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REMEMBERING FATHER KEITH B. KENNY

By Monsignor James Murphy, printed in January/February 2012 Edition of the *Catholic Herald*



Photo from Diocesan Archives

Father Keith B Kenny

Father Keith B Kenny was a controversial priest of our diocese – a social activist whom the Sacramento City Unified School District honored by naming a public school after him.

As the theme of this issue of *Catholic Herald* is Catholic Education, it is fitting to remember this priest after whom Father Keith B. Kenny Elementary School on Martin Luther King Blvd in Sacramento is named.

Ironically, Keith was not well-known for his efforts in education. He was better known as a fighter for Mexican farm workers, a supporter of the United Farm Workers' union who got his name in *Time* magazine (December 1965) when he flew a Cessna 180 over the Delano area of Southern California and dropped "Huelga" leaflets into the fields. Beside him in the plane that day was Cesar Chavez, who addressed the farm workers on a bullhorn.

He was a personal friend of Chavez and hosted him several times at Our Lady of Guadalupe Church, when the union organizer visited Sacramento. He also provided a bed once for Father Daniel Berrigan, when the anti-war Jesuit was on the run from the FBI for damaging military property.

Those were the days of confrontational politics in the church (the '60s and '70s), and Keith was on the front lines for it all. Chancery office officials were regularly peppered with letters and phone calls from farmers and others who were angry at the sight of a Catholic priest carrying picket signs in vineyards in the San Joaquin Valley, many of them owned by Catholics. Keith was often in trouble with bishops.

Not that he was bothered by the rebukes of church authorities. He was as impatient with ecclesiastical bureaucracy as he was with unfair labor practices. At one point, he abruptly left his job as a legislative analyst at the California Catholic Conference, telling a reporter "The office was on the 11th floor, the action was on the street."

I knew Keith well. We traveled together in Latin America a number of times, and, during the Reagan era, we co-authored a series of articles for Catholic News Service and the *Sacramento Bee* Sunday Forum section on revolution-torn Central America. Working with him was never boring.

I admired his intellectual brilliance and multi-faceted personality, his love of poetry (he once wrote a college essay about the heroic couplet – in heroic couplets), his skill with badgers (he was a licensed flight and instrument instructor); his expertise in future planning (he served on the Sacramento County Planning Commission and was board president for the Sacramento Area Economic Opportunity Council), the respect he commanded among politicians (when he died, a California Senate resolution called him "a tribute not only to the priesthood, but to the state of California"); his popularity with the students at California State University, Sacramento (he taught in the School of Social Work); and his affection for the Mexican people (he was known to cry on occasion when counseling troubled parishioners).

I also admired his efforts to wake us all up to the growing presence of Hispanics in California – in society at large, but also in the Catholic Church. There were no Spanish Masses anywhere in

the Sacramento Diocese at that time, with the exception of Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish (of which he was pastor) and Holy Rosary Parish in Woodland.

Keith was determined to change that, and he didn't suffer fools easily. I often squirmed at his confrontational methods and wondered if the same result could not be achieved by more patient means. But trying to tell that to Keith would be trying to tell John the Baptist to wear respectable clothes. Prophets have their own way of doing things.

What would Keith think of things in our diocese today? He would be happy to see a Hispanic bishop in charge. And he would approve of efforts to strengthen schools such as St Patrick's SUCCEED Academy and Holy Cross College Preparatory Academy. He would also approve of the new Spanish language radio station – *Radio Santísimo Sacramento 1240 AM* – that went on the air in October.

Would he take any credit for those advances? Not a chance! He was too shy and self-effacing for that. But he should. We stand on the shoulders of men like him.



Photo by John E Boll 1959

Father Kenny Gives a Retreat at St Pius X Seminary, Rio Dell in 1959