

Living like Father Hipsley



When Father Milton A. Hipsley Jr. was pastor of St. Thomas Aquinas in Hampden in the 1980s, a visiting priest took note of stacks of unopened correspondence from the Catholic Center that seemed to be accumulating in the rectory. He asked Father Hipsley if he was worried about the unread letters.

“I don’t worry about mail,” the pastor replied. “I only worry that maybe someone will show up at the rectory and a priest won’t be available (to help him).”

The anecdote, told by Father Joseph Breighner during Father Hipsley’s Dec. 22 funeral Mass at St. Agnes in Catonsville, captured the essence of Father Hipsley.

The former pastor of St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Mary in Cumberland, who died Dec. 17 after a six-year battle with Alzheimer’s disease, was a man whose entire life was focused on the nitty-gritty aspects of pastoral ministry: visiting the imprisoned, comforting the sick, consoling the lonely, feeding the hungry and giving hope to the hopeless.

“Milt just didn’t give a few dollars to a homeless person,” said Father Breighner, a Catholic Review columnist. “He would befriend them and say, ‘I am your friend.’ He didn’t give as a superior to an inferior.”

Father Breighner remembered Father Hipsley as a man who was “very innocent.”

“There was no guile,” Father Breighner said. “There was no persona. There was no front. There was just the person of Christ. The person of Christ showed through Milton so very well.”

Ann Pugh, Father Hipsley’s sister, told me that her brother possessed a sense of simplicity from the time he was a boy. It wasn’t naïveté, she said, but genuine goodness. It was holiness.

Once, when Father Hipsley was 6 or 7, he and Ann were playing on an abandoned farm near their home in Baltimore. After their mother called them in for dinner,

Pugh said, young Milton stayed outside to observe the falling snow.

“Everything was covered in white and silence,” Pugh remembered. “It was very spiritual to him. He felt God’s presence.”

As a prison minister, she said, Father Hipsley felt the desolation of those forgotten by society. When he first started celebrating Mass at a Cumberland prison in the early 1990s, she said, only 3 people attended. Within a brief time period, however, that number grew to 30 or 40.

“They would greet him in procession,” Pugh said, noting that seeing prisoners come to him for spiritual support almost made her brother cry.

Father Hipsley once told me that inmates are “lonely” and “frustrated.”

“If you go in and show kindness to them,” he said in his simple way, “it’s like showing attention to the barking dog. If you pet the dog, it starts to lick your hand and become like a friend.”

At the conclusion of Father Hipsley’s funeral Mass, attended by Cardinal Edwin F. O’Brien, Bishop Denis J. Madden, Bishop William C. Newman, nearly 50 priests and many family members, friends and former parishioners, Archbishop William E. Lori offered a prayer that God will send more men to step forward to enter the priestly vocation who have the same spirituality and love for the poor as Father Hipsley.

“He loved those who did not give back,” Archbishop William E. Lori said. “He loved those who were unable to return his love measure for measure. He loved those who could not give financial recompense. He loved those who could not give social recompense.”

What a blessing it would be if we could all live our lives that way.