

Kieran O'Sullivan RIP
Funeral Mass
Rathdowney Church
Wednesday 19th April 2023

Kieran O'Sullivan, Undertaker, The Showgrounds, Rathdowney, Co. Laois, 15th April 2023. Predeceased by his parents Michael and Mai. Peacefully, at home surrounded by his loving wife Mary and daughters Sarah and Louise. Sadly missed by his sisters Margaret (Delaney), Kay (O'Connell), Ann (Koch), Ellen (Delaney) and Rose (Barrett), brothers-in-law Jimmy, Tom, Frank, Noel and Dan, uncle Fintan, nephews, nieces, relatives and friends.

I want to begin today by acknowledging the unique and extraordinary sense of loss which this entire community feels with the death of Kieran O'Sullivan. There are a number of reasons for that but perhaps chief among them is that there are very few families in this parish and our hinterland who have not had cause to call on Kieran's professional services as an undertaker over the years. Kieran was only 11 years old when he first helped his father with a funeral. In the following 44 years Kieran, at first with his dad and then on his own he has journeyed with families when they were heartbroken and were at their most vulnerable. Yes, he was professional to his fingertips but the impact of Kieran's care of people went far beyond the professional and that is why so many people remember him with such affection and why our sense of loss is so great. Many words have been expressed in recent days to try to articulate how much this gentleman has meant to us all. Two people in the parish sent me their own reflections and they both capture the mood of these sad days perfectly:

The first one wrote....

Can't believe Kieran is gone..He is a huge loss to everyone..There was something about him..he was a steadying force, a trusted guide, a gentle

whisper, a reliable friend, someone you were glad to have in your corner and by your side when dealing with loss and at other times too. He made people feel safe .He was also very funny, cheeky and uplifting. .He never criticised anyone or degraded anyone but had a brilliant read on the funny side of human nature. He definitely brightened all our days. He was a wonderful human being who touched so many lives in our community especially at their most vulnerable. He just made everyone feel safe. I don't know what we will do without him. We can no longer say 'Ring Kieran Sullivan. He'll know what to do".(.hard to imagine a funeral without him hovering around..)

I will come back to the second reflection later but there has been a phrase going around in my head for the last few days as I have thought about Kieran. It is a phrase that is sometimes used to describe people in a somewhat troubling way, but I can assure I just want to use it today to describe Kieran O'Sullivan's most positive impact on our community. The phrase I'm thinking of is ***"he knew where the bodies were buried"*** Now in the first instance and in the literal sense that was true of Kieran because as both the undertaker but also as the registrar for the cemeteries he literally knew where everyone is buried. But if I could broaden the meaning of that phrase Kieran's knowledge of this community and it's people and their stories was unique and invaluable. But he did not come to this knowledge by accident as he had grown up in a crucible of community involvement. Michael and Mai O'Sullivan's business life placed them at the heart of this community and gave them a unique insight and knowledge of the people they served. They came to know the struggles and storms in people's lives and in many different ways, most often, quietly, discreetly and below the radar they did what they could to help. Kieran inherited that legacy and in many ways made it his own vocation. It brought him to be involved in Rathdowney Social Services and our local St. Vincent DePaul. In many ways Kieran was St. Vincent DePaul. Even though we were part of a team Kieran was the one who answered the calls and provided the help where needed. His discretion, his compassion and his kindness will only have been known to those he responded to and to His God.

But while it is so important that we give thanks today for this man who has served our community so generously it is also important that we celebrate his life in all its aspects. Kieran loved life, he enjoyed life. He loved the outdoors. He was a passionate horseman who loved show jumping and playing Polo. He loved his dogs and many of you will have seen that beautiful picture of him on the coffin with his two dogs. He was also a skilled craftsman who loved to work with wood. The last great project which Kieran had been working on before Covid and his own illness intervened was to develop his own Craft Beer. He had put a huge amount of thought and research into this. Initially he had hoped to launch it under the famous Rathdowney name of *Perry's Ale* but when that proved impossible, he settled on the name of Clandonagh Craft Beer.

Yes, this was a man of many parts and we thank God for all his gifts today.

Underpinning so much of what motivated this man we honour with Christian burial today was his love of family and his very strong faith in his God. Whatever our sense of loss as a community is today his loss to you his loved ones is so much greater. Margaret , Kay , Ann , Ellen and Rose, Kieran was your only brother and I'm sure that in itself created a unique bond for all of you.

Mary, the adventure began when you met Kieran at that disco in Cullohill. You were down the country spending the summer with your Gilmartin cousins. No doubt Michael O'Sullivan approved when he realised that his only son had met his future wife in his native Cullohill. The omens were good. This year ye were due to celebrate your 30th wedding anniversary. The fruit of your love together has been your two beautiful daughters, Sarah and Louise and I know how proud of both of you he was. All of his life Kieran was blessed among women and you were blessed to have him as your brother, your husband and your dad. To all of you who were Kieran's family I extend our heartfelt sympathy today.

A few months ago, Kieran phoned me and asked me to call up see him. He told me then the full extent of his illness and that he knew he did not have a lot of time left. It was one of the saddest days I can remember. We talked, we laughed, we cried, we prayed. After that visit he sent me a text. In that text he spoke about how he was at peace and that while he would do his best to live as long as possible, he was prepared to accept whatever would come. And then he quoted that beautiful verse from Psalm 23 which we heard sung today:

*Even though I walk through the valley and the shadow of death
I will fear no harm,
for you are with me;
with your crook and your staff,
you will give me comfort.*

Kieran has been walking through the valley and shadow of death for the last few months but I was struck how these words from Psalm 23 *The Lord is My Shepherd* which Kieran had heard read and sung at countless funerals, these words he was now making his own and they were bringing him comfort as he prepared for his death. Yes, as that first reading from The Book of Wisdom alluded to, Kieran has died before his time but despite that Kieran O'Sullivan can also today make his own those words of St. Paul to Timothy: *the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race. I have kept the faith.*

I'd like to leave you with a few final thoughts. The first one is of a personal nature. The relationship of a priest with the local undertaker is a somewhat unique one. We work together to help families at the most difficult and vulnerable times in their lives. Kieran and I worked very well together not just at those sad moments but as I witnessed his work and his wisdom in so many other areas of parish and community life I grew in huge admiration and respect for him. Out of all that developed a friendship which I will always cherish and which I will miss so much. I have been thinking a lot in recent days of those beautiful lines from WB

Yeats when he wrote: *"Think where a person's glory most begins and ends, and say, my glory was that I had such friends"*

The second thought is really in the form of a question particularly addressed to all of us whose lives were most touched by Kieran and his utter love and commitment for this community here in Rathdowney. After the pain and sadness have eased what if anything are we going to do about the death of our friend and fellow parishioner?

Kieran loved all kinds of music. His last outing with Mary was to a concert given by Paul O'Brien and The High Kings in the University Concert Hall in Limerick last February, (we are hoping Paul will be able to make it here to sing his own tribute to Kieran at the end of Mass today) Kieran and Mary had planned a trip to Amsterdam later in the summer to celebrate their 30th Wedding anniversary and to go to a Bruce Springsteen concert. So his taste was varied. In answering that question about what if anything are we going to do about the death of our friend I want to share a true story from the world of music a story which may suggest an answer to the question.

The story is about Puccini, the great Italian writer of such classic operas as Madame Butterfly and La Boheme. It seems that like Kieran, Puccini was relatively young when he contracted cancer, and so he decided to spend his last days writing his final opera, Turandot, which is one of his most polished pieces. When his friends and disciples would say to him, "You are ailing, take it easy and rest" he would always respond; "I'm going to do as much as I can on my great masterpiece and it's up to you, my friends, to finish it if I don't." Well, Puccini died before the opera was completed. Now his friends had a choice. They could forever mourn their friend and return to life as usual- or they could build on his melody and complete what he started. They chose the latter. And so in 1926, at the famous La Scala Opera House in Milan, Italy, Puccini's opera was played for the first time, conducted by the famed Italian conductor, Arturo Toscanini. And when it came to part in the opera where the master had stopped because he died, Toscanini stopped everything, turned around with eyes welling up with tears, and said to the large audience, "This is where the master ends" And he wept. But then after a

few moments, he lifted his head, smiled broadly, and said;" And this is where his friends began". And he finished the opera.

You see the point of the question I posed. What are we going to do about **Kieran's** death. What are we going to do with his unfinished masterpiece. For **Mary, Sarah and Louise** for Margaret , Kay , Ann , Ellen and Rose life can never be the same again. But for those of us who worked with Kieran, benefited from his gift of patience, his love of this community, walked with him or shared life's adventures with him, will it be for us, in a month or so, life as usual? Or can we build on his melody, his sincerity, his loyalty, his enthusiasm , his positivity, his professionalism, his commitment?. I would suggest that there is a fitting response to the sadness we all feel today at Kieran's death; it is life, our life, a life that is lived better, a life lived more selflessly and compassionately, a life that makes a difference, a life that brings the highest standards to whatever we do, whether it is as a parent, a partner, a spouse, an employee, a colleague, a student, a friend or a member of a faith community like this. Across the chasm of death, we can make Kieran live. The music doesn't have to stop here today, it doesn't have to be buried with Kieran. The choice is ours.

My final thought brings me back to that second reflection given to me by one of our parishioners over the weekend. It is addressed to Kieran...and his family.....

As we gather to say farewell to you, our man for all seasons

With hearts abnormally full, we recall how you carried the boulder of concern

For each, for one, for all.

A titan for this community

Your quiet strength encouraged us, you were, you areso good...

A Laimh Chairduil, a friendly hand when we needed it most

A torch bearer when we stumbled...lost..

In the ocean of our lonely tears....

We did not know that deep within you lay your own heartache and your fears.

You masked yours, so you could carry ours.

Now we line up to do our part.

Close enough to offer a strong shoulder

A neckwell for your family's aching heart,

Your pain today is ours.

The sound of sorrow stretches across our parish and beyond.

As in our church, we kneel, we pray, we stand.

Our hearts send light and hope your way,

And Peace and comfort to you Mary, Sarah and Louise

To Margaret , Kay , Ann , Ellen and Rose

Who lent him to us, in our greatest hours of need.

Kieran, may your gentle and generous soul rest in Peace

"The Undertaker" The midnight hour, the darkest hour that only human grief may know, sends forth it's hurried summons - asks me to come, I go! I know not when the bell may toll, I know not where the blow may fall, I only know that I must go in answer to the call. Perhaps a friend, perhaps unknown 'this faith that turns the wheel - the tangled skien of human life, winds slowly on a reel. and I? I'm the undertaker. "Cold blooded" you'll hear them say, "Trained to the shock of chill and death, with a heart that's cold and grey". Trained - that's what the call it, how

little the know the rest - I'm human and know the sorry, that throbs in an
aching breast. (poem unknown)

As we gather to reflect on this man for all seasons

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concern

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