His voice was noticeably faint when he called me last week, but Patrick E. Brown was not giving up. He invited Father Richard Bay and me to join him for the Super Bowl. It wasn’t going to be a big spread, nothing like Sheila was accustomed to produce – just potato chips! That’s what he said, potato chips.

Even that was not going to happen. Two and a half hours before the Patriots/Falcons historic game began, Patrick E. Brown was called home. He taught Sheila, Elizabeth and Thomas (his sisters and brother), Father Peter Doody and a few other priests and close friends there near him an inevitable soft and gentle lesson: treasure your precious gift of life for as long as you live and then when the time comes to let go, do so with faith in God’s fatherly love, Jesus’ saving grace and the Holy Spirit’s loving embrace.

The Patriots taught millions of people in dramatic fashion to keep up their spirits, efforts and hope right to the end. Msgr. Patrick taught us quietly on his hospital bed to do no less. Goal lines are made to be crossed by people with faith and hope, determination and love.

There was something “super” about Patrick Brown. He always seemed to know the best – the best team of doctors, the best hospitals, the best colleges, the best place to get anything from black suits to chocolates! His car was always shiny clean, his shoes –
ah, his shoes, always polished. He was just about the neatest person I’ve ever known. I know he read the newspapers, but not from seeing the orderly way he folded them and stacked them on the kitchen table.

I mentioned black suits. Patrick had his black suit jackets and slacks coordinated. All of us who wear black know that blackness differs. Some black cloths are shinier, some duller, some brighter, etc. Patrick had matching tags sewn into his suits so that the right slacks went with the right jacket.

Patrick told a story he loved to tell. There used to be in Morristown a great department store named Epstein’s, right off the town square which is known as The Green. They had a fine men’s department with an equally first rate tailor. One day when Patrick was in town, walking along the Green, he met this tailor whom you can be sure Patrick knew. They stopped and talked – I think Patrick almost always had time for that! In short order, the tailor told Patrick he noticed that Patrick’s suit jacket needed adjusting. He could easily fix it; if Patrick could part with it for a little bit, the tailor could take it over to the store and make it just right. Patrick liked the idea, took off his suit jacket and the tailor went off to fix it. Someone out of earshot who saw this, Patrick learned later, said, “Look at what that good priest did – he took off his own suit jacket and gave it to that poor man.”

That incident was not what you’d call all that farfetched. Patrick was always responsive to the poor. He gave to the poor when they asked for help, and being a New Yorker that was not unusual. It made such great sense that in his final years as a priest he was assigned to Catholic Charities. He had many friends among those who are well off and as many among those who are not. He treated people as real people. He was like
Jesus in that, Father Peter Doody said, “Patrick personalized the Gospel.” He was a great fundraiser but in no greater measure than for the poor.

An Annunciation parishioner called me during the week and told me that among his many great qualities Patrick had time for everybody and also that he was a great homilist. He spoke to you – you could feel it. You could take to heart what he was saying, “Ah, there’s the rub” Shakespeare would say, he was a good Christlike communicator. One who spoke from the heart. Cardinal John Henry Newman’s motto was “COR AD COR LOQUITUR.” The heart speaks to the heart. Jesus revealed God the Father to us – “when you see me you see the Father,” he told Philip. And Jesus said, as well, “Learn of me, because I am meek and humble of HEART!” Patrick Brown spoke from the heart and in so doing he spoke to people’s hearts. Inevitably, his Christlike suffering in so many ways finetuned his heart so that his words could be in tune with the needs and aspirations in the hearts of those to whom he spoke. We are all poor, Pope Francis said, each of us in need of one thing or the other.

Patrick loved people. It seemed to me that he wanted to respond to every request big or small. He had time for everyone. He started conversations everywhere: in stores, soup kitchens, ticket lines, ski slopes, anywhere.

He loved the priesthood. He loved being a priest (he was the first priest I ordained back in 1978). He loved celebrating Mass every chance he got for the people, with the people – reverently, cheerfully, well aware of those who celebrated with him and joyful to have their participation. He was ready to go anywhere to bring someone Communion, to anoint a person, to console a family, to reconcile someone ready for God’s forgiveness. It seemed to me he was always going some place for a baptism, a
wedding, a funeral, an anniversary, a graduation. He got so much done, that you had to wonder how he did it. Saint Paul attributed his own zeal to Paul’s love of Jesus, his identification with Jesus, his friendship with Jesus. That was the secret source of Patrick’s strength – he knew Jesus was his friend.

Patrick had lots of things he liked, nice things, attractive things, but nothing came before his friendship with Jesus. Saint Cyprian had a beautiful way of putting it: “Prefer nothing to Jesus who preferred nothing to us.”

That friendship may have had a lot to do with Patrick’s relationship with people. He spoke of people in familiar terms, close terms, as his friends. He especially loved the people in the parishes he served – Sparta, New Vernon, Stirling in Long Hill Township, Annunciation here in Wayne. I remember riding with him through one of his parishes down one street after another and he gave me an upbeat account of the occupants of one house after the other. He knew them all. “I know mine and mine know me,” Jesus said. Monsignor Patrick E. Brown could say the same.

Some of us may have lamented the fact that Patrick Brown’s priestly ministry on earth came to an end after 39 years. Many of us live longer, some a lot longer. But the fact is that not everyone has the energy and drive that Patrick E. Brown had - and not everyone who does, puts it into full gear as he did. He accomplished a lot.

Even so, we have to keep in mind – those of us who are called to serve God’s people – that, first of all, we are “called” – Pope Francis said, “just as truly as Mary was.” Paul wrote to the Ephesians, “God chose us (in Christ) before the world began to be holy and blameless in his sight.” He predestined us to be his adopted children through Jesus Christ…” Paul said we are called to carry out a plan in the fullness of time.
We all have a part in that plan. The plan has ages to go, as far as we know; the part we play is as long or short as the Lord who calls us has in mind for us.

Here is how Blessed Oscar Romero, the martyred Archbishop of San Salvador put it:

We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God’s work.

We lay the foundations that will need further development.

We provide yeast that produces far beyond our capabilities.

It may be incomplete but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord’s grace to enter and do the rest.

I said there was something appropriate about Patrick taking his leave of us on a Sunday designated as “Super.” That doesn’t even come close to how fitting it is that this Mass for his beautiful soul’s sharing in Jesus’ Resurrection, is being celebrated on the Feast of Our Lady of Lourdes.

Patrick loved our Blessed Mother and he loved that sacred grotto in France in which she appeared to Bernadette. He loved the grounds on which hundreds of thousands – millions over the course of years – have come and still come to pray for healing, the Basilica and the River Pau, the Domain, great field where with lighted
candles the huge crowd of pilgrims process in the evenings. Patrick was right at home in Lourdes. You couldn’t keep him down. He composed a Way of the Cross, and as Chaplain of the Knights and Dames of Malta, led it. Some of you here today made it with him in Lourdes.

I don’t doubt that Patrick Brown as he made the Way of Jesus to Calvary in Lourdes and in a quieter way on a hospital bed in New York last Sunday, felt close in spirit with Mary and with all those who shared his faith in Jesus and his love of Our Blessed Mother.

And so, I pray, “Jesus, welcome your servant Patrick into the place prepared for him, in the company of Mary and Joseph, Muriel and Patrick, and the entire Communion of Saints, and grant to us who await your call the consoling gifts of peace, gratitude and hope.”