

Fr. Baumgartner, beloved confessor, dies at 88

January 1, 2006

When Redemptorist Father Bernard Baumgartner became too ill to perform his priestly ministry, he prayed to the Lord and to Our Lady of Perpetual Help to take him home. He died at Atlantic General Hospital in Berlin, MD, on the feast of Mary, Mother of God, Jan. 1, 2006. He was 88 years old.

A native of Philadelphia, Father Baumgartner was the son of the late Bernard and Frances Reischmann Baumgartner. He grew up in St. Boniface Parish, where he attended elementary school. With the blessing of his parents and hardly to their surprise - as he had been "celebrating Mass" at home from the time he was a small child - he went off to study in the Redemptorist formation system when he was 14. After finishing at the junior seminary in North East, PA, he spent his novitiate year in Ilchester, MD, and made his first profession of vows in 1939. He continued his studies at Mount St. Alphonsus in Esopus, NY, and made his final profession in 1942. He was ordained to the priesthood June 18, 1944, and was sent to The Catholic University of America, where he earned his Licentiate in Sacred Theology in 1947.

His first assignment was to teach at the Mount, where he also helped out at local parishes with weekend confessions and Masses. From 1950 -61, Father Baumgartner was assigned to Sacred Heart of Jesus Parish in Baltimore. According to longtime family friend Margaret Mack, who met him when she was in the parish grammar school there, Father Baumgartner was well loved by the young and the old, who appreciated his work with the CYO and the Holy Family Ladies, among other organizations. "He had beautiful Holy Hours that filled the church and he was a wonderful speaker," she said. "The words just flowed with him."

Miss Mack recalled that when Father Baumgartner would accept a dinner invitation from her parents, he would spend a lot of time talking with her father, a man who was not a Catholic and had had to drop out of school after the fourth grade. The two men became like brothers, talking about everything, she said, and a year before her father's death, he went to Father Baumgartner and asked to be received into the Church.

The priest's gift for welcoming people into the Church continued throughout his life and he was still working with the RCIA program at St. Mary's until his health gave out. His niece, Dolores (Dee) Hunsberger, suggested that her uncle's success with converts was due to the fact that while he was a very knowledgeable man, he never spoke down to anyone. Father John Tizio, who served at St. Mary's through the 1990s and until his recent appointment as rector of St. Martin of Tours in Bethpage, NY, suggested another contributing factor: "As soon as you met him, he made you feel like you'd always known each other."

Father Baumgartner's reputation as a wonderful confessor began at his first parochial assignment. Father Gerard Knapp, who attended Sacred Heart School, remembered that all the youngsters wanted to go to Father Baumgartner because of his gentleness and compassion. That gift, too, continued throughout his priestly ministry. Father Denis Sweeney, who was rector at St. Mary's for six years, said that when the parish priests were hearing the confessions of the grammar school and high school students, the other priests would be finished long before the line for Father Baumgartner came to an end.

From 1961-67, Father Baumgartner was rector of St. Peter the Apostle Church in Philadelphia and it was due to his efforts that the present rectory there was constructed. It was an exciting time for Redemptorists in Philadelphia because of the beatification of St. John Neumann, a Redemptorist and the fourth Bishop of Philadelphia. Father Baumgartner was very involved in the exhumation of the saint's body, which was found to be well preserved, and for the enshrinement of the body and the establishment of the St. John Neumann Shrine in the lower level of St. Peter's. He also was responsible for transporting relics of St. John Neumann to Rome. To accomplish this, his niece said, he appealed to his sister Loretta Hunsberger for a wooden box that could be locked, and his sister, no questions asked, turned over her silverware chest for his use.

From 1967-69, Father Baumgartner was assigned to his home parish of St. Boniface and Father Michael Hopkins, who was there for a year with him, recalled that "he was fantastic with the kids; he had a real rapport with young people." He was impressed, too, that despite several health setbacks, his confrere was always eager to get back to work.

By this time, Father Baumgartner had earned a reputation as an excellent keeper of parish books, especially the Mass books. When Our Lady of Perpetual Help (Mission Church) in Boston was in need of such help, he was sent there on temporary assignment to bring things up to date.

In 1970-87 he served at Lour Lady of Fatima Church in Baltimore, where he was in charge of a large CCD program. According to Father Lawrence Lover, who was his rector there for six years, Father Baumgartner recruited an excellent faculty from among the parishioners. "He was an excellent parish priest with a fine personality," he said. "He was always very popular among all the people at Our Lady of Fatima and even after he left, a lot of them stayed in contact with him." Father Lover noted that Father Baumgartner continued to suffer from various health problems, "but in spite of this, he did a lot of work." Again, he kept meticulous accounts in the Mass books. He also was a welcome part of community life because "he was a great storyteller and gave a lot of life to the community with his good humor," he added.

Joan Karolkowski is one of the Fatima parishioners who kept in touch. Like Father Knapp and Miss Mack, she first met him when she was a student at Sacred Heart School; by the time Father Baumgartner was at Our Lady of Fatima, Mrs. Karolkowski was too and the priest baptized her middle son. "He was here for us when my husband was so sick," she recalled. "He was a good man." Like other parishioners, she continued to keep in contact and visited him in Annapolis and at the Mack home on the Eastern Shore.

His next assignment, at the age of 70, was to Annapolis. There, in addition to his work with the RCIA and his long hours hearing confessions, Father Tizio said he counted the collections, kept the Mass books and was active with the Knights of Columbus. Although by this time Father Baumgartner had one kidney and that started to fail, "he never wanted to be a burden," Father Tizio said. "He was very outgoing and always had something to talk about. He also had a phenomenal memory for details."

Father Sweeney said that his elder confrere was so conscientious about his vow of obedience that he never left the rectory without his rector's permission. Miss Mack added that when she would extend an invitation to Father Baumgartner to visit at her cottage on the Eastern Shore, "Father B. would ask me to come along to Father Sweeney so I could hear what he said too." Father Sweeney explained that even when Father Baumgartner was in his 80's, he would have to be very clear on instructing him to get some rest at the shore and not to come rushing back to count the collection!

Thanks to the hospitality of Miss Mack to members of the Baumgartner family -- who consider her as one of them -- the priest and his younger sister, School Sister of Notre Dame Mary Dolores Baumgartner, got together frequently. This Christmas was no exception and Sister Mary Dolores said that after dinner, she and her brother "sat and had a wonderful visit." The two had been very close since childhood, when they went to daily Mass with their mother, and that connection, strengthened by their lives as Religious, never diminished. "He was such a good priest," she said, "and his main grief at Christmas was that he couldn't do any of his priestly duties. He asked Our Lady of Perpetual Help, who's always been his right arm, to please come for him and bring him home."

A few days before Christmas, he gave his last blessing when a friend of Miss Mack brought over her twin 5-month-old granddaughters. The babies rested contentedly, one in each of his arms, while he prayed over them. "That made him very happy," she said.

In addition to Sister Mary Dolores, his niece Dolores, and their friend Miss Mack, Father Baumgartner is survived by another niece, Barbara Smalla; three nephews, Milton, Bernard and Gerard McGuckin; and nine great-nieces and nephews. He is predeceased by his parents and two older sisters, Loretta Hunsberger and Catherine McGuckin.

The funeral Mass was celebrated Friday, January 6 at St. Mary's Church, Annapolis, where he had served since 1987. Burial in the churchyard followed the Mass.