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Former Holy Spirit teacher and crew coach Rev. Michael D'Amico dies at 71

By ELAINE ROSE Staff Writer Jun 14, 2010

The Rev. Michael D'Amico, longtime priest in the Diocese of Camden and teacher and coach at Holy Spirit High School, died over the weekend. He was 71.

Born in Vineland, D'Amico graduated from Wildwood Catholic High School and then attended St. Charles Borromeo Seminary in Wynnewood, Pa., and was ordained a priest in 1964. He served in five southern New Jersey parishes, most recently at St. Michael's in Atlantic City.

D'Amico also was on the faculty of Holy Spirit High School in Absecon from 1965 to 1996 and helped establish the boys rowing team at the school.

"He was just an outstanding man," Stan Bergman, former head coach for crew at Holy Spirit, said Monday night. "The main thing he did was get a lot of kids involved in rowing, and he got a lot of kids going to universities they never believed they could go to."

Bergman said he met D'Amico in 1967 when the young priest was assigned to be the moderator of the crew. They became good friends, and D'Amico was godfather to one of Bergman's children.

D'Amico did whatever was needed to help the rowing team, from driving the boats on trailers to varnishing the then-wooden shells and oars to washing the team's racing shirts in the rectory, said Bergman, now the assistant crew coach at Holy Spirit.

In addition, D'Amico visited the sick, and performed weddings and funerals, Bergman said.

"In my mind, he was Christ-like," Bergman said. "He truly gave his heart and soul to people."

D'Amico also was a tough, old-school disciplinarian, and some may not have liked that style, Bergman said.

"He showed love sometimes by disciplining people," Bergman said. "And some kids in high school need that discipline."

But the Diocese of Camden saw another side of D'Amico, and removed him from active ministry in fall 2005 after allegations emerged that he had sexually abused a 13-year-old boy in Gloucester County in 1964. Bishop Joseph A. Galante said at the time that D'Amico admitted to the allegation, although he later recanted the confession. Although when Galante spoke to the victim, his story and D'Amico's original version were the same.

Several parishioners and students of D'Amico's spoke out on D'Amico's behalf. But diocesan officials said at the time that the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People passed by the nation's bishops requires that priests who abuse children be removed from the ministry once the abuse is substantiated, even if it happened many years earlier.

No criminal or civil charges were filed against D'Amico, as the statute of limitations had long expired.

Diocesan spokesman Andrew Walton said Monday night that prayers go out to D'Amico's family and friends in their loss.

"We pray for (D'Amico's) eternal rest, knowing that whatever good we have done in life, and however we have failed, each one of us depends completely on God's mercy," Walton said.