

How long should a life last?

As I was leaving the hospital in May after treatment for my blood clots, another priest was returning to the hospital. I would have an extension of life. The life of Father Kevin Brooksbank would end at age 35.

From a human perspective, every death is tragic. The death of a young person is especially tragic. As the line from the old song goes: "There were so many songs still waiting to be sung."

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My first response is to think of a story a missionary priest told. He had just witnessed the death of a newborn baby, and asked the doctor who had delivered the infant, "What was the purpose of this child's life?" She replied, "The baby evoked love from me. Perhaps that is enough."

Life can't be measured in earth years or clock time. Life is best measured by love, the love given and the love received.

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My second response is to think of a story from my own life. In 1959 I was in my first year of high school in the minor seminary, St. Charles College in Catonsville (the current site of Charlestown). Father Elmer Putsche told us of a young priest, Father Perkowski, newly ordained, who was dying. I don't know if that's the correct spelling of his name. I know absolutely nothing else about him. But the priest I never really knew became a priest that I never forgot.

At that moment in my life, sitting in the junior study hall, there were 12 long years separating me from ordination – four years of high school, four years of college, and four years of theology in the Major Seminary at St. Mary's Seminary, Roland Park. I couldn't imagine what it would be like to climb that 12-story mountain, and then never be able to minister as a priest! So in some fashion, the memory of that priest helped me to persevere through some pretty dark times so that I could honor the ministry that he never had.

I hope in the same way that many young men will be inspired by the life and death of Father Brooksbank to consider becoming priests themselves. At the last supper Jesus said: "Do this in memory of me!" What an honor to do in memory of Father Kevin what he did in memory of Christ.

What could be more noble than to aspire to say the Masses he will no longer say, to celebrate the sacraments Father Kevin will no longer celebrate, to touch the lives of people he will no longer touch.

How long should a life be? Life is measured by the love it evokes. Life is measured by the people we inspire. My third answer would be that life is measured by the challenges we dare and the dreams we follow.

During a challenging time in my own early priesthood, my personal physician was Dr. Paul Coffay. Speaking like a 'Dutch Uncle' one day, he said: "Joe, give yourself credit for trying something I didn't try. Being a priest is not easy. You took the challenge." In those days, the song "To Dream The Impossible Dream" was quite popular. Sometimes that describes the priesthood - sharing the ministry of Christ and also sharing his crucifixion and death.

How long should a life be? My final answer comes from a story about President Abraham Lincoln. He was asked one day how tall he thought a man should be. Lincoln responded: "A man's legs should be long enough to reach the ground."

Perhaps the same could be said of life. A person's life should be long enough to reach God. And, as in Father Brooksbank's case, long enough to help others to reach God as well.