

In Memoriam

Rev. Adamec: Presence of Christ with the poor

Redemptorist Father Joseph Adamec, who wore holes in his shoes trekking through housing projects, prisons and hospital corridors, died Sunday, Aug. 19, at Our Lady of Perpetual Help Rectory at 61st Street, Manhattan. The New York native had traveled from his Boston assignment at the request of a Czech-speaking organization to celebrate a Mass in their language. He was 81 years old.

Father Adamec was born March 28, 1926, one of four sons of Otto and Mary Tomasek Adamec, and was raised in Our Lady of Perpetual Help Parish in Manhattan. He entered the Redemptorists' St. Mary's Seminary in North East, PA, after completing grammar school; made his first profession of vows in 1947 and his final profession in 1950. He completed his studies for the priesthood at Mount St. Alphonsus in Esopus, NY, and was ordained on June 22, 1952.



His first assignment was to his home parish of Our Lady of Perpetual Help, where he served from 1954 to 1961. He then was sent to minister at St. Wenceslaus Church in Baltimore, MD.

In 1967, the year of the ghetto riots in Buffalo, NY, Father Adamec was named rector and pastor at St. Mary Church there and became widely known as "the ghetto priest." Walking through the neighborhoods, greeting everybody, getting to know the people, he learned of the young men sentenced to the Attica Correctional Facility. Carrying messages from their mothers and, always, words about Our Lady of Perpetual Help, Father Adamec often visited the prisoners both before and after the 1971 uprising in which 43 prisoners and guards were killed.

Father Edward (Mickey) Finn, who was stationed with Father Adamec in Buffalo, said that the people of their African-American neighborhood loved "Father Joe" and thought of him as one of their own. Father Adamec's concern went well beyond the Catholics there. He signed up himself and Father Finn as Red Cross volunteers so that when there was any emergency – such as a fire in the night – they would be called to help. "His work in Buffalo was unforgettable," Father Finn said. "Social workers were afraid to go to the places he went."

In 1975, the then-Episcopal Vicar in Buffalo, Father Frederick Hinton, wrote to the Baltimore Provincial: "The quality and intimacy of 'Father Joe's' service as it touches the lives of the people of God in the neighborhood of St. Mary's if it were to be withdrawn would leave a great and lonely place against the sky. Can you spare us that anguish yet another time."

On the occasion of their silver jubilee of priesthood, Fathers Adamec and Finn received permission to make a cross-county drive in a borrowed camper. "He was an amateur geologist and we must have stopped at every outcropping of rocks," Father Finn recalled. "We visited the Montana Glacier National Park and he took a two-mile hike across a glacier – because he had never done it before . . . We went to the Petrified Forest and there were 'Do Not Remove Anything' signs all over. He said he'd love to take a sample, but he didn't."

It was in 1978 that Father Adamec was named Novice Master at Oconamawoc, WI. He offered his novices some unusual experiences: In 1979, took a group of 18 to see Pope John Paul II in Chicago. When the Holy Father emerged from the cathedral, the group was there to hoist their banner proclaiming "Redemptorists Welcome Our Beloved Pope" and to break into what Father Adamec described as their "pep rally Alleluia." They sang their choruses all the way down State Street. In 1982, he and Father Walter Karrer took a group of 19 novices to give a mission on Mackinac Island, MI, leading them across a frozen straight by snowmobile. Redemptorists had ministered to the Native Americans in the area in the 1830s.

Baltimore Provincial Father Alfred Bradley, who was among the novices who went to Mackinac Island, said that Father Adamec had great devotion to the North American Martyrs and could – and did – recite every torture each

endured. "He taught us to be faithful to the Congregation and zealous in spite of any obstacle," he said. "And like St. Alphonsus, he was always with the poor and the most abandoned." One lesson he stressed over and over to the novices: "Be kind to people."

In 1984, Father Adamec went from the frozen North to the Tropics, to Holy Cross Church in Christiansted, St. Croix. There, he made his own the people of every public housing project on the east end of the island. Nor did he overlook visits to the hospital and the prison. Patricia Larsen, who considered him a mentor and dear friend, said that his was the first Christmas card she received every year and, every year, he would remind her that he needed an updated photo of her four sons – his altar boys. "The first time he met my Mom, who's a Moravian, was because he visited her house; when he saw a picture of my sons, he asked her what she was doing with it. Mom told him they were her grandsons and he told her they were his altar boys." Father Adamec was the one who guided her through the RCIA program – even when the exhausted mother fell asleep during one of his talks – and continued to work with her so she became comfortable teaching CCD classes.

Giselle DeChabert, who works now in New York, was a new member of the parish youth group when she first got to know Father Adamec. "He hung out with us and just listened – he was never judgmental – and you felt you were speaking with a friend," Miss DeChabert said. "He was always very funny and unpretentious and he took an interest in everything. He was a beautiful priest, a wonderful person."

Father Adamec also was well known to every street person in the area and they knew they had only to ring the rectory bell in the daytime or throw pebbles at his window at night and he would prepare a packet of sandwiches, fruit and a soft drink for each one.

The assignment to Our Lady of Perpetual Help Basilica in Boson came in June of 1988. Father Matthew Allman, who serves there, said, "He thrived on the idea of being a street priest. You should have seen him at the end of the Spanish Mass -- he'd run out so as not to miss greeting any of the people. He was incredibly dedicated. One of the parishioners told me, 'He was much more ours than he was yours.' He used to tell me he could stand at the top of the stairs to the Stop-and-Shop and see all of the parishioners in one day."

Father Adamec had the unenviable job of following the famed Father Joseph Manton as preacher of the weekly Novena to Our Lady of Perpetual Help. Soon, the novena became as associated with him as it had with his predecessor. "Nothing was going to get in the way of his preaching the novena," Father Allman said. "Any time he was asked to go somewhere, he'd plan around the novena schedule." He also was faithful to visiting with the parish schoolchildren, especially in teaching religion to the sixth-graders, he added.

Rose Cotrone, the parish secretary, said, "He was unbelievable! Every day, between three and five, he's be out evangelizing the projects, knocking on every door. He walked to every hospital. There were 30 or 40 people he brought Communion. He was involved with everything in the neighborhood, served on the community board." One thing he did not do was shop for himself. Mrs. Cotrone said his briefcase/portable Mass kit looked a disgrace, held together as it was with duct tape. She bought him a new one and, over his protests that it was much too nice, got him to accept it as a combined Christmas/birthday gift.

It was the old duct-taped version he carried with him, though, on his last trip to New York. When Father Bradley was asked to see that Father Adamec's personal possessions be returned to his family, he found in his confrere's pocket a rosary, a well-worn prayerbook, an image of Our Lady of Perpetual Help, a slip of paper with the contact numbers for the people who had picked him up for the Mass he celebrated that day, and a cardboard copy of the season schedule of his beloved Red Sox.

Several confreres commented on how appropriate it was that Father Adamec died so peacefully at Our Lady of Perpetual Help Rectory. After all, he had carried her image for more than 50 years of priestly ministry, bringing her into every slum he could find, every prison cell, every sick room. He had entrusted her image to grandmothers seeking Mary's intercession for their families and to young people seeking their way in life. Father Bradley recalled Father Adamec telling him: "The greatest thing the Redemptorists have ever done is promoting Perpetual Help."

Father Adamec is survived by three brothers: Otto, of Manhattan; Charles, of Minneapolis, MN; and Gerard, of Brentwood, NY, as well as several nephews and nieces.

