Archbishop Flynn, former rector of Mount St. Mary's Seminary, dies at 86

Monsignor James P. Farmer will never forget the sage and practical advice he and his fellow seminarians received from the rector of Mount St. Mary's Seminary in Emmitsburg in the 1970s.

Then-Father Harry J. Flynn, a future archbishop of St. Paul and Minneapolis who served as rector of Mount St. Mary's from 1970 to 1979, advised future priests always to answer the phone when it rang and to do so with kindness. Likewise, when someone came to the door, the rector said, treat that person attentively and with sincere respect.

"He always emphasized how important it is for that initial contact to be friendly and welcoming," said Monsignor Farmer, pastor of St. Thomas More in Baltimore. "You never know when a person is coming to you with a problem and is looking for help."

Archbishop Flynn, who served as spiritual shepherd of the Twin Cities for 13 years before his 2008 retirement, died Sept. 22 in St. Paul. He was 86.

Archbishop William E. Lori, who was completing a master's degree at Mount St. Mary's at the same time Archbishop Flynn served as rector, remembered his friend as a "shining light in the church."

"He was a holy priest, a wise rector, and a pastor of souls who truly knew and loved those he was called to serve," Archbishop Lori said. "May his great priestly soul rest in peace."

Monsignor Farmer recalled that Archbishop Flynn often told Mount seminarians that the greatest work they would do as priests would involve the unexpected. That might involve hearing the confession of a stranger on a plane or answering a call in the middle of the night.

“He let us know that God put us there to help that person,” Monsignor Farmer said.

Monsignor Farmer, a defense lawyer before becoming a priest, recalled that Archbishop Flynn once came to him in the seminary and told him about a man who was arrested and had no money for legal help.

“‘You take the case,’” Monsignor Farmer remembered the rector telling him. “We went to court and represented him. He was acquitted.”

Archbishop Flynn was born in Schenectady, N.Y. His father died when he was 6 and his mother died when he was 12. He was raised by two aunts.

Archbishop Flynn prepared for the priesthood at Mount St. Mary’s and was ordained a priest for the Diocese of Albany, N.Y., in 1960. He returned to Mount St. Mary’s Seminary in 1965 to serve as a seminary professor following five years as a Catholic schoolteacher and associate pastor in his home diocese. He would later become vice rector and then rector.

Archbishop Flynn was a close friend of Blessed Stanley Rother, a fellow seminarian from the Mount who was martyred in Guatemala in 1981. Mount St. Mary’s still has some of the correspondence between the martyr and Archbishop Flynn.

The Catholic Review reported in 1974 that in an era when seminaries around the country were closing or curtailing their operations for lack of students, Mount St. Mary’s was expanding.

The seminary had a then-record enrollment of 164 seminarians that year and had to turn away 30 applicants. A $375,000 new wing was being added to the seminary.

“We have never let our community prayer life go and as a result of that community prayer, the spirit of the community has always been excellent,” then-Father Flynn told the Review.

He said the primary function of the seminary is to serve as a house of prayer dedicated to a man’s relationship with God.

“Everything else flows from that,” he said. “When religious communities learn this,

they will never have trouble keeping their houses filled."

Monsignor Farmer called Archbishop Flynn a model of priesthood for seminarians. He recalled how Archbishop Flynn prayed reverently before the Blessed Sacrament and participated with Mount seminarians at the March for Life in Washington, D.C.

Archbishop Flynn also had a good sense of humor, Monsignor Flynn said. He remembered how the then-rector once accidentally sent weights crashing to the floor while exercising at the seminary.

"The next morning, he told us there's too much noise coming from the seminary," Monsignor Farmer said with a laugh. "He was the one who made all the noise."

Monsignor Farmer recalled another time his friend accompanied 40 seminarians on a fishing trip to Ocean City, Md.

"A whale came up out of the water," Monsignor Farmer recalled. "He talked about that for years."

Long after Archbishop Flynn left Mount St. Mary's, he continued to support the seminary and gave priest alumni retreats.

Before his assignment to Minnesota, Archbishop Flynn was the bishop of the Diocese of Lafayette in Louisiana.

In 2002, he served as chair of what was then the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Ad Hoc Committee on Sexual Abuse, which developed the "Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People" in response to the clergy sexual abuse crisis that rocked the Catholic Church across the country.

Archbishop Flynn received wide praise for his work as head of the ad hoc committee. He took a particularly strong stand in favor of the bishops' "zero tolerance" policy under which any priest who admitted or was proven to have committed at least one act of child sex abuse would be removed from all ministry.

After his retirement, however, questions were raised by some about whether he did enough in the Diocese of Lafayette and in the Twin Cities to investigate clergy

sexual abuse allegations.

The archbishop's body is to be received the evening of Sept. 29 at St. Paul Seminary's St. Mary Chapel, followed by public visitation and a vigil. After morning prayer Sept. 30 at the chapel, his body will be transferred to the Cathedral of St. Paul. There will be three hours for public visitation before his 11 a.m. funeral Mass.

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Catholic News Service contributed to this report.