

Updated: Mount St. Joseph mourns revered president

Ever the poetic soul, Xaverian Brother James M. Kelly died as the sun was rising Dec. 3, the feast day of his congregation's patron, St. Francis Xavier.

The president of Mount St. Joseph High School finally succumbed to a years-long struggle with prostate cancer, just two weeks after he was given the papal honor, the Cross Pro Ecclesia et Pontifice, by Archbishop Edwin F. O'Brien at the Cathedral of Mary Our Queen in Homeland Nov. 20.

Brother James' body returned to the cathedral Dec. 6 for a funeral Mass to be offered by Archbishop Edwin F. O'Brien, the apostolic administrator of the Archdiocese of Baltimore.

The cathedral overflowed with mourners, including clergy, alumni, students from across Baltimore, family and supporters among others. Father Christopher J. Whatley, pastor of St. Mark parish in Catonsville, delivered the homily and praised Brother James for his remarkable teachings, even in death.

Father Whatley said that Brother James would tell all those in attendance to "Stay close to Christ."

Brother James was be buried in the Xaverian Brothers' plot of Baltimore's New Cathedral Cemetery.

"The loss for his family, for the Brothers, and for Mount St. Joseph, is not measurable," said the school's principal, Barry Fitzpatrick, in a statement. "As one of our own said recently, he is one of those rare individuals who cannot be replaced, and we shall not try to do so. What we shall try to do, with every fiber of our being, is to honor the legacy he has left us at his Mount, and we shall try to march on, as he would say, in the face of this loss."

Fitzpatrick said his friendship with Brother James lasted more than 40 years and that the dedicated religious teacher would not want sadness surrounding his death, but joy.

Brother Lawrence Harvey, the Xaverian's general superior, called Brother James "one of the pre-eminent Xaverian educators and administrators" in a letter to the Xaverian community and its supporters.

Born in Worcester, Mass., Brother James joined the Xaverians in 1965 and professed his vows two years later. In addition to his undergraduate degree from The Catholic University of America in Washington, Brother James had graduate degrees from Wesleyan University and St. Joseph College, both in Connecticut.

Throughout his schooling, he was never educated by the Xaverians. Still, he was called to the order's work of teaching.

"He made up for his lack of direct experience of Xaverian education," Brother Lawrence said, "by immersing himself in all things Xaverian at the feet of his novitiate teacher and mentor, Brother Albert Downey."

Brother Lawrence said a generation of Xaverians student leaders and teachers learned about the congregation and its history through Brother James' annual talks at conferences and gatherings.

Brother James was elected to the Xaverians general council in 2007 and was also an avid researcher of the history of the Sisters of Mercy, the Sisters of St. Joseph and the Holy Redeemer Sisters, an order the Xaverians brought to the U.S. during the 20th century to work at Mount St. Joe's.

"His interest in and appreciation for the history of religious life was deeply rooted in his own sense of vocation as a consecrated religious and a teaching brother."

After teaching at several schools, he became principal of Xavier High School in Middletown, Conn. He became president of St. Xavier High School in Kentucky in 1993 before getting the same assignment at Mount St. Joseph in 2001. During his time as president, Mount St. Joe's grew physically and in academic offerings. All types of students found a nurturing, challenging environment at Mount St. Joseph thanks to Brother James' leadership.

He wrote books titled "Respecting the Man the Boy Will Come" and "Building Men Who Matter: On the Marvel and Mystery of Raising Teenage Boys."

During a January interview with The Catholic Review, student David Falvo said Brother James was a consummate teacher of British literature.

“Every day with him is a gift,” Falvo said.

As Brother James became more and more weak as a result of various cancer treatments, he taught students via Skype. Even though he was confined to his bedroom, he still wanted to do what he loved most.

“The best thing I do every day is teach,” he told The Catholic Review in January. During the last several months, it became clear to Brother James and the Mount St. Joseph community that he was dying. He lost 35 pounds and his hair. Rather than becoming bitter, Brother James embraced his pain saying he felt a connection to Christ’s death.

“I know that suffering is redemptive,” he told The Catholic Review. “Somehow, this is all God’s plan. It’s made me a better man and a better religious.”

Brother James is survived by his sister, Patricia.