

## Here on the Way to There

By **Rev. Robert J. Kennedy**

I am deeply humbled to have the responsibility of offering a reflection at this vigil tonight for Msgr. William Shannon. I ask myself, “Why me?” I am neither his most successful student nor his closest friend. I only know myself to be among the many who were – and still are – and will be – mentored by Bill. And it is from this standpoint that I speak tonight. How many of us there are – thousands of students over the years, and many thousands more whom he touched and guided through his books, articles, catechetical materials, talks, discussion groups, commissions, committees, councils and retreats.

I came under his wing in the early 1970s as a very young member, not yet ordained, of the Diocesan Liturgical Commission. Our meetings took place across campus in his apartment. With the determined, convicted, assertive style he had, he taught me one thing above all – that sacramental life, faith life, human life lived to the fullest, requires ongoing conversion. At the time we were implementing the liturgical changes following Vatican II, especially the rite of penance. Again and again he came back to that theme of conversion as the means for growth in a holy and human life.

A few weeks ago, that theme became his last written word to us as our teacher and mentor and fellow pilgrim, when a book with an improbable title was published: *How to Become a Christian Even If You Already Are One!* It is a memoir of the four conversions of his own faith life. At the outset Bill quotes John Henry Newman: “In a higher world it is otherwise; but here below, to live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often.” Bill himself writes; “A true conversion changes you so much that you see life and reality in altogether different ways. But because reality is multi-faceted, you need to go through more than one conversion before you can enter fully into the mystery of God who is at the very heart of all reality.”

Then, as the true teacher and mentor he always has been and always will be to us, he takes us through his own journey of conversion: the conversion to a new way of reading the Bible; the conversion to a new way of prayer in God’s presence, discovered through his study of Thomas Merton; the conversion to non-violence, also through the influence of Merton; the conversion to a new understanding of the Church and a new way of living in it. Bill witnesses to the fact that every conversion in life leads us more deeply into the mystery of God, into the mystery of Easter. But each conversion is only preparatory. It anticipates the final conversion – entry into the mystery described so succinctly by Saint Paul in the scripture passage read at this evening’s vigil: “Listen, I will tell you a mystery! . . . We will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. . . . For this imperishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality” (1 Cor.



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15:51-53).

The photograph on the back cover of *How to Become a Christian* pictures Bill, his perishable body a bit slumped in a chair, with a snowy scene outside the window in front of him, and a fiery red poinsettia on the coffee table in front of him. Whether he is contemplating the winter of his life, or the fiery silence of God's ever-present love, I do not know, but it is clearly a moment of "here on the way to there." All the conversions of Bill's life have now led to this final conversion: rising from his wheelchair, the vigor of his spirit flooding his body once again, as he strides into the very mystery of Easter, the very heart of God, the very heart of all that is real. There is no sting there! no victory for death! no looking back, even to us, the many whom Bill taught and mentored and befriended. He simply leaves us the words of St. Paul: "Beloved, be steadfast, ever-faithful, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain" (1 Cor. 15:58).