

Beloved former Cumberland and Ellicott City pastor dies at 78

Monsignor James McGovern, beloved former pastor of Church of the Resurrection in Ellicott City and St. Patrick in Cumberland, died at age 78 after a battle with cancer Dec. 8. Archbishop William E. Lori will offer a funeral Mass Dec. 13 at 10:30 a.m. at Church of the Resurrection.

“He was so well-loved in all the parishes he served,” said Father Michael Roach, longtime friend and pastor of St. Bartholomew in Manchester, where Monsignor McGovern celebrated daily Mass in his retirement. “I’ve never known his equal.”

James Oliver McGovern was born in Baltimore in 1939, and raised in Ellicott City, attending St. Agnes Church and parish school in Catonsville.

He attended what was then Loyola High School in Baltimore and studied for one year at Loyola College before entering the St. Charles Minor Seminary in 1958. Monsignor McGovern then studied at Mount St. Mary’s Seminary in Emmitsburg, where he earned a bachelor’s degree in Latin philosophy.

Monsignor McGovern was ordained to the priesthood at his home parish in 1967 by Cardinal Lawrence Shehan. He was assigned as an associate priest at St. Rita in Dundalk (1967-70), Immaculate Heart of Mary in Baynesville (1970-77) and St. Luke in Edgemere (1977-81).

In 1981, he received his first assignment as pastor at St. Patrick, which is now part of Our Lady of the Mountains in Cumberland. Ten years later, he began his final assignment as pastor at Church of the Resurrection, where he served for 18 years until his retirement in 2009.

“Father Jim, as I knew him, was so kind, gentle with his words and actions and very attentive to anyone who spoke to with him,” said Teresa Files, administrative assistant at Our Lady of the Mountains. “He was a very good listener and cared deeply for St. Patrick’s parishioners.”

Files said Monsignor McGovern loved to work around the parish property replacing lightbulbs, fixing the boiler and weeding the flowerbeds, a passion he would continue to pursue in his retirement as the canonical representative and facilities chair of the board for the former Seton Keough High School in Baltimore.

In a 2009 interview with the Catholic Review about his retirement, Monsignor McGovern said he felt “called forth” by the people he served.

“They see your gifts and they enable you as a priest,” said Monsignor McGovern, noting that encouraging the laity to take a more active role in ministry had been one of the highlights of the priesthood. “I’ve been called to do things I didn’t think I could do, but I found out I could do them because people encouraged me.”

In his nearly two decades at Resurrection, Monsignor McGovern oversaw the building of a gymnasium/multipurpose center, an addition to the school, a storage building and the renovation of an existing building. While serving as pastor, Monsignor McGovern was also a leader in the wider south central region of the former western vicariate of the archdiocese. Cardinal William H. Keeler appointed him to serve as the first vicar forane for the region with responsibilities for 12 parishes in Howard and Carroll counties.

Donna Bridickas, associate superintendent and former president of Seton Keough High School, got to know Monsignor McGovern over the three years they worked together.

“He had the gentlest, most compassionate soul,” Bridickas said. “He cared deeply for educating young people.”

“It doesn’t matter if you knew him for one year, three years or 20 years,” Bridickas said, adding that he was the same ‘Father Jim’ to everyone. “He would treat you the same way.”

Illness did not stop Monsignor McGovern from celebrating daily Mass around the archdiocese, including at St. Joseph in Eldersburg, Ss. James and John in Baltimore and the Mercy sisters’ Retirement Convent at the Villa. At St. Bartholomew, he celebrated Mass twice the same week of his passing.

“Father Jim was a true gentle shepherd,” said Marty Bode, director of sacramental preparation and adult formation at Church of the Resurrection. “He loved and was loved, and truly lived a life that reflected Christ’s love.”

George P. Matysek Jr. contributed to this story.

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