

# Father Bak, 'pioneer' in diaconate, dies

**By George P. Matysek Jr.**

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Father Bernard S. Bak, one of the first permanent deacons ordained in the United States who later became a priest for the Archdiocese of Baltimore, died in his Dundalk home June 8. He was 85.

A funeral Mass was offered June 11 at St. Casimir in Canton, the parish in which Father Bak grew up and where he served as a deacon after his 1971 ordination. Father Bak also served as a deacon at Christ the King in Dundalk.

After his wife of 35 years, Antoinette Stefanowicz, died in 1984, Father Bak petitioned the archdiocese to become a priest. He studied at St. Mary's Seminary and University in Roland Park and was ordained a priest in 1988.

Father Bak served as associate pastor of St. Philip Neri in Linthicum and St. Joseph in Cockeysville. After his retirement in 1999, he assisted regularly at St. Clare, Essex, and St. Athanasius, Curtis Bay. Early in his retirement, he also assisted at St. Joseph, St. Philip Neri and Christ the King.

Father Timothy Kulbicki, O.F.M. Conv., a professor at St. Mary's Seminary and University and Father Bak's nephew and godson, said his uncle always had a deep devotion to his faith.

Father Bak had spent three years discerning the priesthood with the Capuchin Franciscans after he graduated from Baltimore City High School. He left the community and entered the U.S. Army, where he served in the Pacific theater during the Second World War and earned a Good Conduct medal.

"He did all kinds of Catholic action ministry in the 40s and 50s," said Father Kulbicki. "He did a lot of work with the CYO and CCD. It was a lifelong call for him."

Before entering the diaconate, Father Bak was a barber in Dundalk. He later earned a law degree from the Mount Vernon School of Law and worked for the State of Maryland in the division of Parole and Probation.

A very popular priest known for his good cheer and willingness to reach out to others, Father Bak gave freely of his time.

"I think people responded to his sheer humanity," said Father Kulbicki. "He was a very approachable human being. People also knew he was immensely hard working and dependable."

Father Kulbicki noted that his uncle had two children with his wife - both of whom died as infants. The tragic loss of his children gave him a special sensitivity as a priest, Father Kulbicki said - although Father Bak never spoke of his personal background.

"He was an intensely humble man who really didn't draw a lot of attention to himself," Father Kulbicki said.

Deacon Kevin Bagley, pastoral life director of St. Clare, said Father Bak was a "holy man" beloved by parishioners. He always began his homilies with a story and injected humor into his preaching, Deacon Bagley said.

"He always shared a kind word for everyone," Deacon Bagley said.

Calling Father Bak a "pioneer" as a member of the first class of permanent deacons, Deacon Bagley said deacons looked to him as "one of the guys who was a trailblazer."

"He will sorely be missed," he said.