

## In Memoriam

### A prayerful missionary dedicated to God's plan

Redemptorist Father Dennis Demko, who served for two decades in Puerto Rico, died Dec. 30, 2009, as a member of the St. John Neumann community at Stella Maris in Timonium, MD. Father Demko was 57 years old and had been suffering with Parkinson's and Alzheimer's diseases; the immediate cause of his death was double pneumonia.

The only child of Joseph and Mary Janega Demko, he was born on July 28, 1952. He studied at the Redemptorist St. Mary's Seminary in North East, PA, and made his novitiate in Oconomowoc, WI. He made his first profession of vows in 1974 and his perpetual vows in 1977. Father Demko earned a B.A. in Philosophy from St. Alphonsus College in Suffield, CT; a Master's degree in Religious Education and a Master's degree in Divinity from Mount St.

Alphonsus in Esopus, NY. He was ordained to the priesthood on May 24, 1980, in Esopus.



During his seminary years, confreres learned that Father Demko was an all-round athlete. Father Dennis Billy, a classmate, described him as "the epitome of the typical North East, Redemptorist jock." He played baseball, football, basketball and hockey. Father Denis Sweeney remembered his fellow seminarian as shooting 100 baskets a day on his off day -- just to keep in practice.

Father Billy, an avid runner, shared with Father Demko his dream of running the marathon distance of 26 miles and 385 yards. Father Demko decided that he would like to do that also and convinced Father Billy and another classmate to train every day for six months. Father Billy recounted: "And when the big day finally came, he plodded along at his own pace with his creaky ankles and went the entire distance, the entire 26 miles and 385 yards. Later, he told me the last 385 yards were the hardest. Dennis did what he said he was going to do. He got an idea in his head and pursued it until he completed it. And I remember thinking about him back then as I still do today, 'Now THAT took GUTS.' And it truly did."

For the Ordination Class of 1980, news of their first pastoral assignments came in the form of a letter in their mailboxes. Father Demko, who spoke no Spanish then, had no desire to serve in Puerto Rico, but that was where his superiors decided he was needed. After a brief immersion course in the language, he duly reported to San Antonio de Padua in Guayama, PR. Father Kevin Moley, a former Provincial Superior of the San Juan Redemptorists and later Baltimore Provincial Superior, was Father Demko's first rector. "I sort of became a father image to him," Father Moley said. The rector challenged the young priest: "These people are too simple and too good not to be loved."

Not long afterwards, "Padre Dennis" returned to the rectory from his mission church with a huge smile on his face, Father Moley said. The congregation had surprised their young priest with a party for his birthday.

Father Billy noted that his friend "eventually found his footing, came to enjoy his new home, and flourished there in both his vocation and ministry. Puerto Rico would prove to be one of the best things that ever happened to Dennis. He told me so himself."

After serving in Guayama from 1981 to 1990, Father Demko was named rector of Los Tres Santos Reyes in Aguas Buenas, a position he held for two three-year terms. During that same period, he also served on the Provincial Chapter. In 1996, he was named superior of the Nuestra Sra. de Las Mercedes community in San Lorenzo.

Father John McLaughlin, who served in the English-Speaking Region of the Caribbean, got to know Father Demko

when the latter was in Puerto Rico and the two became friends. "We talked about how he felt when he was sent to PR and how he got to love it," he said. "It was one of those situations where you don't want to do something, but God always has a better plan." Father Demko became "a bit of a mentor" to the younger confrere because, Father McLaughlin said, "there was a deep spirituality to Dennis and a great sense of devotion to Mary and to prayer."

Several of the confreres mentioned this aspect of Father Demko, noting that he loved reading Thomas Merton and that he was consistent in fasting every Friday.

Father Demko returned to the Baltimore Province in 2002, concerned over the failing health of both of his parents and, as their only child, wanting to do everything he could to ensure their care. He was assigned to St. Peter the Apostle Church in Philadelphia, where, once again, Father Moley became his rector.

"Father Dennis would go 70 miles to get milk for his father," Father Moley said, because Mr. Demko wanted a certain brand of milk that he remembered from his childhood. While seeing his parents' suffering with forms of dementia and experiencing his father's death, Father Demko was diagnosed with brain lesions, a prelude of his own physical and mental decline.

In 2005, Father Demko was assigned to St. John Neumann Residence in Saratoga Springs, NY, and when the Residence was relocated to Stella Maris in Timonium, MD, Father Demko was among those escorted to the Redemptorist wing of the nursing home.

In speaking about Father Demko, Father Billy said: "Dennis was a man of few words and, as I have told you, was one of the gutsiest persons I have ever met. It doesn't surprise me that the death he would be asked to suffer, the cross he would be asked to bear, would require great courage and stamina.... the last seven years of his life, where, simply by being himself, he expressed his humble faith and trust in God in the midst of a slow, painful death, were the most eloquent sermon he ever preached."

In addition to his mother, Father Demko is survived by three aunts, Dorothy Skulskie, Steph Demko and Anna Pogwist; his cousins Mark and Anne Zerbe, Joan and Ty Zerbe, and Frank Demko; and longtime friends Gene and Kathy Brice.