

Pittsburgh priest who persevered despite Lou Gehrig's disease dies

PITTSBURGH - Father Patrick Rager, who as a newly ordained priest of the Pittsburgh Diocese served just two years in a parish assignment before a devastating illness forced him into a wheelchair and eventual paralysis, died July 20 at age 50.

He died at home in West Homestead, where for the past 20 years he had conducted a phone ministry for people with physical disabilities through the diocesan Department for Persons With Disabilities, touching the lives of people around the country.

His funeral Mass was celebrated July 24 at St. Therese of Lisieux in Munhall.

Many who knew him regarded him as a saint, including Pittsburgh Bishop David A. Zubik.

"His eyes reflect the depth of Christ in his life and in his soul," the bishop said. "His story has so beautifully touched all of our hearts."

Diagnosed with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis - Lou Gehrig's disease - in his 20s, Father Rager served just one assignment following his May 11, 1985, ordination in St. Paul Cathedral by then-Bishop Anthony J. Bevilacqua of Pittsburgh.

That was at St. Sylvester Parish in Brentwood, before he was placed on indefinite leave of absence for health reasons.

A gifted athlete, he had been experiencing mysterious symptoms since age 21. His leg would go out without warning and once while playing softball he went crashing to the ground. By his seminary years he was using a cane. At St. Sylvester, his condition became more dire and he soon was confined to a wheelchair.

He went home, where his parents created an apartment for him on the house's lower level. His first year there, he said, was a time of desolation as, feeling lost and anxious, he questioned how he could continue his ministry as a priest.

When Grace Harding, who headed the diocesan Department for Persons With Disabilities, went to meet him, "I was greeted with his beautiful smile and joyful spirit," she said. "We talked about beginning a telephone ministry with people who were also physically disabled and he loved the idea."

Father Rager created a diocesan outreach in 1987 with a list of 60 names that soon expanded into the hundreds. He also began a newsletter and wrote columns for the Pittsburgh Catholic, the diocesan newspaper.

In interviews, Father Rager said of his ministry: "I've learned the most essential thing - you've got to be accepting. It teaches you great faith in God.

"If you can't accept your condition, you can't move on," he said. "That's my job, getting people with handicaps to accept their disabilities then to get them to go on with their lives."

All the while, Harding said, "Father Pat suffered, but he never ever complained about his situation. He always felt that this was what God wanted from him and he accepted this."

Father Walt Rydzon, who first met Father Rager when he became pastor for the Catholic Deaf Community in 1994, said, "Most of the time when a priest is talking to someone who is carrying the pain of the cross, that priest is usually healthy, and so there's a part in that encounter in which the person who is hurting thinks, 'But Father, you really don't know.' Pat knew the cross and the suffering souls who sought his wisdom knew that also. That's why they listened and believed."

Father Kris Stubna, who gave the homily for Father Rager's funeral Mass, recalled a classmate, friend and co-worker who had a "passion for living, a great sense of humor."

"I admired him tremendously for the choices he made," Father Stubna said. "I believe he saw his suffering and infirmity as an integral part of his priestly ministry and an opportunity for grace for himself and for others. He chose to accept that his illness was part of God's will."

The Serra Club of Pittsburgh honored him with the Good Shepherd Award in 2008.

“In the midst of adversity that most of us cannot comprehend, Father Rager has been an inspiration to those he ministers to,” said John Pillar, club president.

Bishop Zubik once wrote that “Father Rager’s disease has robbed him of almost every aspect of what we would associate with a normal day in the life: walking, running, eating, touching, speaking and, in Father Pat’s case, some might even say ‘priesting.’”

Confined to bed, paralyzed from the neck down, “his only means of communication his eyes and his smile,” Father Rager is “at least a marvel and at best a ‘saint,’” the bishop wrote.