

North American Conference of Redemptorists

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IN REMEMBRANCE:

Fr. Wilfred Lowery, C.Ss.R.

Fr. Wilfred Lowery, an early pioneer who left a lasting legacy in Thailand and continued to minister to Thai and Laotian immigrant communities throughout the United States well into his 90s, died at St. Clement Redemptorist Missionary Community in Liguori on November 10.

At 97 years old, he was revered as the eldest member of the Denver

Province. Although he maintained lifelong friendships with countless people, he held especially close those associated with Thailand, the land that captured and held his heart.

James and Josephine Lowery welcomed their first child, Wilfred (Wil) Eugene, on November 16, 1923 in St. Louis. He was the eldest of six children who grew up in a loving, tight-knit family. Mrs. Lowery once said that she offered each of her children to God when they were born, and she instilled in them a strong devotion to Our Mother of Perpetual Help.

Mrs. Lowery trusted that God would guide their life choices, and eventually the family had four missionaries. Her sons Wil and Daniel became Redemptorist priests, and her two daughters became Maryknoll Sisters. She said that any time God wanted a missionary, all He had to do was knock on her door – No strings attached. She said that having four fine missionaries in the family made her and her husband as happy as they could be.

Wil attended the Old Cathedral Latin School for two years before entering the Redemptorist formation program at St. Joseph College in Kirkwood. After completing novitiate at DeSoto, he professed temporary vows on August 2, 1944. He proceeded to Immaculate

Conception Seminary in Oconomowoc, where he professed perpetual vows on September 2, 1947 and was ordained to the priesthood on June 29, 1949.

Newly ordained Fr. Wil completed second novitiate at Pine City, MN and was excited to be sent forth as a missionary. The Japanese had invaded Thailand and began to persecute Catholics in the early 1940s. Many of them had renounced their religion to save their lives. The first Redemptorists arrived in Thailand in 1948, hoping to bring those Catholics back to their faith before they proceeded to evangelize the country.

Fr. Wil and his classmate, Fr. Creston Smith, sailed for Thailand in 1951. They were on the high seas for an entire month. It took them 17 days to get from Long Beach, CA to the Philippines, where they spent three days. They were met by Australian Redemptorists in

Manila, and Irish Redemptorists in Cebu. They sailed up the Saigon River into South Vietnam, where they met French-Canadian Redemptorists. Their next stop was Bangkok, where they were stationed at Holy Redeemer Church and studied the Thai language.

Six months later, Fr. Wil was appointed pastor of Our Mother of Perpetual Help Parish in Xang-Ming, where he served until 1956.

The Redemptorists in Thailand were asked by Rome to evangelize a new territory, the remote and primitive Prefecture of Udon Thani, in 1953.

Fr. Clarence Duhart, the first superior of the Redemptorists, was appointed Apostolic Prefect on December 4 of that year. The Redemptorists had a jeep, but they did a lot of walking and some horseback riding to cover the various villages scattered throughout

the territory. The villagers absolutely loved the missionaries, and were amazed that they were willing to sacrifice the safety and security of their homeland to come and live with them.

The Vice-Province of Thailand was established in 1956, with Fr. Charles Cotant as the first Vice Provincial. Fr. Wil was appointed pastor of Blessed Virgin Mary Parish and superior of the community in Viengkhu, one of the first in the new Udon Thani Prefecture. The renowned master builder Br. Cornelius Ryan arrived in Thailand that same year. He built a beautiful new church in the Thai architectural style, as well as a boat to transport missionaries down the Mekong River.

The local Redemptorist community inspired young George Yod Phimphisan to become their very first Redemptorist seminarian. He was appointed Bishop of Udon Thani in 1975. The locals in Viengkhu also count one of the Seven Martyrs of Thailand as one of their own.

In 1958, Fr. Wil was appointed pastor of St. Alphonsus Church and local superior in Nongkhai. Br. Cornelius was commissioned to build a new central community house in Nongkhai that year. He remained in Thailand until health issues prompted his return to the United States in 1991, but he returned to Thailand two years later and was buried in Thailand in 1994.

Fr. Wil served as bursar in Bangkok in 1962-64 and returned to Nongkhai when he was named Vice Provincial Superior for the 1964-69 term. After 25 years in Thailand, he was Vicar General of the Udon Diocese when health issues prompted his return to the United States in 1976. He was a bit sad that his time in Thailand was cut short, but he had plenty of wonderful memories and was confident that the remaining American and Thai confreres would carry on the mission of bringing plentiful redemption to the people.

Regardless of his future ministry assignments, Fr. Wil continued to minister to immigrant Laotian Catholic communities throughout the country. He directed retreats and worked for the Mission Office while stationed at Villa Redeemer in Glenview, IL until 1981, when he joined the St. Joseph Parish community in Wichita, KS as rector.

He moved to St. Michael Parish in Chicago in 1987, and served as an itinerant missionary preacher for two years while continuing outreach to Laotian immigrants. He returned to St. Joseph's in 1990, and served that parish community for the next three years.

Fr. Wil served briefly as assistant director of St. Clement Health Care Center in Liguori before he moved to the Mission House for a two-year stint as a missionary preacher in 1994. He was appointed director of the Foreign Mission Office in Chicago in 1996, and a year later moved back to Villa Redeemer to serve as local superior.

Three years later, he joined the multi-cultural St. Alphonsus Parish in Minneapolis. He was immersed in parish ministry to Laotian immigrants until his official retirement in 2009, when he was 86 years old. Despite worsening health issues, he remained in Minneapolis to carry on his ministry as he was able. When he learned that he could continue in ministry as a resident of St. Clement's, he gladly moved to Liguori in 2012. Confreres welcomed his warm, friendly presence in community, and counted on him for a smile, a word of encouragement, or an interesting story from years gone by.

Family and friends joined Redemptorist confreres at St. Clement's for a rosary and vigil on November 15. A Mass of Christian Burial was celebrated at St. Clement's chapel on November 16, with burial immediately following at the Liguori Cemetery. Eternal rest grant unto him, O Lord, and may perpetual light shine upon him. May this faithful son of St. Alphonsus rest in peace.

{By Kristine Stremel/DenverLink.}







