

Father Henry Harper, active in social outreach, dies at 86

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Josephite Father Henry Harper, a longtime associate pastor of St. Peter Claver in Baltimore whose ministry focused on outreach to the poor, died March 29 from complications following a fall. He was 86. An 11 a.m. funeral Mass will be offered April 2 at St. Peter.

In his 23 years at St. Peter, Father Harper was active in social outreach ministries. He set up the parish's "door ministry" that provided sandwiches and pastoral support to the hungry. He also set up a popular Bible study program that had a morning and afternoon session.

"Father Harper was a soft-spoken, humble, gentle spirit who had a deep, deep regard for the needy and the marginalized," said Deborah Holly, parish assistant at St. Peter and St. Pius V.

During the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s, Father Harper ministered to people who were HIV-positive.

"Those who were afflicted were able to talk to him when they couldn't talk with anyone else," Holly said. "He always had an open ear."

Holly noted that Father Harper volunteered at the Joseph Richey Hospice in Baltimore, an ecumenical ministry to AIDS patients.

Father Harper was a familiar presence in his West Baltimore neighborhood and often walked his pet terrier, "Buddy."

"He was much beloved in the neighborhood," Holly said.

Born in the Virgin Islands, Father Harper was educated in Catholic schools in

Washington, D.C. He prepared for the priesthood at St. Charles College Seminary in Catonsville and St. Mary's Seminary in Baltimore. He became a Josephite in 1947, continuing his seminary training in Washington, D.C. He was ordained to the priesthood in 1950 at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington.

In Baltimore, Father Harper was an associate pastor of St. Francis Xavier in 1963. He was stationed at St. Peter in 1988. He had also served as pastor or associate pastor in Maryland, Virginia, Washington, D.C., Texas and Louisiana. He was honored by the NAACP of Virginia and by the Harris County Community Action Association in Houston, Texas.

Father Harper had been scheduled to leave April 1 for a pilgrimage to the Holy Land with his Bible study group. Holly noted that participants plan to place his photograph in the Wailing Wall.