he also loved when someone would disagree with him, sometimes resulting in some very funny exchanges at his or another's expense.

It just so happens that while Fr. Prior was assigned to the parish where my mother worked he received a call from the then Provincial who told him that in addition to his work at the parish, he would like Fr. Prior to do some chaplaincy work on Rikers Island. Fr. Prior did not think that it was really the Provincial calling and that one of his fellow Jesuits was pulling a fast one on him. He quickly responded that he was too busy and hung up. The phone rang back with a stunned Provincial on the other end who said, "Gene, I am very surprised by your reaction" and Fr. Prior responded that he was surprised by his request and that the only way he was ever going to Rikers Island was if he received a certified letter from the Provincial himself, the very next day. Fr. Prior received that letter and was on the phone the next day, begging for mercy. Whenever he told the story, it was prefaced with something like, "you know we can all be fatheads sometime..."

Fr. Prior could also turn the tables on others. The first class that the young "Mr. Prior" ever taught at Loyola, some of whom are here, liked to pull his leg a bit. One trick that they liked playing was to tell Mr. Prior that he had not assigned homework when he would ask to collect it. Well, after many straight days, he decided to hide a tape recorder in his desk and to record the entire lesson. When the next day came and the class once again claimed no homework had been assigned, he pulled out the tape recorder, smiled as we have all seen him smile at the moment we knew he had us caught, and at that moment Loyola School students realized that they had someone very special on their hands.

HIS COURAGE AND HIS ABSOLUTE TRUE LOVE OF OUR LORD

I have a theory that when Fr. Prior prayed, God considered it a local call, and picked up on the first ring. Fr. Prior loved our Lord and loved serving Him as a member of the Society of Jesus. You could tell it in the way he preached, the way he prayed and the way he said "God Bless." He officiated at the weddings of so many of us here today, christened hundreds of children, and buried so many members of our Loyola family, and he agonized over every homily – he wanted to make every mass special, every wedding memorable, every baptism unique and every funeral personalized. His love for others and for God would allow nothing else. I particularly enjoyed

when the gospel contained a parable, as he was always excited by the way Jesus would make his point, thereby showing His love for us while teaching us a lesson. Fr. Prior's love and trust in our Lord was never more apparent than when he celebrated Mike Armstrong's funeral mass. We lost Mike, who was one of Loyola's very best, on September 11th. Fr. Prior was 77 then and losing strength. The vast size of St. Ignatius' altar intimidated him. And he loved Mike with all his heart and could not imagine the world without him. He said to me that "this is the toughest challenge that I have ever had." He prayed for strength and he was given it and lifted Mike's soul from the ashes for all of us that day, as only Fr. Prior could. A very real example of Loyola School's motto – Ex Fide Fortis.

A MAN FOR OTHERS AND OPEN TO GROWTH

Two of the most important tenets of a Jesuit education are being a "woman or man for others" and being "open to growth." Fr. Prior modeled these behaviors his entire life. Whether it was writing zillions of Christmas cards every year, running to the hospital to be with someone, sharing in a festive occasion, or enjoying a good meal at one of New York's finest restaurants. Fr. Prior was always there and he was there to be with you. He did not have a selfish or vain bone in his body..... and considering how much he was loved, he could have been both. I think the best example of his being "open to growth" was the way he took on the Dean of Students position. Prior to being Dean of Students, he was a student counselor and known as a softie and a friend of the students. His new role was, of course, an enforcer's position and he wondered if he was up to it. His care for Loyola's students made him the ideal person to dole out tough love. I have to tell you that not everyone understood the method to Fr. Prior's madness when handing out JUG. There did not seem to be set rules... and the truth is there were not... and he wanted it that way. He wanted to handle each infraction committed by each student in a personalized way. The method and the madness especially perplexed students – Why do we have to memorize "A Road Not Taken" or wear our blazers "to and from school" even under our winter coats? That was until after they graduated, when realization set in that everything that Fr. Prior did was out of his love for Loyola students – the center of his world.

A FATHER FIGURE FOR ALL

When people had good news or bad news as a student, friend, graduate, or parent everyone always wanted to share it with their second father – Fr. Prior. Fr. Prior once told me that the only thing that he regretted about being a priest was not being able to hold his own child in his arms. I responded by saying something like, "You have to be kidding me. I do not know anyone who has more children than you. You are like our Lord in the "Footprints" prayer, in that you are always there to carry us during the toughest times." He played that role for many until the moment he died, even as he suffered through his illness these last months.

HIS OTHER TRUE LOVE

Some of you are probably thinking that I am about to talk about his love for the New York Mets, who probably come in third, but next to our Lord, Fr. Prior's other true love was Loyola School. Friends often asked Fr. Prior about Loyola and he would say "There is no place quite like Loyola." He loved its Ignatian mission, its size, the students, the composition of the student body, the service program, the faculty, the staircase, and even, maybe especially, the gym. And we all know that Fr. Prior was a big part of the reason why "there is no place quite like Loyola." Fr. Prior spent close to 50 years nurturing us and I hope that, with his continued help, we can carry on his legacy and never let his memory die.....

The staff at Murray Weigel often commented that they were amazed by how many people came to visit Fr. Prior and that they had never seen anything like it, not really knowing that Fr. Prior had worked at the smallest of the schools in the Province....I, in turn, was amazed by the effect that he had on the staff of Murray Weigel. They loved him and although he was unable to speak, he still could communicate through his smiles, frowns, nods and winks. They simply learned to love the man inside.

Who else do you know that Greets you in the way that he did? Chides you quite like him? Has such a deep faith and personal relationship with Christ, Is so good, and so selfless? And shepherded so many through adolescence, adulthood and old age? Nobody that I know, and that is why I think that we all loved him so much.....Rest in peace Fr. Prior and may the Lord's perpetual light shine upon you. We will miss you. God Bless.