

'Tragedy of Fr. Hector's ministry was its brevity'

BY MSGR. FRANCIS R. SEYMOUR

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January of this year marked the 50th anniversary of the inauguration of John F. Kennedy as the 35th President of the United States. He brought a whole new dimension to the White House with his own youthful appearance and a young and very attractive family. He made his official residence into a showplace of art and culture, something long missing from that location. All of this came to a crushing end with his assassination less than three years later.

A popular Broadway musical at the time was "Camelot." This show recounted the joys and sorrows from the legend of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table. Shortly after President Kennedy's tragic death, people started drawing comparisons between his brief public life and the glorious but short reign of Camelot. Both showed great promise of new hope and joy in their lands only to have them come falling down in tragedy. Ever since then, Camelot and the Kennedy administration have become forever intertwined in the public perception.

Here in the Archdiocese of Newark, I feel we have a story that could rival Camelot and the Kennedy presidency, although it is not as world famous or strikingly glamorous as those two productions were. However, I am convinced that this experience made a lasting impression on all who came in contact with it.

I am speaking of the hopes and dreams that arose for many when Father Hector Fabio Galvis Rios began his priestly life in our midst. Fr. Hector was ordained on May 23, 2009 and died a few weeks ago. He served as a priest for only 20 months.

Fr. Hector was born in Colombia and went to high school in a minor seminary there. He moved on to a major seminary for a few years before coming to the United States in 2003. First he went to a seminary in Connecticut and then completed his seminary formation at our Immaculate Conception Seminary in South Orange. After being ordained a deacon, he was assigned to Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church in Jersey City. When he was ordained a priest the following year, Archbishop John J. Myers appointed him a parochial vicar at that same parish. This was a universally applauded decision because he had shown great interest in the people and issues of that parish, so they were delighted to have him continue his ministry among them.

I met Fr. Hector when he was at our seminary. I never saw him without a smile on his face. He was always cheerful and lifted up the spirits of those he met. One way he did this was practicing his art as a first-class barber for his fellow seminarians. Another role he played with equal expertise was as a liaison for a large number of his fellow Colombian brothers who wanted to come to our seminary. He was the one they sought and he gave them every possible assistance and encouragement he could.

The tragedy of his ministry was its brevity. He must have had a sense of this because he drove himself relentlessly in fulfilling all of his priestly duties. A year ago he was diagnosed with leukemia. While that condition was not active it was still there and he never let it interfere with the responsibilities he shouldered. He always enjoyed the company of his fellow priests and the many seminarians he shepherded.

Fr. Hector never looked to be the center of attention nor did he ever try to stir up crowds of people with flamboyant rhetoric. His approach to ministry was much simpler and laid back. He served his parishioners in his own quiet way by just showing up when he was needed and staying as long as he was needed. His time and his convenience were never factors in his life when he was summoned by those who desperately sought his assistance.

Recently, he fulfilled a monthly ritual observed by him and the priests he worked with in Mount Carmel Parish and Saint John the Baptist Parish. They all went out to dinner and a movie. The next morning, a Saturday, he did not feel well and was taken to Christ Hospital in Jersey City. There he found out he had pneumonia and it was serious.

He must have known just how serious his condition was because later that day he told a very dear seminarian friend: "I don't think I am going to make it." The friend tried to assure him that everything would be OK, but in the next two days five "code blues" were sounded in the hospital. A "code blue" rings out to call all available medical staff to assist a patient who has a very sudden crisis. Four of those alarms were successful, but the last was not.

On Monday evening his worried and concerned parishioners crowded into Mount Carmel Church to join in a Mass of intercession for Fr. Hector. Five minutes after the Mass concluded, so too did the earthly life of Fr. Hector. The date of his death was Monday, Jan. 31—his 34th birthday.

The funeral masses for priests are usually held in the churches of their last assignments. However, it was anticipated that the crowds who would attend Fr. Hector's obsequies could only be handled comfortably in our Cathedral Basilica of the Sacred Heart. A hint of the wisdom of this decision was borne out on the night before his funeral when a Vigil Mass was offered in his parish Church of Our Lady of Mount Carmel. The number of people present that night overflowed to the steps of the church. Bishop Thomas A. Donato presided at this Mass and Fr. Hector's Pastor, Father Michael Santora, gave the homily.

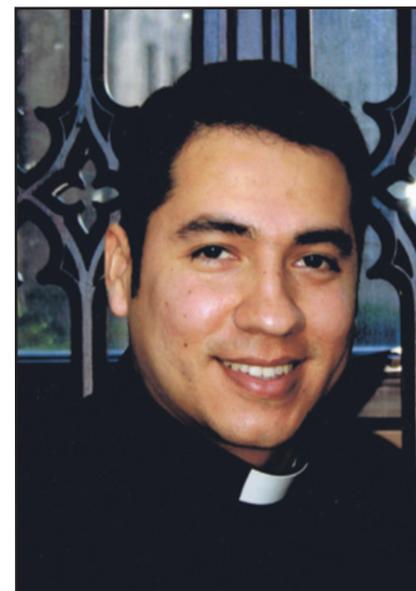
Over a thousand people and dozens of priests came to Newark for his Funeral Mass in the same church where he was ordained a deacon and a priest such a short time before. Bishop Manuel A. Cruz presided and the homily was delivered by Father John Galeano, the pastor of Saint Francis Parish, Lodi. Fr. Hector and Fr. Galeano were long-time friends from their native country of Colombia.

The next day his body was transported back to his hometown of Barbosa in Colombia. Three of our archdiocesan priests traveled there for the funeral, which was held in the church where he had been baptized. Some 2,000 people filled this huge church and scores of priests were there as well. Fr. Galeano was the principal celebrant and homilist. Fr. Hector was buried besides other priests in the parish cemetery.

This was not some veteran in the priesthood or a well-known television evangelist who drew these enormous numbers of people to his funeral. Fr. Hector was a priest who wanted nothing more than to be a priest for his people. Everyone who met him saw how genuine he was and this is what attracted so many faithful followers in the all-too-short time he had on this earth.

Like Camelot and the Kennedy presidency, Fr. Hector did not have a long time to do the work he had hoped to accomplish. But as with those two phenomena, we can look back to some very pleasant memories as we call to mind the great joy that lifted us up whenever we were with Fr. Hector Galvis. Fr. Santora spoke for all of us when he concluded his Vigil Mass homily with these heartfelt sentiments: "Thank you Fr. Hector for being so easy to love. Thank you Fr. Hector for showing us the side of God's face that is joy and delight."

(Editor's note: Rev. Msgr. Francis R. Seymour is the archdiocesan archivist and the book editor for the Archdiocese of Newark's annual Directory and Almanac.)



Father Hector Fabio Galvis Rios