

In Memoriam

Rev. Gerard Kurek, missionary priest, dies at 84

Redemptorist Father Gerard Kurek, who suffered for many years with diabetes, died June 30 in Baltimore. A native of the city, he had been stationed at Sacred Heart of Jesus Parish for the past 17 years. He was 84 years old.

One of six children of Adam and Elizabeth Halinarz Kurek, he was born May 12, 1923, in Sacred Heart Parish. After attending the parish school, he went on to St. Joseph High School before entering the Redemptorist minor seminary in North East, PA. He completed his studies for the priesthood at Mount St. Alphonsus in Esopus, NY. First professed in 1946, he took his final vows in 1949 and was ordained to the priesthood June 17, 1951.

Father Kurek was a hard worker from youth, according to his brother, Daniel Kurek. "We were children of the Great Depression and did not have time to be bored," he said. Times were hard in their Highlandtown neighborhood, but their parents each managed to secure a job. That left the housework to the children. "We found time to play some games, though, and we'd hold pinochle tournaments," Mr. Kurek said. As teenagers, both he and his brother got jobs at a shipyard – "but he had no mechanical ability," his brother added.

The habit of rolling up his sleeves and pitching in was a great preparation for Father Kurek's first assignments as a missionary in South America. After serving a year in Bella Vista, on the Paraguay/Brazil border, Father Kurek was sent to Holy Redeemer Church in Asunción, Paraguay. Father Arthur Gildea, who also served in Paraguay, said that from a small mission on the outskirts of the city, Father Kurek build a large parish. "He founded that parish from nothing and I think that was about the toughest assignment in all of the Province," Father Gildea said.

"He became famous for his close friendship with the President of Paraguay, Alfredo Stroessner, and so the government gave him four blocks of land on which to build. That bit of land flooded every three years! But Padre Martin – that's how he was known there – was able to build a primary school and get the government to help pay the salaries for teachers," Father Gildea said. "When he came there, the people didn't have decent housing, so he worked to get everything given to the people. He gave them some hope for the future." Father Kurek served there from 1954 to 1970, when he moved on to Pedro Juan Caballero, where again he worked in an out-mission of the main church.

One of his nieces, Mary Ellen Romney, said that during those years her uncle served as a missionary, the family got to see him only once every few years. "When he would come back, we'd all go to my grandmother's to see him there," she recalled. "He would bring small gifts for all of us. I remember one year he gave me a set of flags; that was really special because we didn't get to see him often." Mrs. Romney also recalled her grandmother organized many clothing drives for the people of Paraguay, helping those her son cared about so much.

Father Kurek returned to the U.S. in 1974, serving for a few months at St. Wenceslaus Church in Baltimore before his assignment to Sacred Heart of Jesus. For the next ten years, he was in charge of St. Gerard Chapel in the O'Donnell Heights section of Baltimore. It was at Sacred Heart that Father Kurek celebrated his silver jubilee in 1976. Father John Kelly, a close friend from their days in the seminary, said that a high official of the Paraguayan Embassy in Washington attended the Mass of Thanksgiving, presenting Father Kurek with a medal for his contribution to the people of Paraguay and carrying a letter from President Stroessner to Mrs. Kurek, thanking her for her work for the missions.

Father Arthur Mahoney was pastor Sacred Heart at that time and remembered Father Kurek as "a good confrere, very dedicated to his own parish, even though it was a mission." At St. Gerard Chapel, "he ran it like a good shop



and they really liked him there," he added.

From July through December of 1984, Father Kurek served at Immaculate Conception Church in the Bronx; then, for the next five years, he was at St. Mary's Church in Annapolis. He returned to Sacred Heart in 1990. According to Mr. Kurek, his brother took very good care of their father during his sickness and death, and then of their mother. "He did a great job with both," he added, "in arranging for their care and then for hospice."

In the last months of his life, as he suffered from many illnesses caused by diabetes, Father Kurek reverted to speaking in Spanish, the language of the poor people he loved so much in Paraguay. Father Gildea said that for all the years he served in the U.S., Father Kurek's "heart was still there" among those to whom he first ministered.