

Of Many Things

“IT’S A MONSOON out there.” Our rain-soaked superior had just come in from one of the ferocious spring storms that beset New York. I quoted his words in this column in our March 24, 2003 issue. It was our only reference to him in *America* during all the years he lived here. As important as he was to us, his impact on our readers was unseen. In his six years as superior of the America House Jesuit community, he provided comfort, guidance and support to the editors, hugely enhanced by his own experience and wisdom. So when we learned during dinner on Oct. 5 of his sudden death, it was an immense shock. We are still getting used to the idea that he won’t come home to us in this life.

Robert A. Mitchell, S.J., turned 80 in January. He was 50 years ordained on Saint Ignatius Day, July 31, 2006. To celebrate the anniversary, his brother, Bill, and his sister-in-law, Barbara, planned a cruise down the west coast through the Panama Canal into the Caribbean. On Oct. 5, Bob had just celebrated Mass and they went up on deck. It was there that he died of a heart attack.

There had been more than one monsoon in Bob’s life. He was trained as a theologian at Louvain, Belgium, and Strasbourg, France, meaning to be a college teacher, something he was actually allowed to do for a few years. But his compassion and sensitivity led him to be called, and to accept, the job of Jesuit superior over and over again. In the turmoil of the 1960’s, he was tapped to lead the Jesuit students in their formation. Six months later, at what was arguably the worst time to be a superior (until the present day), he was named superior of the New York Province, a position he held from 1966 until 1972. He was subsequently head of the Jesuit Conference in the United States, president of the University of Detroit Mercy, and then president of Le Moyne College in Syracuse, which remained his first love. He came to America House as superior in 2001.

Yes, he was here for 9/11. As one of the elders, he was looked to for guidance and support. That day I got him to tell one story

which hinted at the source of his pervasive serenity. His father was head of the counterespionage unit of the N.Y.P.D. On the afternoon of Dec. 7, 1941, the family had gone out for a ride. When they got back, two police cars were waiting in front of their house—his father’s official car and a regular patrol car. They took Bob’s father away and he didn’t return for 24 hours. “What did he say when he came home?” “He said it would be long.” Another anecdote from that period also tells much. The counterespionage unit was headquartered at “an undisclosed location.” One afternoon the family was visited by the F.B.I. “Just who are you guys?” I presume that communications have improved somewhat since then. Bob had learned patience and discretion from his father, who also regularly chided him to “stand up straight” and “don’t mumble.”

After his term as head of the Jesuit conference, at a bleak period for most American Catholic colleges, Bob was selected to be a university president. He told this story on himself. In his first address to his new constituency, he said: “My name is Bob Mitchell. I am a native New Yorker, and I have spent the last 10 years in Washington. I have come to help you.” The laughter that followed his self-deprecation broke the ice and led to a successful renaissance.

Monsoons were not rare in his life. In 1971, he was standing next to Cardinal Terence Cooke, the military vicar, at the Jesuit ordinations when the cardinal was insulted, right there during the ceremony, by one of the ordinands, an antiwar activist. If ever there was a moment to “lose it,” it was then. Bob didn’t.

He also weathered the storms of closures of beloved and venerable institutions, and of some not so beloved or venerable, never losing grace.

And he led us in mourning. We suffered together during the long and last illness of our editor Father David Toolan; we prayed together after the sudden death of our community administrator Father James Stehr; we gathered together just at this time last year after the death of Bob’s classmate and our

honored counselor Father John Long, one of the church's most revered ecumenists. Bob always brought to us a sense of serenity, an awareness of the eternal and of the passing of monsoons.

So for now, it is my classmate Father Michael Sehler who as interim superior will share with us his serenity and faithfulness. He and I and Father John Donohue often meet very early in the morning: I, on my way to the Sisters of Life; Mike on his way to school, just as he has done every schoolday morning for more than three decades; John, to pray for us all and attend to his proofreading and writing.

At this time, we ask you all to pray for Bob, for his family, and for all of us. May he rest in peace. ***Dennis M. Linehan, S.J.***