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in memoriam
Friday
June 19, 2009

Fr. Dunn: missionary, pastor, preacher



Redemptorist Father Leo Dunn, a former missionary, parish priest, teacher, and retreat house director, died Friday, June 19, at Saratoga Springs Hospital in New York. He had been living at St. John Neumann Residence in Saratoga Springs since 2004 and was 92 at the time of his death.

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The Funeral Mass and burial were held at Mount St. Alphonsus, Esopus, NY, on Monday, June 22.

A native of Rochester, NY, Father Dunn was born Oct. 1, 1916, the son of John and Mary O'Brien Dunn,. The family belonged to Immaculate Conception Parish.

After grammar school, he was accepted at the Redemptorists's St. Mary's Seminary in North East, PA., for a six-year course of studies. He spent his novitiate in Ilchester, MD, and made his first profession of vows in 1939. His final profession came in 1942. After completing his studies for the priesthood at Mount St. Alphonsus in Esopus, he was ordained there on June 18, 1944.

Father Dunn's first 16 years of priestly ministry were spent in Brazil, where he served in Miranda, Aquadauana, Campo Grande, and Ponta Grossa. Father Giles Gardner, who still ministers in Brazil at the age of 96, recalled being stationed with Father Dunn at Ponta Grossa: "He had a serious exterior, but a big, warm heart and an awful lot of friends. He was very zealous in his Father Leo F. Dunn, C.S.S.R. work and a very good community man too," he said.

When Father Dunn returned to the U.S. in 1961, he was assigned to St. Joseph Church in Rochester, where he not only ministered to the parishioners, but put a great deal of work into building a high school, teaching there, and guiding it in its early stages of development. Father Lawrence Lover, who at that time was serving at the seminary in North East, said that they used to visit together from time to time and see each other at regional meetings. "He was a very lively fellow, interesting and nice to visit," Father Lover said. "He was very heavily involved in getting that school built and going. Of course, in Brazil he had built chapels and churches and was more or less used to supervising construction. He very outgoing ,very welcoming, and had a good sense of humor"

His commitment to education came to the attention of the Diocese of Rochester and Father Dunn was asked to serve also as Assistant Superintendent of Diocesan Schools.

In 1970, he was asked to take on a new aspect of ministry — preaching retreats for lay people at Tobyhanna, PA. Two years later, he was named rector of the Redemptorist retreat house there. Father Dunn continued doing retreat work when he was named rector at Notre Dame Retreat House in Canandaigua, NY, in 1981. In a tribute to Father Dunn's work at Tobyhanna, a confrere wrote:

*"The mountain man — as strong as iron
Whose work is never done
From Tobyhanna and its environ
The tireless Leo Dunn.*

*"He models his thought on the Summa
His preaching as solid as rock
And if you care for some humor
He's got plenty of that in stock."*

Father Timothy Keating recalled having served with Father Dunn at Canandaigua, where the elder confreres "was always reading, always with a book in hand." At Canandaigua, he said, "when I'd come down in the morning for breakfast, I'd find him sitting in the common room reading Karl Rahner; other times, I'd see him walking around with a New Testament in hand." Father Dunn also was known for his dry wit and Father Keating said he used to enjoy watching people's faces as they listened to his confrere's introduction to the mission. "You could tell when someone 'got it,'" he said, "because lips would begin to tweak — sometimes there'd be a soft chuckle."

Along with humor, there was a sense of kindness that characterized Father Dunn, Father Keating said. One instance was the time he spent one summer tutoring his nephew to help the boy pass from the 7th to the 8th grade. At a time, Father Keating's mother was visiting at Canandaigua and the rector would fix her a pre-dinner drink and

discuss theology with her. Father Keating said that in his mother's judgment, "Underneath that gruff exterior, there's a teddy bear inside."

In 1987, Father Dunn returned to St. Joseph's in Rochester, where he served for another three terms before going back to Canandaigua. At the age of 85, he "semi-retired" to Mission Church in Boston, where he continued with his habit of reading and sharing the insights he gained with his younger confreres.

After suffering a heart attack, Father Dunn was transferred to St. John Neumann Residence. Sister Serafina Sarnowska, director of nursing then, said, "He had a great sense of humor and was always full of ideas — a very deep man." During the last three-and-a-half years she got to know him and found that "he was always following God's will." When the Baltimore Province announced that the residence would be closed, Father Dunn agreed to accept an assignment to St. Clement Mission House in Ephrata, PA, where confreres are offered an assisted living situation. Then came another heart attack and he agreed to go instead to Stella Maris in Timonium, MD, where the Redemptorists have a wing of the nursing home for round-the-clock care. It was the fragile state of his health which prevented his planned move to Maryland.

Father Gerard Szymkowiak, rector at St. John Neumann's, noted: "After Father Jack Doherty's death, Father Dunn became our senior priest — for 22 days. "He was fun, kind, gentle, humble; and he loved a good joke and a good scotch," Father Szymkowiak said. "He was also a very prayerful man who loved the Alphonsian life. He loved his Mass, his daily visit to the Blessed Sacrament, and he prayed his rosary every day. For his last four days, he never let that rosary go; it was as if he were holding his Mother's hand."

Father Dunn is survived by a sister, Mrs. Rita Tobiassen, and several other relatives.

Rev. Leo Francis Dunn C.Ss.R.

- Born: October 1, 1916
- Professed: October 1, 1942
- Ordained: June 18, 1944
- Died: June 19, 2009

Services

Wake Service

Sunday, June 21

7:00 – 8:15 p.m.

Mount St. Alphonsus Retreat Center Chapel

Esopus, NY

Funeral Mass and burial

Monday, June 22

10:30 a.m.

Mount St. Alphonsus Retreat Center Chapel

Esopus, NY

Additional Memorial Services

Monday, June 29
7:30 p.m.
at OLPH 59th Street
Brooklyn, NY

Wednesday, July 1
7 p.m.
at St. Peter's Church
Philadelphia, PA

Wednesday, July 1
10 a.m.
at St. Patrick's Church
Enfield, CT

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