

Eulogy Remarks
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The Rev. Canon P. Simon Mein
St. Andrew's A. Felix duPont Jr. Chapel
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On behalf of our trustees, faculty, staff and student body, I welcome you all to this beautiful memorial service celebrating the life of Simon Mein. We who gather in this Chapel today represent generations of men and women across the country and the world who have been touched, guided and inspired by the love, humanity and brilliance of Simon and Nan Mein. Today, St. Andrew's embraces Nan and her family, assuring you of our love, our ardent support, and our commitment to making this a school and community that reflects the values you lived out and taught us so well. We particularly welcome Simon and Nan's daughter-in-law Olivia Ringer and her husband John, his daughter Casey, as well as Nan's sister Margaret Cota and her daughter Elizabeth.

Simon would often visit St. Andrew's English classes, both before and after his retirement, to reflect on the work and vision of the English novel and to read passages from Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice. Of course, he brought a flair and exuberance and a remarkable English accent to these performances—he loved the clarity and wit of Jane Austen's prose, and he particularly appreciated her vivid and searing characterization of men and women who were pompous, self-assured, arrogant and haughty. Mr. Collins was one of Simon's treasured characters—you might remember Collins as the newly ordained minister who declares in one memorable and curious letter to Mr. Bennet that he intends "to demean himself with grateful respect towards his patroness," the equally ridiculous and pompous Catherine de Bourgh. In Chapter 15, Austen breaks from her narrative to give us her opinion of the new minister:

Mr. Collins was not a sensible man, and the deficiency of nature had been but little assisted by education or society . . . his very good opinion of himself, of his authenticity as a clergyman, and his rights as a rector made him altogether a mixture of pride and obsequiousness, self-importance and humility.

It struck me over the past few days that Simon read Jane Austen the same way he approached, crafted and interpreted his life: he worked with all his heart and soul to preserve and strengthen his church, his school, his Chapel and his students and colleagues from the perils of insensibility, egotism, selfishness and complacency. As comic and outrageous as Mr. Collins appears, he is in fact Jane Austen's portrait of the temptations that assail and defeat us each day: the proclivity to think ourselves superior to others, to view the world as the source of our own egotistical needs and concerns, to express power and superiority over others. Simon Mein embraced a Church and school that sought openness, creativity and humanity. He modeled and asserted an approach to education and Episcopal identity that was daring, open, progressive and enlightening.

He did so during a career when both the educational and religious establishments embraced conventional thinking and narrow philosophies. Simon served as Chaplain and teacher of religion at St. Andrew's from 1971-1992, a tenure that included the decade of the 1970's, a particularly arduous decade for schools and colleges across the United States. The very principles and assumptions of the private academy were assaulted by the bitterness, anger and chaos of the 1960's. As the country debated the ethics of a tragic and controversial war and explored new and progressive approaches to women's rights, civil rights and issues of poverty, schools and colleges found their curricula, cultures, values and traditions under siege. Headmasters, Chaplains and College Presidents found themselves educating and developing a new generation that viewed the country with profound skepticism, anger and contempt.

Some colleges and schools maintained a contemptuous attitude towards the new and angry generation, fostering a culture of division and confrontation on campus.

Others left mission, values and tradition behind in a desperate attempt to appear superficially relevant and responsive to societal division and anger.

Simon and Nan entered this complex world, bringing qualities, habits of mind and heart that would enlighten St. Andrew's. Both were gifted scholars with deep interest in reading, research and study, and from the beginning, they modeled an approach to life, to marriage and to the profession of boarding school teaching that was calm, mature, confident, thoughtful and ambitious. Despite and because of the chaos of the national culture, they believed in the possibility and need of a Christian community that opened its minds, doors and windows to the world that was emerging in all its complexity. Education, Episcopal education, residential education could develop a powerful, affirmative and transformational reply to a world in crisis.

Simon and Nan began working with colleagues to assert an ethic of empathy, flexibility, creativity and love into the dorms and classrooms of an all-male school. Simon began to question the distance that separated teachers and their students; he worried about a culture that left boys only with a support structure of muscular independence. He suggested to his colleagues that they open up their lives and minds, release their tendency to judge and label their students and instead honor, celebrate and guide their distinctive journeys. You can hear Simon teaching, exhorting and envisioning in these excerpts from his early letters and essays:

The primary element in the social environment of the boys is that of interpersonal relations. Whatever a boy achieves at school, in academics or athletics, is of little use unless he becomes a mature and integrated person, able to function usefully in society.

We have to remember that it is the fate of educators to have to tolerate and absorb the mistakes and resentments of successive generations of students. Each generation needs the freedom to feel its way. Of course, we have seen it all before, but the boys with us now have not. It will just appear cynical if we are not

ready to listen sympathetically. This is a major part of our vocation. (Perhaps we talk too much!)

The boys have a desperate need to relate to persons; if they cannot do it positively, they will do it negatively. I think there is some evidence that we unconsciously encourage negative reactions by our fear of too much expression of positive emotions: love, freedom, etc. The old English public school tradition of the stiff upper lip reinforces the reticence adolescents have of experiencing emotions freely. The resultant (repressed) emotions then reappear in anti-social, hostile and destructive forms, and we react with punishment.

In such passages, Simon envisioned a school of the future: a community of adults and students who owned the culture in a collaborative and creative way, who found inspiration, hope and meaning from one another. The teacher became the mentor, the coach, the adult who believed in students—believed in a student’s potential for service, goodness and leadership.

This was more than a philosophical shift—this was a new way of envisioning the rituals and traditions of school life. Simon and Nan modeled and explored the life of the dorm parent, the advisor, the teacher, the mentor, and they did so by hosting legions of students, teachers and community members in their apartment and homes. As Director of Residential Life, Simon understood that the dormitory could, with effort and creativity, become a community, a family, a place of hospitality and kindness. He taught me and countless others what it meant to live as adults in a boarding school, and through the power of his example, we learned, changed, grew and developed.

He was the first school counselor—he initiated and led community service programs in the school.

When coeducation came, Nan and Simon were ready to lead, ready to assert a vision of coeducation that honored the active collaboration and respect of men and women throughout the community. As a feminist and advocate of lives of women and girls within the school, Simon helped create a coeducational culture at St. Andrew’s that is strong, powerful and distinctive.

If one of Simon and Nan’s gifts to St. Andrew’s was a radical redefinition of the adult/student relationship, Simon’s other calling was to renew and strengthen the school’s Episcopal calling and identity. This was no easy matter at a time when religion and ritual faced profound skepticism and scorn from a new generation of students. Simon worked to make the Chapel and the religious values of the school relevant and meaningful to the community. He worked passionately to help the community to see that a God of hospitality, kindness and radical love rejected a world of prejudice, division, violence and hatred, and he challenged the community to live these principles out not for an hour on Sunday but through seven days in the upcoming week. In one of his last sermons preached at St. Andrew’s, Simon spoke at Reunion Weekend and articulated the God he worshipped and sought to emulate:

Down the centuries, the openness of God has had to be continually reasserted against human efforts to maintain a narrow, closed community, and repeated efforts to insist on rigid legalism. As we are well aware, the struggle is part of our contemporary scene: too many people make it their job to defend God against the kind of people Jesus welcomed to the table.

Simon's faith and ministry insisted upon human beings growing consciousness and awareness of their blindness, prejudice and hypocrisy. He lived to see and participate in a radical redefinition of what it meant to be an Episcopal leader in America, and he rejoiced in St. Andrew's embrace of diversity in all its forms. To acts and expressions of fear, intolerance and exclusivity, Simon answered with his voice and his pen—with reason, love and fearlessness.

And yet there was more—more than the exhibition of a Christian life, more than an exhibition of what a 21st century marriage would look like. More than a radical redefinition of what it meant to be a teacher, a Chaplain a leader. There were tests, excruciating tests of this man and this woman's love, faith and courage. As Simon and Nan wrestled with Andrew's tragic death or successive bouts with cancer, there easily could have been a day, an hour or a minute of anger, bitterness, despair and weakness. Instead, by prayer, by word, deed and action, Simon and Nan taught us that this love, this faith, this belief is transcendent, authentic, powerful and redemptive. It is in the end indomitable.