

Josephite priest who influenced generations of youths in West Baltimore dies

Josephite Father Joseph Francis Xavier Del Vecchio, whose gruff exterior could not hide the compassion he showed several generations of children in West Baltimore, died Jan. 13 at age 72 at St. Joseph Manor, the society's retirement facility in Baltimore.

Father Del Vecchio served as assistant pastor of St. Pius V for four years in the mid-1970s; returned to Baltimore as an associate pastor of St. Peter Claver from 1980 to 1983; and again in 2000 to begin a nine-year stint as administrator and then pastor of both faith communities, which now comprise one parish.

He challenged his young parishioners to do more, both on the playing field and in their community, and broadened their horizons by leading them on pilgrimages to foreign lands and even helping some families with college tuition bills.

A native of Flushing, N.Y., and lifelong fan of the New York Yankees, Father Del Vecchio completed his education at St. Joseph's Seminary in Washington, D.C., and was ordained a priest in 1972. Other than a brief assignment in Alabama, he spent most of his 45 years as a priest serving the Archdioceses of Baltimore and Washington.

The people he impacted in Baltimore include Ray Kelly, who grew up in St. Peter Claver Parish and now serves on its executive committee.

"He was always thinking about the youth of the parish, the next generation," Kelly

said. “He knew that if they weren’t interested in the church when they graduated high school, they’re gone. Father Joe was adamant about us having something to do. He coached us in baseball and basketball, but it wasn’t all about play.

“He demanded that we be of service to the church. He preached that the key to heaven is the work you do for others. The Josephites are known for always working with the black community, and Father Joe had an uncanny way of becoming a part of that community.”

When Kelly was confirmed in 1984, Father Del Vecchio, by then an associate pastor at Incarnation in Washington, returned to St. Peter Claver to stand as his sponsor.

“I needed a lot of guidance as a youth,” Kelly said. “My mother would send me to him for discipline. I had to answer to both.”

Kathleen Filippelli, principal of Holy Angels Catholic School, had the support of Father Del Vecchio when she was principal of the former Father Charles Hall School, which was on the campus of St. Peter Claver.

“He was involved with anything that had to do with the children and youths of the school and parish,” Filippelli said. “He would stand outside to greet the children in the morning, and used to joke, ‘I’ve never seen kids run up to school with a smile on their face. It’s supposed to be the other way around.’

“As gruff as he was on the outside, he was a very gentle soul. He wanted to get children off the street, and into other experiences. He took them from the parish to World Youth Day to see the pope. When pennies got tight for families, he helped them keep their kids in college.”

Greer Dorsey benefited from that help in the spring of 2006, when Father Del Vecchio assisted with the balance of the second semester tuition of her sophomore

year at Hampton University.

“My mom couldn’t afford it,” Dorsey said. “We asked a lot of people for help, but Father Joe was the only person who helped me. He was like a father to me.”

Dorsey did not have a passport, until she and other youths from West Baltimore joined Father Del Vecchio on a pilgrimage to Toronto for World Youth Day 2002, when she saw St. John Paul II. Her pastor also led a youth and young adult pilgrimage to Portugal, France and Spain in 2008.

“He got us involved in so many activities with the archdiocese, HiLi, Justice Action Week,” said Dorsey, still a parishioner of St. Peter Claver/St. Pius V. “He saw something in me, and did his best to bring it out, so that I could be a light for others.”

Father Del Vecchio was a proponent of BUILD (Baltimoreans United in Leadership Development); was honored several times by the archdiocese’s Catholic Youth Organization; and celebrated Mass in 2007 for the New York Jets before they played the Ravens in Baltimore.

He returned to St. Peter Claver/St. Pius V as associate pastor in 2014, but declining health forced him to retire last February. A viewing will be held at St. Peter Claver Jan. 19, from 9 to 11 a.m., with a funeral Mass to be offered at 11 a.m.

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