

Remembering the style of a master teacher

By Katharine Bird
NC News Service

"Who was your most memorable teacher?"

Father Francis Kelly paused just a moment, then launched into a lively recollection of the late Cardinal John Wright. Father Kelly is director of the religious education department of the National Catholic Educational Association in Washington, D.C.

Father Kelly explained that from seventh grade through college he was part of a special group of four student Mass servers who accompanied Cardinal Wright — at that time bishop of Worcester, Mass. — from parish to parish. It meant that several times a week, the four friends were exposed to the bishop's rich personality.

It was exciting, Father Kelly indicated, since Bishop Wright had the reputation of being on the "cutting edge of the intellectual renaissance" among American Catholics in the 1950s.

Three decades later the former pupil could "recall vividly" a speech by Bishop Wright titled "The Mass and the International Order." He "talked of the way the liturgy fosters the sense of an intimate community throughout the world."

Bishop Wright stressed that in celebrating the liturgy, "people of all cultures and races gather around one table, one book" to create an international community.

"That kind of thinking was way ahead of time then," Father Kelly said. It helped the priest to appreciate the liturgy better as "a great symbol of unity."

Bishop Wright had the ability to "greatly expand your horizons on what the church was about," said Father Kelly. The bishop helped people see that Catholicism wasn't simply a private matter, with no relation to people in the wider world.

In fact, the bishop "opened out a whole new world of meaning and understanding and experience" that we hadn't known before, Father Kelly said.

The bishop was knowledgeable and particularly well-versed in church history. Part of his teaching technique, was to let church history "seep" into his lectures. He "led you into aspects of history you otherwise would not have tripped over," Father Kelly commented.

"Lots of passion for the church came through," Father Kelly indicated. The bishop was able to convey his "love and zeal for the

mysteries of the church" to us.

Over the years, Father Kelly has had firsthand experience in many areas of education — as teacher and administrator.

As a teacher of religion, he sees his goal as conversion: "To foster in the learner a personal faith...leading to strong commitment and behavior motivated by gospel values." He thinks religious educators start out with a "great advantage" in their endeavors since they deal with matters "related to our ultimate search for meaning."

As we neared the end of the interview, Father Kelly spoke about Jesus as a teacher. Jesus gave teaching a real priority, the priest thinks.

He recalled the scene in the New Testament where the healings in Capernaum "generate excitement." The crowds mill around Jesus. Finally he escapes and goes off, spending the night alone in prayer.

The next day the disciples point out to Jesus that many people have come to be healed. But, Father Kelly observed, Jesus responds by underlining his primary responsibility as a teacher: "No! I must announce the good news of the kingdom in other towns."

(Ms. Bird is associate editor of Faith Today.)



Teach me your paths

Education in Jesus' time — home to synag

By Father John Castelot
NC News Service

Education wasn't extremely formal in the days of Jesus, but there was a system of sorts. When a boy was very young, his mother was responsible for his training in the simple rudiments of daily living.

But soon the father took over as principal teacher. He was responsible for education in the law of the Jews, the history and traditions of the people, simple economics, and a trade or skill.

Usually a father taught his sons his own trade. Expertise was handed down from generation to generation.

Perhaps the Gospel of John reflects this when, in what was probably a simple parable, it says: "The Son cannot do anything by himself; he can do only what he sees the Father doing...For the Father loves the Son and everything the Father does he shows him" (John 5:19-20).

Girls remained in the care of

the mother. They were instructed in the duties of daughters and prospective wives and mothers. No self-respecting rabbi would accept a girl as a student.

This makes all the more remarkable the familiar scene of Mary — the sister of Martha — sitting at the Lord's feet and listening to him (Luke 10:39). She was assuming the posture of a student seated at the feet of a master. A woman definitely wasn't expected to do this in those times.

Also remarkable was the way Jesus easily accepted the Samaritan woman in what amounted to a discussion of theological matters (John 4).

When education became a bit more formal, classes were held in the local synagogue. There the scribes, experts in the Law of Moses, instructed boys in the Scriptures, which were their national heritage.

Learning with the scribes consisted largely of memorization and repetition; there were no textbooks, and manuscripts were

expensive and carefully preserved.

At the temple in Jerusalem famous rabbis would gather students about them at specified places in the vast courtyard and its protective porticoes.

With this background, it becomes easier to understand what happened when, while visiting his home village, Jesus gave the homily at the sabbath synagogue service.

The synagogue was a lay organization and any qualified member could preach. One can imagine that the homilies were not always of the highest caliber, especially in a little out-of-the-way place like Nazareth. But Jesus "began to teach in the synagogue in a way that kept his large audience amazed."

Their reaction was interesting: "Where did he get all this? What kind of wisdom is he endowed with?" (Mark 6:2). Apparently they were well aware that Jesus had no formal schooling; He had lived with them all his life until quite recently.