Former St. Elizabeth of Hungary pastor was humble adventurer

Third Order Regular Franciscan Father Robert T. Sisk, who died June 23 at the St. Francis Friary at Mount Assisi in Loretto, Pa., was remembered as a kind-hearted parish priest whose humble personality contrasted with an adventurous past serving in foreign missions.

Father Sisk, who died at 84, served as pastor of St. Elizabeth of Hungary Parish in Highlandtown from 2002 to 2012.

"He was just a really good man – what you want in a priest," remembered parishioner Nathaniel Rushing, who moved to the neighborhood with his family in 2010 to be near the parish.

Rushing described his former pastor as "big and burly" but also "really humble and really quiet."

"He definitely had a presence about him," Rushing said, adding that Father Sisk was well-known and respected in the neighborhood by Catholics and non-Catholics alike.

Rushing noted that Father Sisk put in extra effort to make parishioners feel welcome, even singing "Happy Birthday" from the pulpit, just before the recessional hymn, for those whose birthdays fell the previous week.

"He was very warm and kind," said Robert Stastny, who was married to his wife by Father Sisk. "Father Robert would recognize the special moments in people's lives, and when a family was experiencing great trouble, he would go out of his way to console them."

Often, that consolation would come in shared prayer.

"His big thing was praying together," Stastny said. "That was huge in how he handled things. He wasn't really into discussion or getting into specifics."

Stastny remembered approaching Father Sisk during a difficult time in his own life.

"He closed his huge hands, and in his warm voice said, 'OK, let's pray,'" he remembered. "That's pretty cool.

Justin Sapp was baptized at St. Elizabeth, attended its former parish school and has been a parishioner his entire life.

"(Father Sisk) offered general acceptance and understanding and compassion in an inner-city parish where people have all sorts of struggles, life situations and challenges, whether single-parent homes, drugs or alcohol" he said. "He just had a way of connecting with people."

Sapp added that Father Sisk had given two of his children religious instruction prior to their first Communions.

"The classes were one-on-one or close to it because we were such a small parish," he said. "It was neat for the kids to spend time with him. He taught in a way that encouraged them to participate – to think, speak up and give their opinions."

A native of Johnstown, Pa., Father Sisk, one of seven siblings, worked in his father's grocery store for one year after his high school graduation before he entered the postulancy for the Third Order Franciscans at Mount Assisi.

He was ordained to the priesthood May 27, 1961, at the Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament in Altoona.

Father Sisk ministered in Brazil from 1962 to 1979, serving in pastoral, formation and leadership roles, according to an obituary provided by his order.

Rushing noted that many of Father Sisk's great stories – apart from his tackling Johnny Unitas in a high school football game – came from his time in the Amazon.

"One of the priests broke his leg, and (Father Sisk) had to carry him to a canoe, paddle to a gas station, catch a motor boat to a road, and then flag down a truck to take him to the hospital to set his leg," Rushing remembered.

After the Brazil, Father Sisk left for South Africa, where he ministered from 1979

until 1990.

He then served as a pastor in Texas and then in leadership roles for the Third Order Franciscans, including as a member of the order's general council in Rome.

Although Father Sisk retired as pastor of St. Elizabeth in 2012, he remained there as pastor emeritus until 2015, when he departed for Our Lady Queen of Martyrs Parish in Sarasota, Fla. He returned to Loretto in January 2016 and ministered in prayer.

A funeral Mass for Father Sisk was offered June 28 at the chapel of the St. Francis Friary.

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