

Robert F. Hennessey — bishop, priest, friend

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Caption: Deacon Hennessey celebrates baptism, one of thousands in his lifetime.

The seminary faculty had decided that the freshman class of St. John Seminary College would live on the same floor and rooms would be distributed alphabetically. The goal was to create class cohesion and spirit. The arrangement meant that my room was directly across from that of one Robert F. Hennessey.

The proximity of our student rooms helped begin a friendship that has continued to this day. As with most friends we have a number of qualities and characteristics in common, and a good number that are different and in some sense complementary.

Since this is about the new bishop, I'll speak about him -- this is in itself dangerous because he does have a unique ability to "recall" and -- well... "to repay."

Family

He was born in South Boston on April 20, 1952 a son of St. Augustine Parish where he was baptized by Father Gerard Barry (presently a senior priest of the archdiocese living at Regina Cleri). He was the second of what would be five children of John and Eileen (Cahill) Hennessey. His older brother John, his younger brother Dan and his two even younger sisters Deborah and Barbara, round out the clan.

The Old Colony Project was the first family home. In those days the projects had been built to house the veterans of the Second World War and Korea who return home in great number and started families. The housing was intended to be temporary until the families could move, usually to their own home. The Hennessey's eventually moved from Southie to West Roxbury.

While in South Boston the children attended St. Augustine Grammar School where the Sisters of Notre Dame, classes filled to overflowing, imparted faith and knowledge to their students.

Spotted early on as a student with a fine mind, young Robert took the entrance exam and was accepted at the prestigious Boston Latin School when he was to enter grade seven. As was becoming expected, he did very well in class.

All the while he was present in the parish serving as an altar boy. He can tell you stories about the great priests at St. Augustine's and especially the fabled pastor, Msgr. Harry O'Connor a great and looming ecclesiastical and public figure.

The happy family was struck by tragedy when the new bishop's mother died suddenly while he was still in grammar school, leaving his father John literally as both parents for his five children. The challenge was all the greater as he was a Boston Police officer and work hours were anything but regular, definitely not a 9-5.

All the while the call to the priesthood was growing in Bob's mind and heart and on graduation from Latin School he was accepted at St. John Seminary College.

Seminary

In the seminary some things became immediately obvious to all of us. Bob Hennessey was smart, but he was never one to lord his brains or other natural talents over others. He worked hard, he enjoyed a good time, he was witty and quick. It was only sometimes when one walked away and thought for a second -- he just got me with that line. As good as he was at witty remarks he could also be the brunt of them and he took a jab as readily as he might give it. He knows how to laugh -- both at himself and others.

Another quality of the bishop-elect is that he knows what to take seriously, and does so, and also what to take "cum grano salis" as they might say at Latin School -- with a grain of salt. Scripture says it nicely...He is the good steward who knows how to take the best from the new and the old.

Regarding the new bishop's sense of humor. It is really very easy to get him to laugh. But what you really need to try to do is bring him to tears -- of laughter. Every once in a while a story will be told and name referenced and he will laugh to tears. Literally. What you need to know is that the fertile mind has probably just recalled another related situation or person or something that the teller said or did 10 years ago...only when he recovers from the laughter do you get "the rest of the story."

Travels

Following second and third theology, the new bishop, the late Father David Rittenhouse and I traveled once ? halfway across the country and the next time all the way -- back and forth. If you still remain friends after that kind of sojourn you'll likely be friends for the rest of your lives. Two things happened on those trips -- we got see good portions of the United States at the ground level and we got to know even more each others rough edges and warts, but also gifts and abilities.

Following ordination to the diaconate in 1977, Bishop Hennessey was assigned at St. Ann, Gloucester. Cardinal Medeiros ordained 12 of us at Holy Cross Cathedral on May 20, 1978. He was sent "south" to "Hanson...even Cardinal Medeiros wasn't sure where it was, saying "I think it's near Plymouth" then he grabbed a Boston Catholic Directory and pointed out the town on the map. Two other parish assignments followed one in neighboring Plymouth at St. Peter Parish, where Father Hennessey befriended the late Father Dan Lynch. He moved north to Needham's St. Joseph Parish in 1983, serving there until 1986. Even after his first eight years, he was developing a chain of relationships with priests of all ages.

His parish life had been interrupted very briefly when he accepted an invitation to pursue graduate studies at the University of Notre Dame in South Bend, Ind. Although an excellent student, he realized, as did Cardinal Medeiros that his best and happiest days lay ahead in parish ministry.

St. James Society

Until he volunteered to take his parish ministry back down south, but this time "way south" -- to South America as a member of the Missionary Society of St. James the Apostle. For more than eight years he served in parishes of the Society in Bolivia.

I recall speaking once about his parish -- seemed more like a diocese to me -- there was the main parish church with multiple outlying chapels and stations and the Catholic population was some 45,000 people, he was the only priest. (Today there are more than 20 dioceses in the United States that have fewer people than in Father Hennessey's Bolivian parish!)

To say he loved the society, the priests of the Society and especially the people of Bolivia would be the greatest of understatements.

Once again, it struck me that Bishop-elect Hennessey loved the Church and he really loved priests and liked being with priests.

It was obvious that he would develop a facility and ease with Spanish, but he also has a working knowledge of some of the native tongues of Bolivia. And he can move easily among and between them.

Back in the USA

When he returned to Boston in 1994, any idea that there would be a rest or sabbatical before taking on a new assignment was quickly put to rest when Cardinal Law named him pastor of Most Holy Redeemer Parish in East Boston. For three years that appointment was accompanied by his also being the administrator of the Chapel of Our Lady of the Airways at Boston's Logan International Airport (1995-1998) and an 18-month stint as administrator of a bordering East Boston parish, Our Lady of the Assumption (January 2001 to June 2002).

If you did not know how much Father Hennessey breathed with Spanish lungs and loved with a Spanish heart because of his service in South America, all you had to do was spend some time at his East Boston parish. The rectory is a beehive of activity, kind of the brains of the operation, the venerable church is the heart of the parish where the sacramental life is celebrated with Latin exuberance. The Crossroads Shelter is the "hands" of the parish, reaching out in service and care. With endless patience, profound enthusiasm and deep commitment, Father Hennessey is really the "padre" -- father of the parish family.

During his service at East Boston he has taken care, first and foremost of the spiritual needs of the parish family. He has certainly celebrated more baptisms at Most Holy Redeemer in his eight years there, than most of us would celebrate in a lifetime. The parish's Masses are filled to overflowing. His homilies are both folksy and down to earth, yet filled with faith and sound teaching. The people sense a shepherd's heart.

A priests' priest

This is a term familiar to priests but maybe not to others, and it's not easy to explain. It refers to a quality about a priest that says he loves being a priest, other priests see it, and they sense also that he loves them personally. Another action of Father Hennessey at East Boston was the sprucing up of the parish plant, including the rectory which he made into his home -- but a home always with open doors, especially for priests.

He always wants us over to East Boston, most of the time for something simple: sandwiches, pizza or pasta and even a "drop of the creature" as the Irish might say. But really it's to get priests together for conversation and fraternity. He does this on both a small scale and on larger ones. Invites to his "times" are plentiful and your invitation always includes an invitation to any other priest you want to invite. There is an observation about the Irish "if you walk through a family's kitchen once, the next time you're surely a cousin." There is an appropriate adaptation of that for Bishop-elect Hennessey: "If you're a priest you have a standing invitation."

"Obispo flamante"

With his ordination to the episcopacy Bishop-elect Hennessey assumes a greater role of responsibility in and for the Church. We who know him suspect it really means more time and attention to everything he's already done so well.

Priests, especially, will continue to have a friend, advocate and guide readily available and willing to assist in any way possible.

He will have a special relationship with the ever-growing Hispanic communities of the archdiocese.

One of the community newspapers referred to him at the time of his appointment as "obispo flamante" best translated he tells me as "fiery bishop." It is difficult for us who know him to be possessed of "Irish reserve" to think this way about his style. It is not hard for us to see this referring to his fiery zeal -- for people and priests, for Christ and His Church.