

Baltimore-native Father Oppitz survived famous ship's sinking

Fifty-five years after he narrowly avoided losing his life on board a sinking ship, Father Joseph W. Oppitz died under the care of the Redemptorist order he joined as a young man.

A funeral Mass was offered for Redemptorist Father Oppitz Oct. 11 at Stella Maris in Timonium. Father Oppitz died Oct. 6 at the age of 85.

A known author, philosophy professor, missionary and pastor, Father Oppitz survived the sinking of the SS Andrea Doria ship, which sank July 26, 1956.

Born in Baltimore, he professed his first vows in 1948 and final vows in 1951. He was ordained a priest on June 21, 1953 in Esopus, N.Y.

From 1954 to 1956 he studied at the Angelicum in Rome where he received his doctoral degree in philosophy. He traveled to Genoa and boarded the Andrew Doria after defending his thesis, according to a personal account he wrote.

"The ship was 697 feet long and had all the latest safety devices, the most recent and sophisticated radio and radar equipment, a series of up-to-date safety compartments, such that it would be impossible for the ship to ever sink," he wrote.

As the Andrea Doria approached busy Nantucket, Mass., through fog, it was struck by MS Stockholm of Sweden.

"The Stockholm," Father Oppitz wrote, "at practically full speed, knifed almost halfway through the Andrea Doria's right side just below the wing"

While there were more than 1,600 survivors, 46 people died following the crash.

"My own personal miracle had taken place the day we left Genoa when I was forced to change my cabin," Father Oppitz wrote. "Had I not changed quarters I would have been killed in one of the cabins that was completely destroyed. The actual length of the gash was 40 feet wide through seven of the Andrea Doria's 11 decks."

He lived for 55 more years and spent more than 20 years teaching in the Redemptorist seminary formation system of the Baltimore Province and in Washington.

During the early 1980s he served on the mission team and was a part-time parish priest at St. Wenceslaus Parish in Baltimore.

Father Oppitz served as parish priest in St. Mary's in Annapolis during the mid-1980s. He retired in 2000, first to the St. John Neumann Residence in Saratoga Springs, N.Y., and finally to Stella Maris.