

A Word from Father Justin

Sunday, August 13, 2023

Dear friends,

I write with sad news. As Deacon Chris announced at church this morning, the Reverend Richard Van Wely, second rector of St. Barnabas (1976–2002), died early this morning. He was surrounded in his last days and hours by members of his family, whose devotion to him has been extraordinary and unflagging. Chris was privileged to administer the last rites of the church to Father Van Wely on Friday evening with his family alongside. I am so grateful to her for her pastoral presence with you while I am away. We will have a memorial service for Father Van Wely at St. Barnabas in October when all of us can take part, and he will be buried in a small, family service in the columbarium in the coming weeks. His wife, Judy, and their children, Lori, Janet, Chris, and Gayle, are so grateful for the love and support of this congregation over so many years. At this time, as they attend to the many duties that follow the death of a loved one, they appreciate you reaching out to them by cards, notes, and text messages.

I was honored to visit Father Van Wely several times before I left last week for the first leg of my vacation, in Tennessee. It is true that Dick's long illness had diminished his powers, but I can tell you with certainty: his soul was undimmed. As we all grieve his death, I pray we will also take strength from the faith in our Lord which he proclaimed so powerfully in word and deed as your pastor and priest.

In her interview with Dick for the Greenwich Oral History Project, Mary Ellen LeBien captured something extraordinary. At the end of the interview, Dick reflects on the joy he took in observing the changing seasons while living in the rectory on the "spiritual hilltop." He would often observe the stars in the quiet dark of backcountry evenings. "There was always that," he said, "The creator of the universe at work in all that splendor. Then I would turn in another direction and suddenly catch the silhouette of the cross perched on the peak of the church—what splendor indeed." Dick goes on to talk of his love for the flowering crab tree in front of the rectory, how he would stand under that tree and take in its glory, and how he once captured on a home video his granddaughter Nicole doing the same thing, only three years old:

On the tape, with no other sound except the gentle breeze and her careful exploring footsteps, she seemed to linger there in a spirit of playfulness. For me, that sight was heart-stopping because I imagined she understood something about eternal harmony and how to play within it as all children do under their own special tree, I suppose, I guess. It's akin to the children of God in any age standing beneath a canopy of a trillion billion stars on a clear night, perhaps in August, when a meteor shower is in full display. And for some of us, the mystery and meaning of our being here resurfaces from within, standing beneath the cross.

Let us pray for Richard, priest in the church of God, who one last August night stood spiritually beneath the tree of the cross and a canopy of a trillion billion stars and met their Maker, and was greeted with words that answer the mystery and meaning of his being and ours: *Come ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world (Matthew 25:34).*

Yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Justin" with a small cross at the end of the name.

Father Justin