

# Pioneering Josephite priest dies

Father Robert “Rocky” Kearns, a pioneering Josephite priest, pastor and superior general who was active in the social justice movement, died in an Alabama hospital Dec. 6 from complications of cancer. He was 72.

An 11 a.m. funeral Mass will be offered Dec. 13 at St. Peter Claver, the West Baltimore parish Father Kearns served as pastor in the 1980s and '90s. Father Kearns was also a former pastor of St. Pius V in Harlem Park.

Friends and colleagues credited Father Kearns with encouraging Catholic churches in Baltimore to become more active in ecumenical outreach organizations. He was very involved in Baltimoreans United in Leadership Development (BUILD) and a spinoff housing initiative called the Build Enterprise Nehemiah Development Corporation.

Father Kearns was also the former vice president of the Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance and active in a variety of archdiocesan initiatives.

“He was constantly trying to think of new and better ways to proclaim the Gospel in the African-American community,” said Josephite Father John Harfmann, consultor general of his religious order.

Father Harfmann noted that Father Kearns was the first director of a diaconate formation program for men of the Archdiocese of Baltimore and two other dioceses.

“He was very strong in wanting to give leadership opportunities to the African-American population,” Father Harfmann said.

Josephite Father Donald Fest, former pastor of St. Veronica in Cherry Hill, called Father Kearns “very affable, outgoing, charismatic, gregarious and innovative.”

“His gift was bringing people together,” Father Fest said, noting that Father Kearns also started the Josephite Pastoral Center in Washington to develop resources for African-American ministry.

Father Sylvester Peterka, Vincentian pastor of St. Cecilia and Immaculate

Conception in Baltimore, called Father Kearns “certainly one of the beacons in ecumenical relations in his work with the alliance.”

“When it came to issues of justice, he would be present for rallies to bring a Catholic voice,” Father Peterka said. “He was one of the leaders, but he never desired the limelight. He was a very unassuming person.”

Rev. Dr. William C. Calhoun, pastor of Trinity Baptist Church in Baltimore and a former president of the Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance, said Father Kearns encouraged Cardinal William H. Keeler to support the work of the alliance. The priest was instrumental in having the cardinal speak at one of the group’s convocations, Rev. Calhoun said.

“We’ve really lost a dear friend and a colleague in the faith,” said Rev. Calhoun. “He will long be remembered for his commitment to Christ and the church universal and his love of people everywhere.”

Therese Wilson Favors, director of the archdiocesan office of African-American Catholic ministries, said Father Kearns was an “outstanding, old-fashioned pastor.”

“He really got to know the people in the neighborhood,” she said. “The whole community was his parish. He came to Baltimore infused with new ideas of outreach and he had an ability to energize other people.”

Ms. Favors remembered that Father Kearns was her prayer partner early in his Baltimore ministry.

“Fifteen years later, he told me he was still praying for me,” she said. “That’s the kind of person he was.”

Father Henry Harper, a Josephite associate pastor of St. Peter Claver, said Father Kearns was a “very fine administrator” who was deeply committed to his parish.

“He was always concerned about the poor, about those who were sick and those confined in hospitals,” Father Harper said.

When Father Kearns was elected superior general of his Baltimore-based Society of

St. Joseph of the Sacred Heart in 1995, he oversaw the building of a Baltimore retirement and recuperation facility for Josephite priests and brothers. He also led the building of a new faculty residence for St. Augustine High School in New Orleans.

During two terms as superior general, which ended in 2003, he fostered collaboration between the Josephites and the Missionaries of St. Paul in Nigeria to allow Nigerian priests to minister in Josephite parishes in Baltimore and other American cities.

In a 2000 interview with The Catholic Review, Father Kearns called the partnership a “wonderful collaboration between two religious communities, of cross-culture, cross-race, cross-nationality, which is just what the church is trying to promote but with a great deal of difficulty because we like to do our own thing.”

In addition to serving in Baltimore, Father Kearns ministered in Los Angeles; Washington, D.C.; Pritchard, Alabama and Mobile City, Alabama.

Bishop John Ricard, former auxiliary bishop of Baltimore and current bishop of Pensacola – Tallahassee, and Archbishop Thomas Rodi of Mobile, were to offer a memorial Mass in Pritchard on Dec. 10. Retired Archbishop Oscar Lipscomb of Mobile, Alabama, was to offer a memorial Mass in Mobile on Dec. 11.

On his deathbed, Father Kearns was surrounded by friends and family, including Father Harfmann.

“He was born on the Feast of St. Joseph – the patron of a happy death,” said Father Harfmann. “He was extremely at peace when he died.”