

In Memoriam

Fr. Hopwood: A tireless missionary and friend to the poor of Paraguay

[Click here](#) to read a remembrance from Fr. Humberto Villalba, C.Ss.R.

Redemptorist Father Robert Hopwood, who energetically ministered to the people of Paraguay for a half century, died June 25 at St. John Neumann Residence at Stella Maris in Timonium, MD. He was 84 years old and had Alzheimer's Disease.

Father Hopwood was born Aug. 25, 1925, in Oil City, PA, and was one of 11 children born to Arthur and Eldene Schoonover Hopwood. He grew up in St. Stephen Parish and, after completing grammar school, was accepted to study with the Redemptorists at St. Mary's Seminary in North East, PA.

He made his novitiate year at Ilchester, MD, and professed his first vows in 1947. He then went on to continue his studies for the priesthood at Mount St. Alphonsus Seminary in Esopus, NY, making his final profession of vows in 1950 and being ordained to the priesthood on June 22, 1952.

On his golden jubilee, Father Hopwood recalled the notice he received for his first missionary assignment: "You will leave New York City on the Rio Jachal Ship of the Argentine State Line on March 8, arriving in Buenos Aires where you will transfer to a tramp steamer to sail north on the Paraná River to Asunción, Paraguay. From there you will leave for Ponta Porá, of the Mato Grosso State of Brasil, and from there west to Bella Vista, Paraguay, your first mission." The journey, he recalled, took five weeks.

Another veteran missionary, Father Andrew Carr, said: "In those days, we got no formal training in the languages; if you wanted to study Spanish or Portuguese as a hobby, you could." In Paraguay, the confreres were confronted with two official languages, Spanish and Guarani. "There were men more fluent, but he got very adequate in Guarani during his long trips in Bella Vista," Father Carr said. The foundation there encompassed 120 miles by 90 miles, with little pockets of people spread throughout the area.

"He had a great zeal to serve the poor in the Paraguayan hinterlands and made frequent apostolic trips on horseback," Father Carr added. "We didn't get any training for that either!"

Father Humberto Villalba of Paraguay said that the people's affectionate nickname for Father Hopwood was "Robertito." He noted that the villages where his confrere would minister had no more than 20 houses each; there was no drinking water, no electricity, no street. Father Villalba added that Father Hopwood would return to his Redemptorist community after 30 or 40 days, only to bathe, wash his clothes, and prepare to set out for his next round of visits.

In 1958, Father Hopwood was transferred to Pedro Juan Caballero in Ponta Porá, Brazil. He served for two years, beginning in 1960, at Nuestra Señora del Perpetuo Socorro in Asunción, Paraguay. Later that year he returned to Pedro Juan Caballero; in 1962, Father Hopwood was assigned again to Nuestra Señora del Perpetuo Socorro. His new assignment in 1967 was to the same city, Asunción, but to a different parish, Santisimo Redentor.

His later assignments followed the same pattern: Bella Vista, in 1970; Pedro Juan Caballero, in 1971; Nuestra Señora del Perpetuo Socorro, in 1972. Also in 1972, he was named chaplain of the English-speaking Catholics in Paraguay, a ministry he continued for more than 30 years. The National Conference of Paraguayan Bishops chose Father Hopwood as their National Secretary for Ecumenism in 1983.



One project that Father Hopwood undertook, both among the *campesinos* and the city-dwellers, was marketing the work of local artisans. Father James Gilmour, who served in Asunción for ten years overlapping Father Hopwood's time there, recalled how his confrere worked to set up American markets where the handmade items could be sold at a price fair to the artisans. Among the products were fine laces and embroideries.

At the age of 65, Father Hopwood was relieved of parish work to take charge of Charity Hospital Capellanes del Chaco of the Redemptorist Fathers. Father Ronald Bonneau, another missionary to Paraguay, said that Father Hopwood "did great work there and it became known particularly for the maternity care it offered to the poor." A lot of contributions to support this work came from English-speaking Catholics he met, mostly from the American embassy staff.

In Asunción, there were tennis courts available, to the delight of the highly energetic and athletic missionary.

"Hoppy was a wonderful tennis player," Father Gilmour said. "He also was a sun-worshiper and he kept himself in very good health."

Father Bonneau described his friend as being "like the Energizer Bunny," who always volunteered to celebrate the first Mass of the day. Father Carr noted that the Redemptorists "were very strict with ourselves about taking a day off each week." He added that the people were pleased with the priests taking a day off because they would be all the easier to approach for the rest of the week.

Father Blas Caceres, a native of Paraguay who serves now at St. Mary's Church in Annapolis, said that in 1978 the Vice Province of Asunción offered one of their priests to serve the Spanish-speaking communities in the Province of Baltimore and, in return, Baltimore offered to take responsibility for what was then a small chapel named for St. Vincent de Paul.

Father Caceres later was chosen to come to the United States and Father Hopwood was chosen to serve as pastor of the chapel, which later was renamed Divino Espíritu. According to Father Caceres, his family belongs to this village chapel and quickly came to love "the smiling priest, very kind, who was always visiting families in their homes and bringing a family spirit to the church. The people were amazed at this wonderful priest they had received."

More and more people began to come to the church regularly and to take part in parish activities, especially the Legion of Mary, Father Caceres said. He drew young people to the parish by encouraging sports, even offering tennis lessons to those interested in learning.

Like Jesus using parables, Father Hopwood used stories in his preaching. "The community adored his storytelling and he was a very good spiritual teacher for that community," Father Caceres said.

While Father Hopwood never ran out of energy for serving the people, nor was his love for the Paraguayans ever diminished, he was persuaded by his Redemptorist superiors and a niece, Debbie Hopwood, with whom he was especially close because she had spent some years in Paraguay nursing the sick, to return to the United States.

With the onset and advance of dementia, the missionary who had served so many others for more than 50 years was brought home to the United States, to be served among his confreres who form the Redemptorist community at the St. John Neumann Residence at Stella Maris.

Father Hopwood is predeceased by brothers Eugene, William and Arthur, and a sister, Rita York. He is survived by brothers Paul and James in California, John in Indiana, Richard in Erie, PA, and Donald in Warren, PA, also a sister, Marihelen Egan in Franklin, PA; as well as numerous nieces and nephews.