

Celebrating 50 years: Msgr. Simonin

The Miscellany profiles the three priests who will celebrate this year the 50th anniversary of their ordination to the priesthood: Rev. Jerome C. Powers, Rev. Msgr. J. Fleming McManus and Rev. Msgr. John A. Simonin

By JOANNE COMAR

Rev. Msgr. John A. Simonin

Msgr. John Anthony Simonin's 50 years of priesthood represent not only caring ministry and effective leadership but also Lowcountry gentility and neighborliness. He has served as a priest for half a century within the Coastal Deanery.

He was ordained May 25, 1947 at the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist in Charleston by Bishop Emmet M. Walsh. During his first two decades as a priest he served as pastor of St. Andrew, Bluffton; St. Anthony, Hardeeville; St. Anthony, Ridgeland; and the mission at Hilton Head Island. He traveled extensively to celebrate the sacraments, visit the sick, and build a sense of community among the scattered Catholic population of rural and coastal areas.

In the middle years of his priesthood Msgr. Simonin was pastor of St. Patrick's, Charleston; Holy Spirit, John's Island; Our Lady of Good Counsel, Folly Beach; Nativity, James Island; St. Peter's, Beaufort; and St. Joseph's, Charleston.

For the past 15 years he has been pastor of Charleston's historic Church of St. Mary of the Annunciation, mother church of the Carolinas and Georgia.

St. Mary's Parish will hold a 50th anniversary celebration for Msgr. Simonin on June 1.

Msgr. Simonin is delighted with the increase in Catholics in South Carolina. To address the growing need for priests to minister to the burgeoning numbers of Catholics, he and St. Mary's Parish are taking a direct and powerful approach: prayer. "Going down the alphabet, we assign five families each week to pray for vocations," he said. "They have been most gracious in accepting this responsibility."

He said his own vocation was always there, fostered and nurtured by his parents and his family life. The moment he committed himself to his vocation is still vivid in his memory. "I was in a group of boys talking together at Bishop England, when 'Doc' O'Brien (founder and first rector of the school) walked up and asked us, one by one, if we were going into the seminary. I said yes. Father O'Brien was always very vocal about the priesthood. Sometimes a person just needs someone to push a button to start the commitment process."

Because he served at Hilton Head and John's Island when there were few Catholics in these areas, Msgr. Simonin is well aware of the contrast between then and now. He recently visited Hilton Head, where there are two large, thriving parishes, and was amazed at the numbers of Catholics. "When I was pastor of the mission there, I celebrated Mass in the William Hilton Inn," he said. "We started out with about 40 Catholics, but the summer crowds kept growing. Now with the development at Hilton and the establishment of the Sun City retirement community, the growth in Catholics is unbelievable. When I was pastor of Holy Spirit, John's Island, Kiawah and

Seabrook were not yet developed. I was given the Folly Beach parish as a mission from Holy Spirit, to keep me going financially.”

During the 20 years of monsignor’s ministry in the Ridgeland-Beaufort area, he spent 13 years as the director of Camp St. Mary’s, having served there as counselor for six years during his seminary days. “Those were good years, and the staff was wonderful,” he said.

“Part of the seminarians’ formation was their service as instructors and counselors at the camp in the summertime. I was happy to help them in this part of their preparation for the priesthood. The campers received comprehensive religious education in beautiful surroundings. A special happiness for me is the recent announcement that the camp will become a county park, and its history and beauty will be respected and preserved.” Another source of joy in his ministry was his 15 years of chaplaincy at the Veterans Hospital in Charleston.

Six years ago, Father Simonin was named by Pope John Paul II as a prelate of honor to his holiness, with the title of reverend monsignor. He received this honor in recognition of his work in Lowcountry rural areas, his loyal service to the sick through hospital ministry, his faithful and judicious administration of parishes under his pastorate, and his kindness as a pastoral caregiver.

For the past 23 years, monsignor has been reinforced and assisted in his pastoral ministry by Deacon Joseph C. Kemper, the first permanent deacon to be ordained in America. Their collaboration as pastor and deacon began in 1974 at Nativity Parish, and the pastoral team is still serving the Diocese of Charleston at St. Mary’s.

The son of the late Leo L. and Mary Danehey Simonin, Msgr. Simonin received his priestly education and formation at St. Bernard in Cullman, Alabama; St. Gregory in Mt. Washington, Ohio; and St. Mary’s in Baltimore. His two sisters, Rosemary Simonin and Dolores S. Puckhaber, live in Mt. Pleasant, and his brother, Leo L. Simonin, Jr., lives in Riverland Terrace, James Island. His younger brother, Charles Joseph Simonin, is deceased.

Msgr. Simonin feels optimistic about the future of the church, particularly because lay leadership is a major help and support to the pastors. St. Mary’s Pastoral Council and Finance Council have helped him tremendously. “I appreciate the way St. Mary’s parishioners have taken over responsibilities. They have been fabulous, especially with all the important challenges of implementing the Synod.”