

Leader's low-key style saved Catholic hospitals

By Tim McCarthy

Ken Masters, a member of St. Mark Parish in Catonsville and former Majority Leader in the Maryland House of Delegates, died Jan. 17. He must be remembered for the key role he played in the 1991 fight in Annapolis that preserved the right of Catholic hospitals to not perform abortions.

Pro-life forces lacked the votes to stop passage of Maryland's permissive abortion law that year. As written, the law would have forced Catholic hospitals in Maryland to perform abortions, which would ultimately have led to the closing of the Catholic hospital system in Maryland.

Ken's fellow Democrat on the House Judiciary Committee, Del. Ken Montague of Baltimore City, had worked closely with Gov. William Donald Schaefer to craft the legislation. Passage was a statistical certainty. Masters drafted an amendment exempting the Catholic hospital system and discussed its implications privately with Montague.

Both men were highly respected across the political spectrum. An objection by Montague would have doomed the amendment and the Catholic hospital system with it. As Masters took to the floor, was Montague remembering his Catholic roots at St. Peter Claver Elementary in Baltimore and Loyola Blakefield? Whatever his thoughts, he kept them to himself, and raised no objection. The amendment passed and the Catholic hospital system was preserved intact.

There were no news stories about this vital change in the law. Ken Masters didn't operate that way. As Father Christopher J. Whatley, the pastor of St. Mark, pointed out at his Jan. 21 funeral Mass, "Ken always flew below the radar."

That style began when he was a U.S. Army lieutenant in Vietnam charged with flying

in small planes on artillery-spotting missions. He was grateful that “he never lost anybody in his platoon.” So was the Army, which awarded him the Bronze Star for Valor with the Oak Leaf Cluster.

The year’s first ice storm did not stop 500 people from attending the Mass of Resurrection for Masters at St. Mark’s. The eulogy was given by former Gov. Robert Ehrlich Jr., who called Masters, “the finest legislator of our generation.”

As the Republican governor said of his chief legislative officer – a Democrat – “When the day was over and other legislators left to populate the bars of Annapolis, (then-Delegate) Masters stayed in his office reading to the last line the last bill submitted by the last constituent. There were no votes for Ken Masters in this. Most of these bills died in committee. But it was something he did out of respect for the voters. He was a man of integrity ... the most respected legislator in Annapolis.”

Father Whatley described Masters as a man of integrity who put his marriage, his church and his community ahead of himself.

“In his last years cancer became his cross. He trusted Christ was always with him,” said Father Whatley, who spoke directly to Ken’s family. “He fought that fight so valiantly because he wanted to be with you. But he knew you were ready to give him back to God. His remarkable spirit lives on with you.”

In a final hospital visit to Masters, Father Whatley said, “Ken, I pray for your healing but we both know that vertical climb may begin.”

Ken answered, “Father, as long as it’s up and not down I’ll be fine.”

When Ken Masters died we of the Knights of Columbus lost more than a faithful friend. We lost a hero.

McCarthy is a parishioner of St. Joseph’s Passionist Monastery Church, Irvington.