

Father Skeabeck, devoted teacher, dies at 85

March 21, 2007

Redemptorist Father Andrew Skeabeck, a longtime teacher and an ardent Yankees fan, died Tuesday, March 20, at St. John Neumann Residence in Saratoga Springs, NY. He was 85 years old and had been suffering from heart problems and Parkinson's disease.

A native of Beyer, PA, Father Skeabeck was born June 2, 1921, the first of five children born to Susan Harchick Skeabeck and the late Andrew Skeabeck. After studying at St. Ann Parochial School, he attended Cathedral Prep School in Erie, PA, for two years. In a biographical sketch written before his final vows, Father Skeabeck recounted how the examples of a Redemptorist priest who came to conduct novena services to our Lady of Perpetual Help led him to apply for admission to the Redemptorist seminary at North East, PA.

He completed his studies for the priesthood at Mount St. Alphonsus in Esopus, NY, making his first profession of vows in 1941 and his final profession three years later. He was ordained to the priesthood on June 22, 1947, and his Superiors, noting his academic gifts, send him on to study at The Catholic University of America, where he earned a Master of Arts in American Church History.

"He wrote his Master's thesis on Bishop William Gross, who was Bishop of Savannah before he became Archbishop of Oregon City, now Portland," said Father Carl Hoegerl, Provincial Archivist. It's the best thing that's been done on Bishop Gross."

Father Skeabeck's teaching career began at St. Mary's Seminary in North East in 1949; over the next 38 years he taught hundreds of students there, at Esopus, and at St. Alphonsus Seminary in Suffield, CT. Father Gerard Knapp, Provincial Procurator, said Father Skeabeck obviously loved teaching history and tried to convey that love of his subject to his students. "He was a great man for details," according to Father Patrick Woods, Provincial Superior of The Baltimore Province. "He also was a kind man, mild-tempered and never intimidating."

Several former students also spoke of Father Skeabeck's generosity in helping them to prepare for exams. He would pass out what the students came to call "Skeat Sheets" – a list of about 20 study questions from which he would draw four or five for the final exam. "He really was a very good historian," said Father George Keaveney, rector of Mount St. Esopus. "By the time we got to C.U. (Catholic University), history was a pushover." Father Skeabeck "made you get the facts," he explained, and Father Hoegerl, who also taught history to the seminarians, "made you think about the facts."

Father Francis Freel, a classmate of Father Skeabeck, said his longtime friend played center field in baseball when they were in the seminary and, even as a youngster, "was an ardent Yankees fan." When he returned to North East as a professor, Father Skeabeck kept up his involvement in sports. "He would play basketball and hockey with us," Father Knapp recalled, "and he was infamous for his love of sports." Father Michael Hopkins, Provincial Secretary, remembered Father Skeabeck organizing all kinds of sports tournaments for the students, with the winners getting "what every growing young man wants -- food!" Long after he was unable to participate in sports himself, Father Skeabeck was known for watching two games on television screens and keeping track of a third through the earplugs of his radio, said Father Michael Sergi, rector of St. John Neumann Residence. As a teacher, Father Skeabeck had a couple of months free in the summer and, in his early years, he used to spend his time at San Alfonso Retreat House, where he would organize golf tournaments and picnics for the confreres. He was always ready to serve as the grill master, preparing hot dogs and hamburgers for the men. For about his last dozen years of teaching, he would spend his summers helping out in the Vice Province of Richmond, mainly in Griffin, GA, according to Father Hopkins. "He'd come and fill in for two weeks so one guy could get a vacation, then he'd fill in for somebody else," he said. "He was really great that way. If it weren't for Andy, the guys couldn't get away at all."

Father Keaveney, who was rector at Suffield when Father Skeabeck was teaching there, said his confrere "was a marvelous community man, always looking out for the others. He'd try to find furniture for the men that was comfortable; he kept the common room well-stocked; he always remembered birthdays. The things that would slip my mind, he'd always remember. He was a delightful man to live with and never missed prayer time with us."

In 1987, Father Skeabeck retired from teaching and, after recovering from bypass heart surgery, returned to North East to serve at St. Gregory Church. "The people in North East loved him, Father Keaveney said. "He was wonderful with the altar servers -- never yelled at them when they made a mistake -- and very faithful to the people at the hospital." He ministered to the people there for nine years, until the Redemptorists withdrew from the parish. At that time -- 1996 -- the Provincial Council expected that Father Skeabeck would like to stay on in the area to be near his mother, who lived in Erie and was still making hand-sewn vestments for the confreres. Father Woods said that Father Skeabeck chose to continue living among his confreres and, at the age of 75, he moved to San Alfonso Retreat House, in retirement from active ministry, but very much a part of the Redemptorist Community there.

With his health further declining, Father Skeabeck was transferred to St. John Neumann Residence in 2003. For the past few years, he suffered from coughing fits that interfered with eating and conversation, Father Hoegerl said. Still, the coughing did not prevent Father Skeabeck from calling to talk with his now 106-year-old mother every evening. Father Sergi said that when Mrs. Skeabeck was told of her son's death, she said she already knew -- because he hadn't called the previous night.

In addition to his mother, Father Skeabeck is survived by his brother, Francis, of Brookpark, OH; and three sisters, Anne Marie Silverman and Marilyn Boyd, both living in California, and Sister Mary Carmel Skeabeck, S.S.J., of Erie, PA.
