

In Memoriam

Rev. William Biffar dies at 87

Redemptorist Father William Biffar, a retired Navy Chaplain and longtime parish priest at Sacred Heart of Jesus Church in New Smyrna Beach, FL, died Feb. 27 at St. John Neumann Residence in Saratoga Springs, NY. He was 87 years old and suffered for many years with diabetes and complications from that disease.

The Wake Service is scheduled for Friday, March 2, with the Funeral Mass the following day at 11 a.m. Father Jerome Chavarria, Vice Provincial of Richmond, will be the celebrant and homilist.

One of six children of the late Harry and Catherine Lanigan Biffar, Father Biffar was born on Oct. 17, 1919, in College Point, NY. He grew up in St. Fidelia Parish and, after finishing grammar school, studied for one year at Immaculate Conception College to prepare for the priesthood in the Diocese of Brooklyn. An anniversary mission at his home parish, preached by Redemptorist Father Alfred Menth, drew him toward the Redemptorist life. He transferred to St. Mary's Seminary in North East, PA, then completed his studies at St. Alphonsus in Esopus, NY. He made his first profession of vows in 1942 and his final profession three years later. He was ordained to the priesthood June 22, 1947.



A classmate, Father Ed Foley, recalled that his confrere was "too nice for his own good" in the seminary. "He was always happy to go along with anything for a happy situation," Father Foley said, remembering especially the satiric plays written by Father Menth for the amusement of the community. "Biffar was always a character and always willing to be the butt of something," his confrere said. "Everybody would laugh at him, but year after year he'd agree to do it."

Like most of the Redemptorists ordained at that time, his first assignment was as a missionary. Father Biffar served for three years at Monte Alegre and two years at Campo Grande, Brazil.

When Father John Sephton, then Baltimore Provincial Superior, issued a call for priests to serve as military chaplains, Father Biffar volunteered. He was commissioned by the U.S. Navy in 1952 and served as a chaplain for 21 years, retiring with the rank of Lieut. Commander. The good humor and camaraderie he had shown in the seminary served him well in working with the military. Father John Barry, another classmate, said Father Biffar "was very well thought of" by those he served. "He was kind, generous, loving and zealous," Father Barry said. "As St. Paul urged us, he tried to be all things to all men in order to win as many as possible for the Lord."

In 1973, Father Biffar was appointed to Sacred Heart Church, where he was active until his health began to decline in 2001. Father Barry, who serves now at Sacred Heart, said that Father Biffar was "very much loved by all here and his memory is very fresh among the people." As minister of the house, Father Biffar not only took care of all the repairs needed, but ran the carnivals and other fund-raising events for the parish. He had a reputation for getting things done -- as he did in the military when he got the Navy to build a chapel for a colony of lepers in Hawaii. "He was instrumental in building up the Church here and he was 'well-connected' in a good sense," Father Chavarria said.

It was at Sacred Heart that Father Chavarria, then a seminarian, met Father Biffar, who became a mentor and a dear friend. "He taught me two things -- about being human and being holy. I learned from him that the priesthood could be fun," Father Chavarria said. "He was a wonderful pastor and, as St. Alphonsus used to say, he was a lion in the pulpit and a lamb in the confessional."

Father Chavarria described his friend as "an apostle of reconciliation with the Church," especially with the sick

and the dying. His frequent visits to people in hospitals provided not only for non-practicing Catholics to be reconciled with the Church, but also resulted in a number of baptisms of those who had no faith until Father Biffar began to talk with them about Jesus.

After Father Biffar was transferred to St. John Neumann Residence, he and Father Chavarria continued to talk several days a week and the younger confrere visited at Saratoga Springs as often as possible. "Pat Woods (Baltimore Provincial Superior) talks about the gift of Gospel friendship. I have to say I had one of the best ever," Father Chavarria said.

As evidenced by the library in his room at St. John Neumann Residence, Father Biffar remained a voracious reader until his failing eyesight became a trial. Thanks to his family and friends, he was well-supplied with best-sellers, biographies, westerns, detective stories and history books. Father Arthur Gildea, former rector at the residence, said that Father Biffar always kept the community there updated on the latest news discussed by television commentators, as well as news of confreres. "He kept in prolific contact with other Redemptorists," Father Gildea said, noting that he was especially solicitous of those experiencing vocational difficulties and those who were sick.

"He was a big help with community spirit here," Father Gildea recalled. "He was always trying to organize card games -- but they didn't last too long because he always cleaned everyone out!" Father Biffar also was an eager Scrabble-player, usually managing to cover every "triple word score" block on the board.

Father Biffar is survived by one brother, Father John Biffar of the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary, who has been serving in Japan for nearly 50 years; and a sister and brother-in-law, Doctors Ada and Ed Ryan of Tucson, AZ. With the help of his military pension, Father William Biffar has long been a generous supporter of his brother's missionary work. When the Doctors Ryan became active in the pro-life movement, he supported that cause as well, not only financially, but with his presence at many pro-life demonstrations in cities around the country. According to Father Gildea, Father Biffar also was quick to support projects started by Redemptorist confreres to help the poor.

Father Chavarria, hearing of his friend's death, thanked God that the priest, who had smoothed the way to a peaceful death for so many others, spent his last hours amidst his confreres, supported by prayers, dying peacefully in his sleep.