Aidan Kavanagh, OSB
(1929–2006)

A leading figure of the appropriation of the Second Vatican Council’s liturgical reform in the United States, a monk of St. Meinrad Archabbey in Indiana, and author of liturgical texts, Father Aidan Kavanagh, OSB, might best be remembered for his creation of a “theology of the congregation.” His primary theologian, “Mrs. Murphy,” who appeared in many of his writings, possessed theological acumen, not because of books but because of her place in the pew and her concerns and struggles.

After his ordination in 1957, Kavanagh pursued an academic career earning a licentiate in sacred theology and a doctorate in sacred theology. His teachings and writings would have their influence primarily upon St. Meinrad School of Theology, the University of Notre Dame, and Yale University and its Institute of Sacred Music.

One of his most influential works for the ongoing work of liturgical reform in the United States was his 1978 The Shape of Baptism: The Rite of Christian Initiation. A champion for restoring adult initiation to a normative status, Kavanagh argued against “indiscriminate Baptism” (that is, baptizing infants to eradicate original sin). Writing on the early Christian community, Kavanagh states: “Catechism was understood to be not about education but about conversion” (120). Kavanagh believed that liturgical renewal would succeed to the degree that conversion became the primary entrance into the liturgical assembly.

As stated at the outset, Kavanagh’s greatest contribution as a liturgical pioneer came in the form of his endorsement of “Mrs. Murphy” as a theologian. All who are engaged in liturgy are theologians precisely because the liturgy is the Church’s faith. In his 1984 seminal work, On Liturgical Theology, Kavanagh states: “It cannot be forgotten that the church at worship is not only present to God; far more significantly, the living God is present to the church. . . . God is not present to the worshipping church by faith but in reality; it is the church which is present by faith to God” (8).

Kavanagh was also interested in ritual behavior. His 1982 Elements of Rite: A Handbook of Liturgical Style has been a worthy guide in the formation of priests and other ministers. Referring to the assembly in terms of an established liturgical “order,” he writes: “It is a central part of the pastoral art to be able to discern, respect, and coordinate the rich gifts of these orders both in and out of the liturgy for the good of the Church and the world to which the Church is corporate minister by God’s grace” (45).

In the opening pages of On Liturgical Theology, Kavanagh refers to himself as “a living paradox . . . one in whom the tension between love of God’s world and adamant critique of what we have made of it has taken on living form, reinforced by professional commitment to both sides of the tension. While he lives happily in the earthly city, he realizes that it does not abide and his true enfranchisement is in another city which does abide but whose presence is not yet wholly consummated in space and time. Thus he finds himself committed to the human predicament” (7).

Aidan Kavanagh died July 9, 2006. He lived the truth that the liturgy, as God’s grace, contains the material necessary to transform the earthly city. “The Church doing the world as God means it to be done in Christ is the greatest prophecy, the most powerful exorcism, of all” (On Liturgical Theology, 176).