

Silent Vigil

A Ritual of Shared Grief

NEW YORK — (AP) — The silent vigil by the mahogany coffin holding the body of Sen. Robert Kennedy began spontaneously and grew into one of the most poignant rituals in the two days he lay in state beneath the spirals of St. Patrick's Cathedral.

A tall, hulking John Kenneth Galbraith . . . a dungaree-clad Rev. Ralph David Abernathy . . . a serious Jack Paar . . . a nervous 16 year old Donald Kerry . . . and the senator's youthful namesake, Robert Francis Kennedy Jr., were among the diverse group who stood by the coffin.

A THING TO DO

The idea for the vigil "just sprang up Thursday night as a thing to do," said William Haddad, a John F. Kennedy appointee in the Peace Corps.

It began when a small group of the late senator's friends and aides began to flank the coffin. By yesterday morning, more than 600 had stood by the senator.

First to keep the vigil was Sen. Edward Kennedy, who stayed by his brother's coffin throughout Thursday evening and much of Friday morning.

During the next two days, as national leaders, celebrities and campaign aides arrived, they were ushered to a pew to the left of the coffin.

A SHARED GRIEF

Occasionally, a Kennedy aide would whisper quietly to one of the mourners and he would rise, walk to the coffin and replace one of six men who stood in front of six lighted tapers, hands folded.

Former Defense Secretary Robert McNamara said afterward that his feeling while standing by the coffin of the man whom he served with in President Kennedy's cabinet, was of "a grief that was shared by thousands passing by."