Kevin Cullen

Comforting the comforters

I would usually call him on the phone to set something up, but sometimes I would just show up at the rectory, in Turf Lodge, in West Belfast, and ring the bell. His greeting was always the same.

"Ach, Kevin," Father Matt Wallace would say. "What about ye?"

He was a Wexford man, but he had lived in Belfast for so long you would think he was Antrim-born.

He smoked like a chimney. He took a drink. He loved to flirt with women. He would sometimes use words that, had I used them, I'd have to go to confession.

Once, I was driving with him down the Ormeau Road in South Belfast and he looked at his watch and shouted excitedly, "Pull over! Pull over!"

I did so, and Father Matt bolted from the car. He ducked into Sean Graham's, the bookie shop, and emerged minutes later with a smile on his face and a betting slip in his hand.

"Jayziz," he sighed, settling back into the front seat, tapping a pack of Marlboros, the only thing he ever asked me to get for him at the duty-free. "I almost missed that race."

Father Matt's humanity, his ordinariness, made him special, endearing him to the people of West Belfast, a place where there are no such things as big heads because if you have one, they'll knock it off.

I met him when he was at St. Peter's off the Falls Road in Divis, a neighborhood that suffered greatly during the Troubles. Over the years, between Divis and Turf Lodge, where he was pastor at Holy Trinity, Father Matt brought me into houses where people died too young, violently and needlessly. He was wonderful with people consumed with grief. He didn't throw the Bible at them; he threw his arms around them.

After a young fellow was shot to death in cold blood in the warmth of broad daylight, Father Matt brought me to some boys who saw the whole thing. The boys told me, excitedly, how a hooded gunman stood over the guy and pumped bullets into him.

"His head bounced," a 10-year-old boy named Padraig told me, and I looked to Father Matt and he just shook his head.

And, so, now, 20 years later, I'm sitting here thinking about that and everything else because of a phone call two weeks ago.

It was before dawn, and that is never good news.

"Did you hear about Father Matt?" a friend from Belfast whispered.

He apologized about calling so early, blaming his shock for forgetting the time difference.

But then the shock was mine. Father Matt Wallace, a great, empathetic priest, had killed himself.

It has bothered me for two weeks, and I don't pretend to know what happened, but to paraphrase Yeats, Father Matt's favorite poet, what if excess of love bewildered him until he died? There had to be a cumulative effect of the trauma and hurt and horrible things Father Matt saw.

Closer to home, I think of great priests like Father Jack Ahern and Father Doc Conway, who work with the poorest kids in Boston. I remember them comforting the mother of Jaivon Blake, a 16-year-old boy gunned down on a sunny Sunday afternoon. I remember them presiding over the memorial service at St. Peter's in Dorchester with Rev. Gene Rivers, one of our great African-American preachers who give their lives to save kids.

Gene went home to his wife, and Father Jack and Father Doc went home to a rectory.

Father Sean Connor, a wonderful priest, comforted the Richard family, who suffered so grievously from the Patriots Day bombs, as he comforted all of St. Ann's parish, all of Dorchester, all of us. He is old school, walking in Jesus' footsteps.

But who comforts Father Sean?

So, in memory of Father Matt Wallace, Father Jack, Father Doc, Father Sean, if you know a priest, talk to him, thank him.

Tell him you appreciate everything they do.

Because they don't hear it enough.

Kevin Cullen is a Globe columnist. He can be reached at cullen@globe.com. Follow him on Twitter @GlobeCullen.