

Remembering Cardinal Keeler



Cardinal William H. Keeler speaks to the media prior to leaving Baltimore for Rome to participate in the papal conclave in 2005. (CR File)

I had planned to write on another topic today, but when I woke to see the news of Cardinal Keeler's passing, all I could think about was him, so I thought I'd share those thoughts instead.

I am not someone who knew Cardinal Keeler well; like many hundreds if not thousands of others, I am someone who simply encountered the cardinal, who met him and watched him and who feels blessed to have done so. But though I have no intimate or profound experiences to relate, I can tell you about the love and light I felt when I was around Cardinal Keeler, and which I feel now as I remember him.

I grew up in the Archdiocese of Baltimore – I was ten when Keeler was installed as Archbishop and nearly thirty when he retired – so to me, the cardinal looms large as a representation of bishops, and of the Archdiocese, and indeed of the Church itself. But not just because of his position.

Cardinal Keeler was one of those rare individuals who made everyone feel like they counted. He connected with people. He was funny and clever and he had this sparkle in his eye that made you feel like you were in on the joke. The cardinal exuded love and warmth and an intangible quality that must have had something to do with the light of Christ. You just felt lucky to be around him.

I first met Cardinal Keeler when I participated in the Archdiocese's High School Leadership Institute (High LI). Somehow I ended up with the job of introducing His Eminence to the crowd and sitting with him (moderating, perhaps?) as he answered questions. I remember that he anticipated my nerves and set me at ease.

Years later, when I was working at the Maryland Catholic Conference, my colleagues and I loved answering the phone when he called. He'd stop and inquire about you before asking to be passed along to the person he needed. He was always kind. He was always gentle. And yet Cardinal Keeler was also sharp – purposeful and firm.

I saw Cardinal Keeler at countless events – in parishes, at my college, in the Statehouse, at meetings and dinners – and he seemed to bring life to each of them. That's not a super unusual quality for well-known people to have – I've shared spaces with lots of "important" people and they often cause excitement when they walk into a room. But (and this is kind of hard to explain), I found that when

Cardinal Keeler was in a group of people, he didn't just cause excitement; he also altered the group's dynamic. His wake wasn't flat; he left you feeling more loving and committed for having been near him.

When I worked for the Conference, we were often reminded that for some people, we would be The Church to them, we would be Christ to them. We would speak to a legislator or an advocate or a hurting parishioner, and we had the weighty responsibility of conveying - in our honesty and kindness and clarity and mercy - God's love to them.

From everything I saw of Cardinal Keeler, he lived out this responsibility beautifully. From his leadership in the Archdiocese and the brotherhood of bishops, to his work as a bridge-builder between Christians and Jews, to his everyday interactions with his flock, Cardinal Keeler was a man who - with gentleness and wit - lovingly conveyed the love and light of Christ.

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