

101-year-old Josephite priest, Father Robert O'Connell dies

A funeral Mass was offered Nov. 27 for Father Robert O'Connell, S.S.J., who at 101 was the longest-lived Josephite priest, one who had served God for 66 years.

Father O'Connell lived at the St. Joseph Manor in Baltimore since he was 90. From 1983 to 1986, he served in Baltimore at both St. Pius V and St. Peter Claver churches.

While at St. Pius V, he was pistol-whipped during a robbery when thieves broke into the rectory. He had to get 20 stitches in his head and he suffered a black eye.

But, said Father Edward J. Mullaney, S.S.J., a former rector, he wasn't angry at the robbers; he was mad about being portrayed as an old man in the resulting newspaper story.

Father Mullaney recalled that Father O'Connell, a New York native, was a novice master for 14 years at Epiphany College in New York.

"He was a master - he not only formed us in the spiritual life but he also taught us as a master how to enjoy every minute of it," Father Mullaney said. "He was well-liked; he was serious about the spiritual life but he was always a good friend and a priest's priest. He was loved as the master."

Father Matthew O'Rourke recalled that he and Father O'Connell became friends when they were both living in the Josephite headquarters on Calvert Street, where the priests in the house enjoyed conversations with Father O'Connell.

"I think it was his happy approach to life - he was an outwardly happy man," Father O'Rourke said.

Father O'Connell, who was known for his punctuality, served as associate pastor and pastor in Texas, Mississippi, Louisiana, Delaware, the District of Columbia, Florida and New York, and he served as administrator and member of the Josephite Council

in Baltimore and as a delegate to the Josephite Chapter, the Society's policy convention. He also served as a chaplain to South Baltimore General Hospital in 1968 and at the Villa Maria retirement home in 1972 and 1977.

He marked his 100th birthday with a Mass celebrated by Cardinal William H. Keeler. Toward the end of his life - he attributed his good health to eating in moderation, exercise and prayer - "he often asked me 'why is God letting me live so long?'" Father Mullooney recalled. "But I think it's because he was such a great blessing." The Friday before he died, he told Father O'Rourke, "Why is the Lord keeping me all these years? I don't understand it - I want to go home."

On Nov. 24, he did.