

# Former Ascension pastor and area high school principal dies at 93

A longtime Baltimore County pastor and principal of two Catholic high schools who was known for his unique blend of erudition, generosity and wit died Aug. 25 at St. Martin's Home for the Aged in Catonsville after years of declining health.

Father Manuel R. Roman, a native of the U.S. Virgin Islands who was a few weeks shy of his 94th birthday when he died, was pastor of Church of the Ascension in Halethorpe from 1986 to his retirement in June 2005.

He had previously served as principal of what is now Archbishop Spalding High School in Severn (1980-86), associate pastor of St. Philip Neri in Linthicum (1979-1980) and principal of Our Lady of Mount Carmel High School in Essex (1977-1979).

Earlier assignments included ministry in education, the marriage tribunal and military and medical chaplaincies, among others. Father Roman was also a former assistant superintendent of Catholic schools, the first director of the Hispanic Apostolate and the first director of special education for the Archdiocese of Baltimore.

"He seemed to always be interested in other people's welfare," said Father William Foley, the coordinator of pastoral care for retired priests who will give the homily for his friend's 10:30 a.m. Aug. 31 funeral Mass at Ascension.

"He would often hear of people who were in need and he would make donations to them," Father Foley said. "He would receive stacks of requests for donations. I joked with him that he should save something for himself."

Joseph Herbert, a former president of the pastoral council at Ascension, remembered that Father Roman helped get students enrolled in Catholic high schools.

"Then he helped pay tuition if their parents couldn't afford it," Herbert said.

Herbert recalled the priest making frequent visits to the sick and homebound. Every Halloween, the pastor dressed in costume and gave out giant-sized candy bars from the pastoral center.

“All the kids in the neighborhood knew that was the place to go for the good candy,” Herbert said.

Born in Christiansted, St. Croix, Father Roman studied medicine, French and German at The Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. He was commissioned a second lieutenant in the U.S. Infantry Reserves in 1949.

In a 2005 interview with the Catholic Review, Father Roman recalled that as a young man he had considered becoming a surgeon, a professor of languages or a military officer.

“In 1950, I read a paperback published by the Vincentian Fathers of Germantown, Pennsylvania,” he said. “When I finished, I wanted to be a parish priest.”

Father Roman, of Spanish descent, prepared for the priesthood at St. Mary’s Seminary in Roland Park and Theological College Seminary in Washington, D.C. Prior to entering the seminary, he had been a parishioner of Ss. Philip and James in Homewood since 1943.

Archbishop Francis P. Keough ordained him a priest May 26, 1956, at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Baltimore. He was one of 24 clerics ordained that day – the largest priesthood class in the history of the Archdiocese of Baltimore, according to Father Foley. Monsignor Thomas Donellan, one of Father Roman’s friends, is the last surviving priest from the class.

Father Roman’s first assignment was as associate pastor of St. Bernardine in Baltimore. He then went to what is now Loyola University Maryland in Baltimore for post-graduate work in 1959 while residing at the Cathedral of Mary Our Queen.

He was appointed chaplain to the U.S. Air Force Civil Patrol in 1959, holding that post for a decade.

Father Roman earned a master’s degree in educational psychology from Loyola in

1960. He earned a doctorate in educational psychology in 1973, completing his course work at The Johns Hopkins University and his dissertation through Walden University.

Father Roman was a lecturer in psychology and education at what is now Notre Dame of Maryland University in Baltimore and a full-time chaplain to the University of Maryland in Baltimore's School of Medicine, Law, Nursing, Pharmacy and Social Work. He also taught ethics at the Mercy School of Nursing.

Father Foley noted that Father Roman drew from his vast knowledge to craft engaging homilies.

"He was a teacher," Father Foley said, "so he could present the material in an interesting way."

Father Roman had a reputation for a good sense of humor. Herbert remembered a time when a visiting priest celebrated Mass at Ascension while Father Roman stood near one of the exits to greet people after Mass. As several people attempted to leave Mass early after Communion, Herbert said, they instead made their way into the restrooms when they saw the pastor standing at the back of church.

"He looked at me and said, 'Is there something in the water? Everyone seems to have to go to the bathroom at the same time!'" Herbert remembered with a laugh. "Then Father Roman said, 'You know, Judas left early, too.'"

With his interest in education, Father Roman was a regular presence in Ascension School, sometimes teaching religion and giving instruction for sacramental preparation.

Mary Hoban, director of engagement of volunteers at Ascension, called Father Roman a "very reverent priest" who had a "great respect" for the Blessed Sacrament. He encouraged parishioners to be actively engaged.

"He came to me to get involved with being a eucharistic minister and then it just kept going with the parish council, committees and whatever else," she said.

Herbert said Father Roman had a reputation for making calls to volunteers between

10:30 and 11 p.m.

"It was before caller ID," Herbert said with a laugh, "but if the phone rang at that time, you knew it was Father Roman."

In his retirement, Father Roman celebrated Mass at the Shangri-La assisted living facility in Ellicott City and at Heartlands retirement community in Ellicott City, where he lived before moving to St. Martin's. He maintained a longtime hobby of collecting model cars and for more than 50 years, he annually gathered with the members of his priesthood class for a Mass and meal in honor of their ordination.

"I've been very happy as a priest," Father Roman told the Catholic Review in 2005, "and if I had to do it over again, I'd make the same decision."

*Father Roman will lie in state on Aug. 30 from 3-8 p.m. at Church of the Ascension, with a wake service to be held at 7:30 p.m. His funeral Mass will be offered by Archbishop William E. Lori Aug. 31 at 10:30 a.m. at Ascension.*

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