

# Priest was 'big' in many ways

By Father Richard P. McBrien  
Syndicated columnist

Father James Conefrey, a priest of the Archdiocese of Hartford, Conn., died in January, short of his 73rd birthday and his 48th anniversary of ordination.

He is the subject of this week's column, not only because of the enormous admiration and respect I had for him, but also because of what his life as a priest meant for the church in and beyond the state of Connecticut.

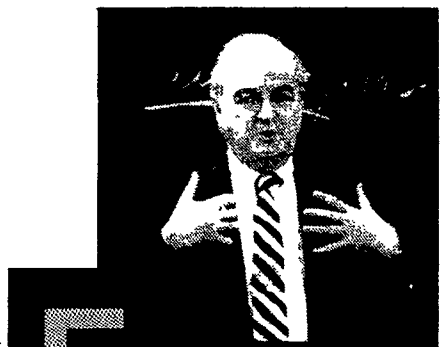
He was "Big Jim" to everyone who knew him well, especially his brother priests and his former students at St. Thomas Seminary in Bloomfield, Conn., where he had served on the faculty and later as rector for 35 years.

As his friend Monsignor William Mullen said of him at his funeral, Jim Conefrey was big in many ways.

He was big, first and most obviously, in physical stature. A towering, broad-shouldered man, he had a booming voice and penetrating eyes — qualities that served him well during his years as the seminary's dean of discipline.

But his bark and his stare were always softened by a ready smile, a twinkle in the eye, and a warm and caring disposition. Big Jim was big-hearted.

He was also big intellectually, even though he never had the opportunity of doing graduate studies or engaging in traditional scholarly



## ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

work. Bright and incisive, he would have succeeded grandly at both.

Instead, his time and energies were consumed over the years by a heavy teaching load, administrative duties, and service on various diocesan commissions, including the directorship of the Propagation of the Faith.

Jim Conefrey was, in the end, a big person, and this is why the length of his shadow extends beyond Connecticut.

Ordained in 1944, a full 18 years before the opening of the Second Vatican Council, he was a priest thoroughly trained and formed in the pre-Vatican II church. And he trained and formed countless other future priests in and for a pre-conciliar church.

But when the council came and the winds of the Holy Spirit blew across the church's face, Big Jim Conefrey did not retreat — like some others — to the safety of familiar ideas, familiar habits and familiar attitudes.

He read the "signs of the times" and welcomed the challenge of change, eager to do his part in helping to lead the people of God, especially its future priests, into a new and exciting moment of the church's history.

For the last 10 years of his life, already in his 60s, he served as pastor in Farmington, a well-to-do Hartford suburb. Here he ministered even-handedly to rich and poor alike. He was, as priests have always been charged to be, "all things to all people."

Jim Conefrey was a good pastor because he met people where they were, not speaking to them as if he alone occupied the moral high-ground.

His physical problems first surfaced almost at the same time that he began this last phase of his ministry at St. Patrick's.

First the arthritis, painful and crippling, and then the kidney ailment that forced him to undergo dialysis treatments three times a week for the last year and a half of his life.

And yet he never lost his confidence or his determination to carry on with his duties. He continued his pastoral work until retirement last August, and even kept at his golf

game, although limited now to a few holes per outing.

He was a whole person and a dedicated priest to the end. Not clerical, not effete, not self-righteous, not censorious, not ideological, not reactionary.

In other words, he was just the kind of priest the church needed in the years before Vatican II, and just the kind of priest the church needed in the years after Vatican II — and needs more desperately than ever today.

If one should bemoan the personal and ideological rigidity of some who present themselves for ordination or who have been advanced to positions of pastoral leadership in the church today, it is not for the sake of depreciating the priesthood or undermining the ecclesiastical authority.

On the contrary, the church needs good priests who are healthy, whole human beings, and it needs to speak and act with a moral authority that it is at once credible and effective.

Jim Conefrey's ministerial life set a standard of excellence on both counts.

Although there are still many like him in the priesthood and among the ranks of its pastoral leaders, their number is in decline.

How the church addresses this most serious of challenges will shape its course for the next century and the new millennium.

Jim Conefrey would not have settled for easy, pious answers. Neither should we.

# We must conquer our temptations

By Father Albert Shamon  
Courier columnist

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Luke 4:1-13; (R1) Deuteronomy 26:4-10; (R2) Romans 10:8-13.

One of Lent's themes is baptism; the other is penance (Vatican II, *Constitution on Sacred Liturgy*, #109).

St. Luke tells us that after Jesus had been baptized, He was "led by the Spirit into the desert for forty days, to be tempted by the devil." Why was He tempted? Why are we tempted?

Temptations are of two kinds: seductive and probative.

A seductive temptation is a solicitation to evil. God can never tempt us that way. Thus St. James writes: "No one experiencing temptation should say, 'I am being tempted by God;' for God is not subject to temptation to evil, and he himself tempts no one" (1:13).

A probative temptation is a test God permits to help us discover ourselves, such as our strengths and our weaknesses. "Consider it all joy, my brothers, when you encounter various trials, for you know the testing of your faith produces perseverance" (James 1:2-3).

Thus Satan, like an assassin, cuts to kill. God, as a surgeon does, cuts to cure.

Our Lord's temptations in the desert were probative. At His baptism, the Spirit had come upon Him. By combatting the powers of darkness, Jesus learned how powerful the Spirit's coming had made Him. The temptations revealed to Jesus what opposition He would be up against during His public ministry and what power He had to conquer evil's forces through the Holy Spirit.

Our temptations also can help us realize who our enemy is and what we are really up against — "our struggle is not with flesh and blood but ... with the evil spirits" (Ephesians 6:12).

They also help us understand why God calls us to prayer, penance and the sacraments. And, above all, they help us to get to know ourselves and our weaknesses.

Jack Nicklaus, one of the greatest golfers ever, achieved his skill by carefully analyzing and correcting his mistakes. During one championship match, he was having trouble with his putting. After the first round, he watched the tournament's videotapes. He spied the

trouble: "I've been leaning over too far," he said.

Before resuming play the next day, he practiced his putting over and over again on the putting green, until he had overcome the weakness. He won the tournament.

A basic step to success in any field is to check ourselves and learn our weaknesses.

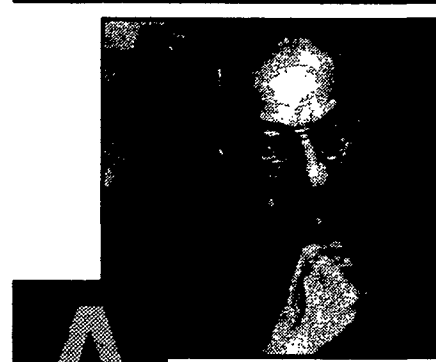
Temptations can strengthen us. They temper the soul as steel is by fire. The swimmer grows strong in swimming against the current. The kite rises high in the wind. In Poland's darkness under communism, not one priest left the priesthood.

Before temptation, be on guard and pray. In times of peace prepare for war.

During temptation, resist promptly. The Imitation says, "Resist beginnings."

If victorious after temptation, thank God; if defeated, try again and again and again. St. Augustine became a saint by stepping on his vices. His victory inspired Longfellow's *Ladder of St. Augustine*:

*St. Augustine! well hast thou said,  
That of our vices we can frame*



## WORD FOR SUNDAY

*A ladder, if we will but tread  
Beneath our feet each deed of shame!  
We have no wings, we cannot soar;  
But we have feet to scale and climb  
By slow degrees, by more and more,  
The cloudy summits of our time.  
The heights by great men reached  
and kept  
Were not attained by sudden flight,  
But they, while their companions  
slept,  
Were toiling upward in the night.*

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