

In Memoriam

Fr. Herman Brinkmann: Army chaplain and '100% Redemptorist'

Redemptorist Father Herman Brinkmann, a hero to heroes and a spiritual father to thousands across the world, died of cancer on Oct. 25 at St. John Neumann Residence in Timonium, MD. He was 81 years old.

A Wake Service is planned for Thursday, Oct. 29, at St. Peter the Apostle Church in Philadelphia, where his brother, Father Gerard Brinkmann, will lead the prayers. The Mass of Christian Burial will be offered there the following morning at 11 a.m., with Baltimore Provincial Vicar Father Alfred Bradley as main celebrant and another Brinkmann brother, Father Charles, as homilist. Burial will be at Holy Redeemer Cemetery in Philadelphia.



A native of Philadelphia, Father Herman was born on May 27, 1928, the third of nine children born to Herman and Helen Widmeier Brinkmann, members of St. Boniface Parish. Among the nine were the three Redemptorist priests and two Mercy Sisters, Marie Virginia and Mary Helen Brinkmann. Drawn to the priesthood from early childhood, Father Herman Brinkmann went to St. Mary's Minor Seminary in North East, PA. He made his novitiate at Ilchester, MD, and first professed his vows as a Redemptorist in 1949. He continued his studies at Mount St. Alphonsus in Esopus, NY, making his final profession in 1952. He was ordained to the priesthood on June 20, 1954.

One of his classmates, Father Joseph Hurley, a former Baltimore Provincial Superior, said: "Herman was always outgoing, a wonderful companion and an enjoyable person to be with." Another classmate, Father Thomas Forrest, noted: "He was the beginning of a tradition in our Province — The Brinkmanns to Follow! He wasn't the greatest of athletes, but you still wanted him on your team, especially for basketball; he was 6'5". One outstanding fact was that he was everyone's friend; he had a smile for everyone. He was a hundred-percent Redemptorist."

Father Brinkmann's first ministerial assignment was to St. Mary Church in Buffalo, NY, in 1956. Three years later, he was transferred to St. Gerard Church in Lima, OH. In 1964, he was sent to St. Mary's in Annapolis, MD, and named director of the Tirocinium, which was designed as a transition period for newly ordained Redemptorists from being students to managing pastoral responsibilities.

In 1966, when U.S. troop deployment began a sharp rise in Vietnam, the military issued an urgent call for more chaplains. Father Brinkmann requested and received permission from his Provincial Superior to serve as a chaplain with the U.S. Army. After basic training, his first assignment was with the 9th Infantry Division in My Tho, South Vietnam. Writing in January of 1968 from the Mekong Delta, scene of some of the most ferocious fighting in the war, Father Brinkmann said that his time in Vietnam "has been most rewarding to me spiritually and priest-wise. New experiences, mostly sad, sure do work on one's perspective. Last night, I survived my tenth mortar attack. That sounds a lot more vicious than it really is, but just one mortar can take you to eternity." His proximity to an exploding land mine caused damage to his sight and hearing and, despite medical care and surgeries, he continued to have problems from this incident for the rest of his life.

In the midst of the war, Father Brinkmann managed to sponsor an orphanage in My Tho and wrote: "Those kids have done more for the morale of this post than any other single factor." The Viet Cong had mined a truck-full of orphans and mortared the orphanage itself, he said. Nevertheless, he managed to expedite the adoption of nine of the orphans by American families.

After finishing his tour of duty in Vietnam, Father Brinkmann was sent to bases in West Germany, first to Nuremberg and then to Heidelberg. With so many U.S. troops and their families based in Germany, he was put in charge of "the biggest parish in Europe," he reported. Father Gerard Brinkmann said that his brother especially

enjoyed serving in those places where he could create a parish home for the military families who were transferred so often from one culture to another.

In 1971, Father Brinkmann was posted to Fort Campbell, KY, and, two years later, he was sent again to Asia, based this time in Makiminato, Okinawa, Japan. It was from here that he began a letter-writing campaign to all the members of Congress to protest the Supreme Court decision in Roe vs. Wade, which legalized abortion throughout the country. He continued to proclaim a pro-life message wherever he was sent in the future. It was also in Okinawa that he celebrated his silver anniversary of profession. It happened that the Capuchins from Brooklyn had a Friary on the island and four of the friars also were celebrating their silver jubilees. Father Brinkmann reported to his Provincial Superior, Father Joseph Kerins: "In a Japanese setting we renewed vows before Bishop Ishigami (a Capuchin). Barefoot (the custom in all Japanese chapels) we approached the altar, concelebrating with fifteen chaplains and fifteen Capuchins. Now how many Redemptorists have ever renewed their vows before a Capuchin superior!"

Father Brinkmann's next assignment, in 1975, brought him close to his confreres in Brooklyn, as the military sent him to earn a Master's degree from the Chaplain School near Fort Hamilton. He spent the following year ministering at Fort Gordon in Georgia and then returned to Asia in 1978, this time to Korea. He was assigned next back to the U.S., based at West Point, NY, and given the pastoral responsibility for a church in nearby Newburg, where many of the academy's instructors and their families lived.

His final overseas assignment came in 1982, when he was sent to the European Command at Stuttgart, West Germany. Auxiliary Bishop Francis X. Rogue of the Military Vicariate (now Archdiocese) wrote about Father Brinkmann then: "Father Herman is one of our finest Chaplains and a truly wonderful pastor. His Parish is well organized and deeply touches the lives of many people. Father Herman is a friend to all and works very hard at being a pastor." Father Brinkmann extended his friendship to sick and wounded veterans and their families when he was posted to Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, DC, in 1985.

After his retirement from the Military Service in 1986, with the rank of Captain, Father Brinkmann was assigned to St. Mary's in Annapolis, where he was responsible for the pastoral care of one of the parish's mission churches in Edgewater, MD. In 1996, he was granted a sabbatical, which he spent in Philadelphia at St. Peter the Apostle Church/ St. John Neumann Shrine, where his brother, Father Gerard, was based as a mission preacher.

Father Brinkmann never actually "retired" — certainly not as a priest, nor even as a chaplain. Philadelphia Police Captain Louis Campione, a member of the St. Peter the Apostle Parish, said: "I've known him for 19 years now and I saw how he took time with people. He knew how to talk with them. He was always warm, unselfish, caring." When Captain Campione was concerned about a police officer in his unit, who as a member of the National Guard was being deployed to Iraq, he sent him to talk with Father Brinkmann. The officer, Gennaro Pellegrino, found a true friend in the priest who had served in the Mekong Delta. "Father Herman told him that he was going to Iraq not just to fight evil, but to help people find a better life," he said. The priest especially encouraged the soldier to be kind to the children and assured him that if he wrote about needing something for them, the parish would do everything possible to support his efforts. When Gennaro Pellegrino wrote about all the children he met who had no shoes to protect their feet from the rubble of war, Philadelphia school children collected several hundred pairs of flip-flops to send. Father Brinkmann made sure that care packages for the troops, along with candy for the children, arrived often.

In August of 2005, the soldier was killed in a mine explosion. "Father Brinkmann immediately went to the family house," Captain Campione said. "He prayed with them. He talked with them, not just about war, but about helping the people there. I could see the difference it made in their demeanor. They lost their anxiety. He brought peace to the whole family."

A few years back, the military chaplain who had striven to bring God's peace to everyone he met, was assaulted by a mugger who hit him in the head with a brick. The local media picked up on the community outrage that their beloved priest should be so wounded. Father Brinkmann surprised them, though, with his resilience. On Holy Thursday, still sore and bruised and bandaged, he managed to get himself to the sanctuary to concelebrate the Mass. When he appeared — to the surprise of his confreres who expected him to be resting — the congregation stood and applauded.

It was only in the past few months that a quick-moving cancer caused him to leave Philadelphia for St. John Neumann Residence.

He is survived by his two Redemptorist brothers, his two Religious sisters, brothers Fred, Larry, John and Joseph Brinkmann; 15 nieces and nephews, among the latter a fellow Redemptorist, Fred Brinkmann; and numerous great-nieces and great-nephews.