



FRIENDS

The Missionary Society of St. James the Apostle

July 2024



The First and the Last...

Dear Friends,

We devote this issue to Fr. William Pearsall, who recently died in May. He was a missionary priest, dedicated to his ministry and to the St. James Society. Fr. Des Tynan, a fellow St. James Society alumnus, aptly stated, upon hearing of Fr. Bill's passing, "*He was the first and the last.*" Fr. Des referred to the fact that Fr. Bill was the very first member of the original group of missionaries whom Cardinal Cushing sent to Peru in 1959; he was also the last surviving member of that first group. Fr. Bill was ordained on September 29, 1953 in Holy Cross Cathedral, Boston by Cardinal Richard Cushing. After Ordination, Fr. Pearsall served in the Archdiocese of Boston until 1959, when he answered the call of Cardinal Cushing and left Boston to serve in South America. He was the first among fourteen priests who volunteered for The Missionary Society of St. James. He served for the next 41 years, in parishes in Peru, including in the Abancay, Piura, Sicuani and Chimbote dioceses. Fr. Bill later assumed the role as Director of the St. James Society from 1993 to 1997.

Diocesan priests serving the poorest of the poor in Latin America since 1958.

Fr. William Pearsall's funeral Mass was celebrated at St. Margaret's in Lowell, MA on May 8th, 2024. Fr. David Costello, current Director of the Society, was the homilist. Fr. David opened his homily with these words, "It is said that 'the greatness of a man is not in how much wealth or material possession or fame he acquires in this life, but in his integrity, his faithfulness and his ability to give of himself completely and affect those around him positively.' Fr. Bill Pearsall was such a Man; he lived a long and fruitful life of 95 years. He dedicated 66 of his years to the Society of St. James."

Fr. David continued, "For those of us who are members or alumni of the St. James Society we have much to be grateful for, to Fr. Bill Pearsall...as Fr. Des Tynan reminded me on the phone a few days ago... 'Bill was the first and the last'...he was the first member of the original group, and he was the last remaining member of that important group. Bill was very proud of the fact that he was the very first priest of the Archdiocese of Boston to be accepted for the St. James Society by Cardinal Cushing. We know that Fr. Bill wrote directly to Cardinal Cushing at the suggestion of his uncle, Fr. Ernie. In response to Bill's letter expressing interest in this new missionary endeavor... Cardinal Cushing wrote him a congratulatory note on April 30, 1958: "Dear Fr. Pearsall... Your letter thrills me... I will see you sometime later, within a couple of months. I will at least list you tentatively as the first priest to be identified with the Society of St. James the Apostle."

Reflecting on his initial acceptance into the Society, during an interview in 1994 with Bill Milhomme, Fr. Bill Pearsall explained, "Cardinal Cushing formed this first group between March and June 1958 and he invited the men to his home for dinner, in June. During dinner the Cardinal explained they would all be going down to Peru in March of 1959 and he advised them, '...don't say anything yet. You don't want to be saying goodbye for nine months!' Yet, within an hour of giving this directive, the Cardinal himself led the rosary on the radio and told his audience that he had some priests with him on the radio who '...are the first members of the St. James Society and are going down to Peru next year'. The Cardinal proceeded to list each of our names, on the radio when we had not even had a chance to tell our families or pastors!"

When asked about his first days in the mountains in Peru, Fr. Bill reflected, "I remember saying to Joe Martin and Tony Vasaturo (two fellow missionary priests), 'We better just walk around and let the people know who we are and that we are here'. Of course we were wearing cassocks in those days. We wore the cassocks everywhere, as all priests did. We were walking around and could hardly talk; but we were shaking hands and showing the people who we were because they couldn't figure us out. Why would these 'gringos' come away up here to work with us? They couldn't understand what we were doing there. Why would anybody choose to go Apurimac, which was one of the most backward areas of Peru...gradually they came to

figure it out. We started teaching in the schools... There was plenty of sacramental work to do. In fact, during our first year in Andahuaylas we did 1,500 Baptisms, and 440 weddings, just in the first year... When they found out who we were and what



Frs. Bill Pearsall & Dan Sheehan



First group of Society of St. James Priests: Fr. Bill Pearsall, Back Row, Far Right.

we were, they wanted to get married. It really snowballed. There was plenty to do in the beginning.' When Bill Milhomme asked Fr. Pearsall about the camaraderie among the priests in South America, Bill shared his memories of the early days and the challenges: "Well, it was a matter of survival. I mean we were the only gringos for hundreds of miles around. We used to go to extremes to get together. I used to go to Huancarama just to get away. Fr. Dan Sheehan would say that I was the only guy that would go to Huancarama on a day off. It was a three hour trip each way. So I would drive down one day and stay overnight and come back the next. I remember I used to go down there to get a shower Because they had a 55 gallon drum. You could take a shower there, even though it took about three hours to heat the water!! We didn't even have that in Andahuaylas!!" Fr. Bill talked about how they used horses and also used F100 Ford Trucks to drive on the unpaved mountain roads and they even applied for radio licenses. Electricity and water were scarce. Fr. Bill commented, "Running water we used to get from the street. You had to bring it in pails. We didn't do it. We had the kids bring the water to us. It was basic. They were living like five hundred years ago." Communication was a significant challenge in those days in Peru.

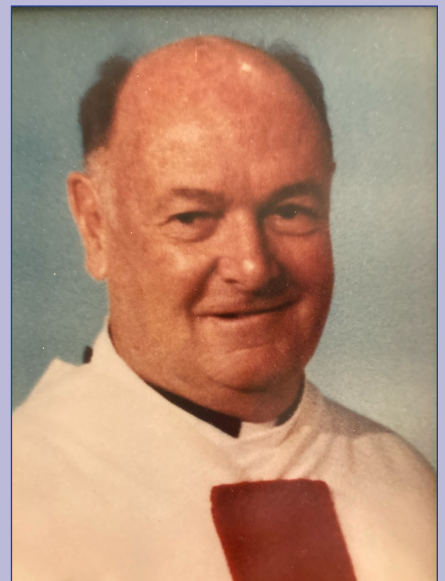


A Carmelite named George O'Keefe recommended that Fr. Bill and his fellow priests obtain radio licenses, once they arrived in Peru. Fr. Bill explained, "It was the only way of communication among the parishes in the mountains in those days. So every night about nine o'clock we would go on the air for an hour or so. Just talk back and forth and even joke around. You were not supposed to fool around. This was real radio. This wasn't walkie talkie. It was a signal. You could go all around the world if you were on the right frequency...I remember meeting someone in Cuzco, Peru. He found out my name, he said 'Ohh. I listen to you and Dan every night.' We realized this was crazy. We better watch what we say! They used to call it the **Bill and Dan Hour** in the beginning. We were the first two that had radio licenses. We had to watch out what we were talking about. Anyway...We used it for communication to talk among ourselves. They used to go on [the radio] in Lima. Fr. Leo Mahoney was good at going on [the radio] when we needed something and we would order it.



The telephone was hopeless. There was no other way... a telegram could take three days or something. The radios were very good. Not only for getting our needs met and communication but also for entertainment too. They played a big part, those radios." When asked about other memories of his first years working in Peru, Fr. Bill talked about the importance of catechists to support their work, "Without the catechists we could do nothing. So we all had catechists. There were pretty good catechetical programs. We used to send them over to the diocese of Cuzco for a month-long course to prepare them.

There were weekly, monthly meetings with the catechists. They were great. Without them you couldn't do it. Here we are, two or three men with maybe 30,000 - 40,000 people. Spread over hundreds of miles. They were great. You would work with catechists and then they would go back and prepare the people. Then when you went out to the place the people were already for confessions and so on. Without catechists you just couldn't do anything. A great program."



Fr. David Costello shared a memory of Fr. Bill Pearsall, as a generous mentor, when he first came out of language school in Peru, "I will always remember his [Fr. Bill's] words of encouragement to me as a young priest, as the newest member at that time...he was conscious that I had recently arrived fresh out of language school and so there was the normal struggle with speaking Spanish and settling into a new culture and a whole new way of being a priest. He commended me for volunteering for mission service... for making the decision to join the St. James Society and moving to Peru. He assured me my priesthood would benefit greatly and that my life most likely would never be the same... and then he told me that he wished that he was at my stage...starting all over again...because, as he told me, he loved being a missionary, and he loved every single day he spent with the St. James Society." Fr. Bill Pearsall conveyed his optimism and leadership when he told Bill Milhomme: "We often say a strong thing in the Society is 'flexibility.' There is a place for everybody here. Regardless of whether you are conservative or liberal or such. There is a place for everybody. We have three countries. In each country we have different areas, different dioceses...All kinds of opportunity. Somebody should be able to find his niche. If you can't find something that appeals to you in those three countries, then there is something wrong. It is a great opportunity to express yourself."

Fr. Costello closed his funeral homily, with these memorable words: "We are grateful to Fr. Bill for his leadership of the St. James Society and for all he did to ensure that we are still responding to Cardinal Cushing's vision of being present among the poorest of the poor 66 years on. At every opportunity Bill would let me know that the St. James Society meant so much to him and, in encouraging me, he wanted to ensure that it would continue long into the future so that many more priests could have the same joyful and joy filled experience that he had. I know Fr. Bill will continue to watch over us and urge us on from his place in heaven...He was keenly aware of all the blessings God had gifted him with, and he was proud to share them with others. His focus was never on himself; he was always looking to see how he could use his God given talents for the benefit of others. This knowledge and way of living made him, in turn, a blessing to everyone he encountered. He was a popular presence in the St. James Society since its foundation, and I know he was well loved and appreciated in each of the parishes he served here in the Archdiocese."

(Sincere thanks to Bill Milhomme for his contributions to this article)

With Every Good Wish in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "David Costello".

Rev. David Costello, Director



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