

# Father James Keller: Man of Hope



1945-2020 **75**<sup>th</sup> Anniversary



Christopher News Notes

**AS WE CELEBRATE THE 75TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE CHRISTOPHERS,** we look back at the life and work of the man who started it all: our founder Father James Keller, M.M.

Father Keller was many things to many people. He was a public figure, a radio and television personality, a writer and editor, a religious leader, a spiritual counselor, and a friend. To all who knew him, personally or through his writings and broadcasts, he was a man of hope.

To all who crossed his path, he had but one message: “You, individually, have a mission in life to fulfill—a special job to do. You can do something no other person can do to shape the world in which you live.”

## Doing Some Good

James Keller was born in Oakland, California, on June 27, 1900, the fourth of five children. At the age of six, he heard a parish priest tell his catechism class, “One of you may be a priest some day and do some good for the world.” In his autobiography, *To Light a Candle*, Father Keller recalled: “I certainly didn’t understand all the implications of his remarks, but I distinctly remember ducking beneath my desk hoping that the young priest who stood before us didn’t mean me!”

The idea of “doing some good” made a deep impression on Keller. In his teens, he began preparations for the priesthood at St. Patrick’s Seminary in Menlo Park, California. When the first group of American priests bound for China stopped at the seminary in 1918, the young seminarian became interested in their newly formed society, Maryknoll. He entered Maryknoll and was ordained on August 15, 1925. But, instead of going to China, he spent the next 20 years in the United States recruiting students and raising funds for Maryknoll missions.

During the 1930s, the talks he gave to groups around the country took on a new dimension. “Gradually,” he recalled, “I began almost subconsciously to emphasize not only what my listeners could do to assist missionaries by prayers and finances, but also how they could play a missionary role themselves.” To describe that role, he coined the term “Christopher,” from the Greek word for Christ-bearer—an individual who sought to apply the principles of the Gospel in the marketplace of everyday life.

At the end of the Second World War, Father Keller began a movement called The Christophers. It would seek to motivate men and women in all walks of life to bring Judeo-Christian principles to bear on the world around them. The Christophers,

## Shaping The World

Father Keller inspired countless individuals to help shape the world in which they lived. Here’s what some of them have said in notes to him and The Christophers:

**New York**—“I’ve never met Father Keller in person, but I heard him speak once long ago. It was that encounter which motivated me, or, more accurately, propelled me into becoming a writer.”

**Pennsylvania**—“I am a township manager and am therefore interested in our number one aim: raising the standards of government. I will continue to try to do that, always starting here, with me, in my office.”

**Maryland**—“I received a personal letter from you on having been elected a junior officer of my company...I have tried to ‘light candles,’ although, at times, my fingers have gotten burned.”

**Illinois**—“Thanks for the notes and also your splendid TV program. You have been a vital influence in my life and have inspired me to do many things I formerly shied away from.”

as he saw it, would have no formal organization, no memberships, no dues. “The reason for this somewhat unusual formula,” he explained, “was to focus attention on personal responsibility.” For a motto, he chose an ancient Chinese proverb: “Better to light one candle than to curse the darkness.”

In January, 1946, an article entitled “*You Can Be a Christopher*” appeared in *The Catholic World* magazine. Response was overwhelming. “Launching the Christopher movement,” according to Father Keller, “was like dropping a pebble into a pool. The circles just went on widening outward by themselves.” For the next 20 years, he traveled the country and was welcomed everywhere by enthusiastic audiences. Through Christopher News Notes, radio and television programs, books and newspaper columns, Father Keller continually preached his message of hope.

Upon his death on February 7, 1977, letters poured into the Christopher office. One of them summed up well the influence this man of hope had on those he touched: “His was a unique message and brought hope and courage to thousands of people deeply distressed in these troubled times.”

## Hope in Action

Father Keller once wrote these timeless words

about hope: “Hope looks for the good in people instead of harping on the worst. Hope opens doors where despair closes them. Hope discovers what can be done instead of grumbling about what cannot. Hope draws its power from a deep trust in God and the basic goodness of mankind. Hope ‘lights a candle’ instead of ‘cursing the darkness.’ Hope regards problems, small or large, as opportunities. Hope cherishes no illusions, nor does it yield to cynicism. Hope sets big goals and is not frustrated by repeated difficulties or setbacks. Hope pushes ahead when it would be easy to quit. Hope puts up with modest gains, realizing that ‘the longest journey starts with one step.’ Hope accepts misunderstandings as the price for serving the greater good of others. Hope is a good loser because it has the divine assurance of final victory.”

*“In the world you will have trouble, but be brave: I have conquered the world.”* (John 16:33)

## A Look at the Man

**Tireless:** On a hot day in early summer, Father Keller was making TV programs in a poorly ventilated studio. Working conditions were so difficult that the crew was all set to walk off the job. What kept them on was the example of Father Keller, under the hot lights, calmly making one television program after another without complaint.

**Public-spirited:** A successful businessman once asked him if he should take a high government job, with all the frustrations involved. Father Keller replied: "This country has done very well by you. Isn't it about time you gave something back to it?" On a similar occasion, he told another executive: "You've inherited a financially troubled company. Don't you think your first obligation is to your employees and stockholders to get your firm on its feet?"

**Thoughtful:** Someone published an article in an obscure magazine some years ago. "I assumed nobody but my mother would read it," the person wrote. "Shortly thereafter, a letter came tumbling in from *the* Father Keller complimenting me on the piece. I walked on air for a week and then some. I still have the letter."

**Observant:** On his way to Boston to give Christopher talks, he was getting some exercise walking up and down during a stopover at New Haven. He spotted a woman stranded with heavy baggage. Before the astonished woman could say a word, he picked up her luggage and carried it onto the train.

**Attentive:** "I shook hands with Father Keller back in 1948 or 1949 at the San Francisco College for Women. I was a very shy and lonely person at the time, and he made me feel important."

An old friend summed it up: "As I think back over all those years, it was his warmth of spirit, as though he really knew you and cared, that impressed me and made me a follower."

  
**"It's better to light one candle  
than to curse the darkness."**

A non-profit, founded in 1945 by Father James Keller, M.M., The Christophers encourages people to change the world for the better. Donations are tax-deductible. News Notes are published 10 times a year. Single copies are free.

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## **A Final Testament**

In 1972, Father Keller, aware that he was failing in health, wrote: "Since tomorrow, August 15, is the 47th anniversary of my ordination, it seems fitting to ponder more seriously than ever the fact that a relatively short time is left to me to prepare for my final summons. Throughout my life I have looked forward with joyful anticipation to the 'homecoming' day when I will meet my Savior face to face. But the nearer I get to that glorious occasion, the more unworthy I feel. I find myself counting more than ever before on the mercy of the Lord to make up for my defects and shortcomings.

"Through prayer and good works during the time left, I can do penance for my imperfections and prove that I am truly sorry for any and all of my offenses against a loving God—By increasing my prayers for the work of The Christophers, for numerous intentions involving eternal salvation and human well-being of many friends and acquaintances, as well as the poor people of the earth; By accepting cheerfully the handicap of my physical ailments; By welcoming rather than evading any suffering that the Lord allows to come my way; By trying to be of greater service to mankind through working for The Christophers...

"By striving to bring joy, not gloom, into the lives of others; By avoiding all forms of self-pity; By fulfilling more devotedly all daily spiritual exercises; By endeavoring to be more conscientious that I may be under all circumstances a humble witness of the holiness, devotion, generosity, detachment, and purity that most people associate with a good priest; By continually thanking God for the countless blessings I have received from Him throughout my life; By recalling frequently St. Paul's reminder: 'By God's favor you were saved. This is not your own doing, it is God's gift'; and By faithfully living up to the spiritual goals set by the prophet Micah: 'This is what the Lord asks of you, only this—to act justly, to love tenderly, and to walk humbly with your God.'"

*This is an edited version of the classic Christopher News Note "James Keller: Man of Hope."*