

## Reverend Kenneth J. MacDonald

BY  
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In writing about men and women who have edified us we often compare them with those we have met in our reading, and it would seem to be the only way by which we can be sure of giving a proper estimate of their lives and the work they have accomplished. Whilst remembering the handicaps which were to be overcome in order to make life a success, it is most important that we know the traits of character which have made the person about whom we write to be regarded as a useful member of society.

As far as I can remember the Life of Saint Francis of Assisi was the first of the Lives of the Saints to appeal to me. As this life was carefully read by my parents they often spoke of Francis as a strange young boy. They wondered, too, if it was right for him to give up all he possessed and – in this regard – to refuse obeisance even to his father. They thought that boys should be industrious and try not to be a laughing stock for those among whom they were reared. My father was a great reader; he could tell the story of every character in the Old and New Testament. Thus it happened that Noah, Job, Solomon, David, Saint Peter and Saint John were well known to me long before I myself could read. These were in our conversations even more frequently than were our nearest neighbors. Good singers, dancers, musicians and those who could fight well at weddings were also spoken about, and stories of the priests who labored so zealously in the parishes of Mabou, Broad Cove, Port Hood, Cheticamp and Judique also formed a part of our fireside chats. Since my mother had spent the year preparatory to obtaining a teacher's license going to school from Father Kenneth's, she was particularly fond of talking about this zealous priest. At this time we lived on a farm which my father bought from a non-Catholic family. Consequently – previous to his marriage, my father continued to attend church at Broad Cove, to which parish both of my grandfathers belonged. But an uncle, Angus, bought a property in Mabou parish, and there the priest came at stated times to minister to the spiritual needs of the scattered flock. A short time before his death, when I visited him at Saint Joseph's Hospital, Glace Bay (as I so often did), Father Kenneth told me that my father and a MacIsaac family applied for admittance to Mabou parish, and that when he asked Father MacGillivray – the then parish priest of Broad Cove, what kind of people Rankin and MacIsaac were and he had offered the information that, when he knew her, "Rankin's wife was a good, young woman". Father MacGillivray

said, "You will find Mr. and Mrs. Rankin very correct in every way. I have known the people from whom they are descended since I came to Broad Cove parish, and they are the most industrious parishioners – ever attentive to their duties as Catholics and excellent supporters of the church." And, said the old priest to me, "That is the way I found the Rankins". Elizabeth MacNeil, Father Kenneth's life-long housekeeper, was my godmother, and each time my mother received Holy Communion Elizabeth insisted that she spend the previous night at the Glebe house. In this way I first began to know Father Kenneth as a friend of my mother, a friend who used to talk to her in such an interested manner about her home and children. As I was the second eldest boy in the family I could be allowed to remain longer in school than my elder brother, who really was brighter and showed more aptitude for farm work. It was decided that – just as soon as a convent would be opened in our locality – I would be one of the first pupils. From the pulpit parents were exhorted to watch in their children for signs of a vocation to the holy Priesthood or the religious life. Then in 1885 the remote preparations for the present Saint Joseph's Convent, in Mabou, were begun. For two years the men worked busily levelling the site and hauling the necessary stones. It was agreed that their labor would be free, and it is but fair to the people to say that they co-operated to an extraordinary degree. Especially since times were hard, money scarce, and so many of the people had to struggle to eke out a living for themselves, a building proposition just then was a huge undertaking, yet the far-seeing, energetic priest said it could be done, and the passage of time showed how right he was. Previous to this date there were only two convents in Cape Breton – one in Sydney, the other at Arichat. Pictou and Antigonish enjoyed the same privilege. In the Spring of 1887 work was begun on the actual building, and in November following classes were opened therein. While the construction work was going on Father Kenneth was ever on the go, now at the quarries, then superintending the excavating and filling in, again going from house to house urging his parishioners to do their best for the undertaking in hand. Father Kenneth was an early riser. Having made a good meditation preparatory to saying Mass he was usually ready for that sacred function at five o'clock, even in winter. Prayerful man that he was, as he drove along the road he said his beads. In order that he might be able to visit all parts of his parish, in every kind of weather, he always kept a good horse. He always had a herd of cows and a flock of sheep, and he used his lot of land – about 150 acres – to provide feed and pasture for this stock. We are told that much of the farm work such as the plowing, sowing, moving, harvesting, cutting and hauling the fuel for the church and glebe, was done by those who were in arrears with their dues. In so far as contributing to the support of the pastor, the church, and school, was concerned, Father Kenneth insisted that the law of the church be carried out. He visited the schools regularly and in this way kept in touch with the youth of the parish. At Easter

time he held what was then known as “a station” in different places throughout the parish. He came early in the morning, baptized the children, taught Catechism, heard confessions, distributed Holy Communion to the aged, sick and bed-ridden. These visitations afforded ample opportunity for finding out any disorder in the parish and – as well admit – this was a very effective way of doing real pastoral work.

Father Kenneth’s early life was spent amid hardships that would stagger us of the present generation. His father died early and his mother married a second time. As far as I have been able to find out both his father and mother were dead when, as a young boy, he went to live with a relative. Nor is it certain which of his parents was related to the one with whom he lived when the call to the sacred priesthood came to him. In any case he attended school at Saint Andrew’s for a few years and then, in the year 1853, went to the College at Arichat. He was born at South River, Antigonish County, May 10th 1821. He entered Grand Seminary, Quebec, in July 1854 and owing to scarcity of priests – was called home in December 1856 to be ordained at Arichat on the eighth of that month. From January to May 1857 he was assistant at Arichat and pastor of Ingonish and Bay St. Lawrence from May till September 1857. Father Kenneth spent ten days with us when I was serving as assistant to Reverend Michael Tompkins in Guysboro. To me, a young priest anxious to hear the story of the labors of the pioneers, this was an interesting visit. According to an entry made in a diary which I kept at that time Father came on September 16, 1904. That entry made thirty-nine years ago is interesting to myself now, and it may be of interest to others thirty-nine years from now, hence I insert it here. “My heart leaped with joy when I saw him come through the gate limping, for this meant that I should see again my old friend, the priest who baptized me, the good confessor who heard my first confession when I was only seven years of age, the pious director who prepared me for my first Holy Communion and for the Sacrament of Confirmation”. (Bishop Alexander MacDonald gave me my first Holy Communion while his first cousin Reverend John Beaton, newly ordained, served Mass). “I was glad also to hear Father telling stories of his early life as a priest – especially since Father Tompkins could fill in all the interesting details in connection with those stories. There is a mixture of joy and sorrow in meeting again your former parish priest – joy in remembering the many consolations he has brought to you in the confessional – sorrow in seeing the ravages old age has wrought in him.

When he baptized me Father Kenneth was 53 years of age. When he heard my first confession he was 60 years, and 65 when he prepared me for Confirmation. When he was 72, because he was crippled, he retired. As I first remember this dear, old priest he was very energetic always engaged in some work that tended to the betterment of the community and I can remember, too, that he was highly respected by those with whom he came in contact. He

was so fearless in denouncing evil that badly-disposed people gave him considerable trouble and tried – as hard as their unscrupulous conscience permitted them – to undermine if not to destroy his influence. It is told of Saint John Regis that he was not only taken up in court for denouncing evil and the doers thereof but that he was attacked and suffered serious bodily harm for trying to protect the virtues of those whom he tried to direct. Let it not, then, be held against this good priest that he was taken to court.

I often heard Father Kenneth scolding in Gaelic – and very forcibly, too. He preached for fully forty minutes, a good sermon – so good indeed that few sermons – before or since – impressed me more. His knowledge of holy Scripture and the lives of the saints was such as to allow him to cleverly and appropriately fit exhortations and examples from them into all of his sermons. He and Father Tompkins went to Boylston to visit the Baraie family who are nearly-related to him. On their return he was cheerful and happy and continued to tell us about himself and his experiences at Cape North, Ingonish, West River, Arisaig, Port Hood, Mabou and Lake Ainslie. The Rev. James Grant, V.G., at St. Andrews, fifteen years before his death baptized Father Kenneth which leaves the latter 83 years old now and in the forty-eighth year of the sacred Priesthood. He told us of his arrival at Cape North whither he had been sent by the late Bishop MacKinnon – of whom he spoke as a none-too-patient prelate. Once – in answer to Father Kenneth's enquiry as to whether he should take his baggage with him to Cape North – the Bishop answered “you and your baggage will remain where you are until you are ordered elsewhere.” Again he reproves him for not going at once to Arichat when there was no means of conveyance until the arrival of the next vessel. At another time when he was at Arisaig the Bishop heard that he had a number of cows that would calve early in the season and asked him for one in the following manner, “Will love or money induce you to part with one of your barn-full of cows.” To which the priest made answer, “Your Lordship has been mis-informed about my barn-full of cows. If three constitutes a barn-fill I have that number, and you may have one without either love or money.” We, in this age of comfort and facility of transportation, find it hard to even form a picture of these early days. Once – when he missed his vessel and rather than delay until the arrival of the next one – Father Kenneth walked from Sydney to Cape North. On the way he slept, in a very narrow bed, with two other men – larger than himself. We are told that “Practice makes perfection” and surely these and other such privations and hardships, practised continually for almost half a century, helped to make Father Kenneth the good priest that we knew him to be. One regrets that, in his old age, he could not have been given the help that would enable him to continue the work which he had done with such great zeal. The Church has really legislated on this point and benignly directs that recognition be given to those who have done good work, but occasionally we come across a few instances which clearly show that justice

and charity are not exercised. I might have taken one of the most scholarly men, priest or layman, prelate or statesman and tell all that he had done, but I would be telling you of what few are called upon to do, and every day his words, deeds and works are being told and re-told, but so few people think it worth while telling how one man did what so many others, similarly placed are actually doing. And yet it is the man who tills the soil, the man who goes down to the sea to fish, the man who rears a family under trying circumstances that does the all-important work for God and country. Men may sit, as sit they must, in legislatures halls, men may wield the sceptre and the sword, but without the millions who form the common people of every land, there would be no need of either swords or crowns. Nor is it the great prelate whose name is found on the pages of the daily press who is doing the most for souls. No – it is the humble priest who works among the poor and toil-worn and to whom the spiritual and temporal welfare of his flock means so much. When Father Kenneth was working so zealously among the people entrusted to his keeping there were but few English Catholic publications in any part of Canada. In 1841 The Island Reporter was started, then came The Casket, and in 1850 The True Witness and Catholic Chronicle appeared in Montreal. But Father Kenneth's works were not recorded. In fact, while the anti-Catholic legislation which was being enacted in England found place in The True Witness, what was going on nearer home, in America, was not recorded, yet the work that was daily being done by Father Kenneth was equally important, even more so, for he was instructing a generation of people from whom should come such worthy descendants as Archbishop MacNeil, Bishop MacDonald, a score of priests and religious and countless laymen who – in every walk of life – do honor to the teachings of this venerable, old priest. The good done by Archbishop MacNeil as priest, professor, catechist, editor, Bishop and Archbishop is still with us and – as time goes on – it will continue to make its influence felt. Bishop Alexander MacDonald, by his writings, preaching and other services affected many souls, not alone in America but likewise beyond its confines. His brother priests, the religious and lay people who have had the privilege of observing the self-sacrificing life of Father Kenneth were edified by his example and – in this manner – as well as in so many other ways his work lives on, as does the work of any one who was as faithful to God's law as he was. It has been said by one of Father Kenneth's parishioners that oftentimes he seemed not to be able to distinguish between the crime and the person who – committed it – between the sin and the sinner. That the Divine Saviour of Mankind was merciful to the sinner while He condemned his crime is true, and equally true is it that all pastors of souls – in order not to fall short of the Ideal – must follow His example. Saint Paul – the model pastor – speaks of the diversity of gifts given to men – gifts which they are to use to bring themselves and others to Christ. The priest who is energetic, who is prayerful and is charitable towards God

and the souls created by Him cannot but impress on the minds of his people the joy of using these gifts in the service of God. His example will serve as an urge to them to attend the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass on Sundays, to frequent the Sacraments, to be ever ready to give their children the benefit of a sound education so that they, in turn, may be well-informed Catholics who will use the gifts they possess to promote christian living and the best welfare of their neighbor. Pastors of this type have – all through the ages of christianity – kept the faith strong and active in the hearts of the Catholic people of all the countries of the world. Those who remember the years between 1890 and 1898 know that – as a general rule – the priests of the Antigonish Diocese voted on the conservative ticket, and many of them visited their parishioners at election time in order to influence them to vote for that party. Father Kenneth was one of this number. Many of the laity who honestly believed that, as Catholics, they were supposed to cast their vote as they thought proper and that not even a priest had any right to influence them in this connection regretted that their pastor, whom they admired and respected, thus interfered in politics. It is true that, previous to this date, the Code of Canon Law had not been drawn up and the Council of Quebec had not made it clear that Canadian priests must not discuss politics from the pulpit but, in Inverness County generally it was known that voting was the privilege of a citizen – which privilege he was to use as his knowledge and conscience – directed him. Good Catholics, throughout the whole world, not unfrequently ask their pastor's opinion of the issues discussed on the public platform at election-time and then, of course, the good priest gives his honest opinion. When a question of faith and morals is at stake church authorities have a duty to perform and God – rather than man – is to be obeyed, as was done by the Apostles and a host of others who suffered for their Faith. Many there were – even in Father Kenneth's time who thought it would eventually come about that – apart from giving their candid opinion when asked for it and voting for the party of their choice, clergymen should scrupulously avoid taking any part in politics. It is a well known fact that – later on – Father MacDonald, like many another priest, fully realized that if he had followed the above rule his relations with the people would have been much more amicable, both pastor and parishioners would have been happier, and the memory of these years would have been much more pleasant. Father Kenneth MacDonald was one of the most earnest workers of his time in the cause of temperance. So bitterly did he regret the harm done by drinking that nothing short of total abstinence, could be regarded by him as a proper attitude towards drink. Because he found that dances, picnics and such outings lent themselves to drinking he strenuously opposed them, and those whom he found indulging in intoxicating liquors had to pay the penalty. The last time I saw him before his death he again insisted that picnics were not the proper channels through which to raise money for any charitable purpose – least of

all for building a church or convent. He was sorely disappointed because, just then, I was going to have a picnic in order to make funds to build a glebe house. Let it be said to his (own) credit as a financier that, at Mabou, he built, a carriage house, barn, glebe-house convent and he had \$9,000.00 laid by to build a church – a good standing surely – and especially in those early days when there was less money in circulation. Whether or not the strict discipline exercised by this earnest apostle was responsible for the prosperity and good standing of the parish we may not and can not judge, but certain it is that, during his pastorship, exceptional progress was made and, “The parish was giving a larger percentage of priests to the Sacred Ministry and more subjects to the religious life than were any of the neighboring parishes.”

When Father Kenneth was dying he expressed a wish that he be buried in the cemetery adjoining Sacred Heart church, where Reverend James McKeagney, who had been pastor of that place for many years, had been laid to rest. It was also this humble priest’s wish that no funeral sermon be preached. All was carried out according to his desire.

There is living at Iona a man – a very worthy man who, as a young boy, stayed with his uncle Reverend John MacNeil, whom Father Kenneth knew in college and – later on – in the seminary. In those early, motorless days it was nothing for a priest to start off, by horse and carriage, on a forty-mile journey and, since these outings necessarily included visits to any of the parishioners who were remiss in their religious duties they usually took a whole week from start to finish. On one occasion – just after returning from one of these visitations, the old priest came into the hall-way and was taking off his coat when the young boy, very politely, offered to put it on the peg. However, the priest declined the offer, and told him that he did not know how to hang the coat. Afterwards he showed him a little loop on the collar, which was intended for that purpose, and he himself did the deed. It is characteristic of young people to form their own conclusions and, while they are not always wrong neither are they always right. At the time of this little incident the boy decided that the priest was very fussy, but later on he recalled – and with no small measure of gratitude – the directions given. From the same source we get another of the Father Kenneth stories. Just after he had retired from active service in Mabou he came again to visit his friend Father MacNeil, and it happened that, at a short distance from the glebe-house, preparations were being completed for a wedding, which was to be held that very night. Strangely enough – a few hours after his arrival – Father Kenneth was taken ill – so sick indeed was he that, nowadays, we would consider him a fit subject for the hospital. Doctors were few and far between; nurses were unknown. What was to be done? At last one of the most resourceful of those in attendance thought of the only available remedy – the panacea for all ills – whiskey. Being a woman of exceptional presence of mind she remembered that she had seen a bottle of this liquor in the pocket of a chance visitor from

the wedding house to the glebe house, and straightway she prepared a toddy for the patient. But here another difficulty presented itself. Who could approach Father Kenneth with his own "accursed" beverage? The deed fell to Father MacNeil's lot and, to the last drop, he administered the potion prepared. It was not long before the patient began to show signs of recovery and, very soon, he was completely relieved. As was but natural to suppose he asked Father MacNeil what was in the glass and, on being informed, he was wholly surprised that his life-long enemy could thus prove to be such a friend in need. Then – true to custom – he had to find out how the drug came to the priest's house, where and by whom it was bought and an infinity of similar details. In bringing to a close this little sketch of Father MacDonald's life I want to give here one striking proof of how his work lives on. Because of his efforts and initiative in building Saint Joseph's Convent, at Mabou, the cause of education has been greatly promoted in Eastern Canada. Beautifully located as this institution is, at the foot of the famous Mabou Hills, which have a charm all their own, and overlooking the charming waters of the river and harbor it has, for well nigh sixty years, opened its hospitable doors to the boarders who have come there, not alone from Inverness County, but likewise from every part of the Island of Cape Breton. In the beginning only the first years of High School work were taught there, but now both boys and girls do the Grade XII course with excellent results. Since its inception the people of the parish have been generously supporting this convent, and the good Sisters of the Congregation of Notre Dame have excelled themselves in the training they have been giving in Music, Domestic Science, Secretarial work and the various handicrafts. In Father Kenneth's day the rural communities were much more populous than they are today. In 1889, five years before he retired, his parish at Mabou numbered two hundred and fifty families, almost sixty more than at the present time. In addition, the mission at Lake Ainslie had one hundred and fifty families where there are about thirty families today. It was not an easy charge but Father Kenneth was quite as severe with himself as with others. He would make neither age nor infirmity an excuse for lessening his labors; obscurely, unobtrusively, he did a great work which lives after him. Firmly he spent himself for the glory of God and the good of his people.