

Monsignor Strempeck, hospital chaplain and pastor, dies

Monsignor Martin R. Strempeck, a much-loved priest and former pastor who devoted much of his ministry to comforting others, died Feb. 8. Archbishop Edwin F. O'Brien offered a funeral Mass Feb. 14 at St. Margaret in Bel Air, the parish where 82-year-old Monsignor Strempeck had retired but remained active in ministry until three months before his death.

"He was a wonderful, gentle, sweet and funny man," said Father Charles Wible, pastor of St. Francis de Sales in Abingdon. "He had a gentle way of leading by example and being there for other people."

Monsignor Strempeck was the pastor of St. John the Evangelist in Hydes when Father Wible was assigned there as an associate pastor following Father Wible's 1996 ordination.

"I can't begin to tell you what I learned from him," Father Wible said. "He taught me the importance of kindness. If I had a bad day, I would go into his office and close the door and chat and talk things through."

Father Wible remembered that his mentor had a good sense of humor. When Cardinal William H. Keeler told Monsignor Strempeck that Pope John Paul II had named him a monsignor in 1997, Monsignor Strempeck returned to St. John with a document with the word "monsignor" on it. He asked Father Wible what "monsignor" meant.

"I told him it means, 'my lord,'" Father Wible remembered with a laugh. "He said, 'Oh! I like that!'"

Baptized at Holy Rosary in Baltimore, Monsignor Strempeck attended St. Brigid School in Canton and St. Charles College High School in Catonsville before entering St. Mary's Seminary in Roland Park. Archbishop Francis P. Keogh ordained him to the priesthood on May 28, 1955.

Monsignor Strempeck served as associate pastor of St. Stephen in Bradshaw from 1955 to 1964. He was associate pastor of St. Andrew in Baltimore from 1964 to 1981, serving as administrator the year before St. Andrew closed.

During his tenure at St. Andrew, Monsignor Strempeck was also a chaplain at The Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore. He was frequently consulted on ethical and moral matters and was remembered for hearing confessions and bringing holy Communion to the sick.

In a 1999 interview with The Catholic Review, Monsignor Strempeck said he worked in hospital ministry with people struggling with "serious problems in their lives."

"The important thing became the relationship with God and with each other," he said.

Monsignor Strempeck noted that he served at Hopkins right after the Second Vatican Council in a time of great turmoil for the Catholic Church.

"It was a traumatic time," he said. "A lot of my friends were leaving."

He remained in the priesthood, he said, after examining his motivations.

"It was a time of great stress," he said, "but making a decision to stay was also strengthening. The motivation has always been for the sake of the people."

Monsignor Strempeck was pastor of Ss. Philip and James from 1981 to 1992. He served as pastor of St. John in Hydes from 1992 until his retirement in 1999.

Matt Gutberlet, business manager at St. John, remembered that Monsignor Strempeck oversaw the restoration of the parish's historic church. He was a good administrator who cared about his parishioners, Gutberlet said.

"People were very attracted to him," Gutberlet said. "He was very straightforward with people in a nice way. You always knew where you stood with Monsignor."

Gutberlet recalled that after one of Monsignor Strempeck's friends was incapacitated, the priest picked him up and took him for a ride once a week without any fanfare.

"That's the way he was," Gutberlet said. "He was a wonderful person,"