

# **The Burial of the Dead for Edgar Fisher Wells, Jr., Priest and Rector**

**August 21, 2021**

**By the Reverend Stephen Gerth**

*Wisdom 3:1–9, Psalm 23, Romans 8:14-19, 34–35, 37–39, John 14:1–6*

No words in John’s gospel are ever very far from the verb “believe.” So today’s gospel lesson from John’s account of the supper before the Passover, we read, “Jesus said, “Let not your hearts be troubled; believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house are many rooms . . . And when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also” (John 14:1–3).

I have a hunch that Father Wells’s faith journey was underway before he had any idea that it was possible for God not to be a part of people’s lives. He grew up in the church. He and Father Joseph Zorawick, retired rector of Christ and St. Stephen’s Church, sang together in the boys’ choir of the Church of the Resurrection here in the city. I think it is fair to say that Father Wells never ventured far from knowing his Lord.

I enjoyed reading the remembrances in the service bulletin very much. It’s true, as Dr. Henry Cooper wrote, he and Father Edgar Wells were “two boys from the Bronx.” But Father Wells was born in what was, until 1977, the Polyclinic Hospital, on West 50th Street, between 9th and 10th Avenues. It was converted to apartments after the hospital closed. Father Wells was born a half-mile from here—a ten-minute walk from the rectory.

Since his retirement at the end of 1997, he lived in Manhattan Plaza—a little closer to the hospital than the rectory—a nine-minute walk according to Google Maps. Manhattan Plaza opened in 1977, the same year the Polyclinic Hospital closed. His apartment there was the opposite of the rectory. It was a large studio apartment in a relatively new complex. It overlooked the playground between the two towers. It had good afternoon light. He enjoyed retirement. He had friends in Canada, England, and Australia that I was privileged to meet. He found a church home at St. Edward the Martyr. He was very fortunate in his companion, Evan Wong, who gave so much of himself to care for Edgar as his physical and mental capabilities declined late in his life. Evan’s heart and compassion are genuine.

It was a brave Edgar Fisher Wells, Jr., who followed the direction of his bishop, the Bishop of Chicago, James Montgomery, who knew the situation at Saint Mary’s, to

take the call to become the eighth rector of the parish. Bishop Montgomery had confidence that Father Wells was the right man for the job—and he was.

In 1979, some of the trustees expected Father Wells to return Saint Mary's Masses to *The Anglican Missal*—basically, the Pre-Vatican II Roman Rite in English. Because ordination was opened to women in 1976 and enshrined in the 1979 Prayer Book, some parishioners wanted to take Saint Mary's out of the Episcopal Church. Father Wells would have none of it. He was a life-long Anglo-Catholic. For him, that necessarily meant he was an Episcopalian and intensely loyal to the ministry of this church. I am not sure Saint Mary's would have survived the 1980s had Father Wells not been willing to serve. He was in many ways a true son of Nashotah House Seminary, founded on the frontier in 1842. The seminary is still called "the Mission" in the area between Madison and Milwaukee. There he was formed to go where he was needed—and he was needed here.

Less than a dozen issues of the parish magazine *Ave* have not been located and scanned for our website. But, unfortunately, the issue that contained Father Wells's final sermon is among them. Father Jay Gordon shared this excerpt with me, "In retrospect, I don't imagine there has been a period in my life when I have experienced more fear than I did during those first few months and years of my ministry in this place. And within myself, there was a sense of impending doom that made me wonder whether I might perish as well."

As the years passed, Father Wells came to believe that the Holy Spirit was doing new things, good things, among us Anglicans. He was not alone, but his leadership led to this congregation's generous welcome of the Right Reverend Catherine Scimeca Roskam, bishop suffragan of New York, as celebrant and preacher for the Feast of the Presentation six days after her ordination to the episcopate.

Over my years here, I have heard from many about the quality of his pastoral care and compassion for people whose lives were challenged by circumstances often beyond their control. For example, he had no hesitation in caring for and burying people who had HIV or drinking from a chalice that people with HIV had shared.

Father Jay Gordon shared with me some notes about Father Wells's life. He made a note of Edgar's intention of having his ashes interred at the cathedral. He saw his choice as a sign that "they would know the eighth rector of St. Mary the Virgin was loyal to the Episcopal Church." Father Wells had told me the same thing when I became rector, and he wanted to go over plans for his funeral—during my first year as rector.

A large part of his growth and happiness happened because he confronted alcoholism. It gave him a new spirit, new perspective, and new hope. He had known too many clergy colleagues who were closeted homosexual men who died from drinking. He seized the grace that came his way to be free.

I was glad to see Father Jay Gordon quote these words from Father Wells about the redecoration of the church's interior, "these hallowed halls never looked so beautiful."

In July 1997, Father Wells wrote to the parish to announce his retirement. "Eighteen and a half years ago, I was pessimistic in the extreme where the future of this parish was concerned. Eighteen and a half years later, I am filled with optimism, and I know that optimism is shared by a majority of those who worship here . . . The remaining months of this year promise to be full ones indeed where our life on 46th Street is concerned . . . And for me, they will be filled with the joy of what it has meant to serve at St. Mary's, knowing that throughout these years, God has led and protected me in my ministry here and trusting implicitly in his guidance in all that lies ahead. I have lived long enough to realize that sharing in Christ's high priesthood is the greatest gift in my life. That much of it has been lived in this place is a particular grace, one that will remain with me always."

Finally, I want you to know that Father Jay Smith was the priest at Saint Mary's who cared for Father Wells and Evan. Father Wells was very strict about keeping his distance from the rector and the business of the parish. Father Wells and Evan were very thankful, as I am, for Father Smith's ministry to them.

In John, on the morning of the resurrection, Peter and the disciple Jesus loved, learn from Mary Magdalene that the tomb is empty. They run to see. Then leave. Mary Magdalene remains at the tomb, grieving. Jesus speaks, "Mary." She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rab-bo'ni!" (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, "Do not hold me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brothers and sisters brethren and say to them, I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God" (John 20:1–18). With those words, the son of God reordered God's creation for eternity.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,  
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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