

LAWRENCE F. STEBLER

Priest drew people back to church

By Ann Rodgers-Melnick
Post-Gazette Staff Writer

The Rev. Lawrence F. Stebler, 62, a sharp-witted priest with a knack for reaching people who were alienated from the church, died Monday of esophageal cancer at St. Teresa of Avila parish in Ross.

"He was a real city person, who had a sense of taking the church to the streets, to the neighborhoods," said the Rev. Garrett Dorsey, pastor of St. Ursula Church in Hampton, who worked with Father Stebler for many years at St. Stephen Church in Hazelwood.

"He got a lot of people to come back to the church, back to the sacraments," said Sister Barbara Ann Boss, director of the St. Elizabeth Seton community center in Brookline, who also served with Father Stebler in Hazelwood.

His widowed mother raised him as an only child near Sacred Heart parish in Shadyside, where he was an altar server. He was close to both the parish priests and the brothers at Central Catholic High School, Dorsey said.

He earned a degree in journalism at the University of Pittsburgh and considered becoming a lawyer but entered seminary instead.

"Early on, I think he had a sense that he was called to service. I think he saw journalism and thought of law as service. And the priesthood was also a way of service. He had a very strong sense of giving to others. He was never interested in stuff for himself," Dorsey said.

Father Stebler was ordained in 1963 and had early assignments at St. Hilary in Washington and Our Lady of Fatima in Hopewell. He was co-administrator of St. Stephen from 1969 to 1988.

Hazelwood was seething with racial tension and the frustration of unemployment when Father Stebler and the Rev. Thomas Harvey came to serve there. The church itself was in turmoil as it grappled with the changes of Vatican II.

"It was an unsettled time when they arrived [at St. Stephen], but they had a sense that their mission was to do a whole lot of outreach. They wanted to go out and find the people where they were, not just in the membership lists and within the lines of the parish. Whatever was going on in the neighborhood was their concern," Dorsey said.

Father Stebler co-founded the Meals on Wheels program in Hazelwood and took the then-radical step of serving on the board of Lutheran Social Services.

But he was often found on street corners, talking to the youths who hung out there. They nicknamed him Sticks "because he weighed about 120 pounds soaking wet and he was nearly 6 feet tall," Dorsey said.

His idealism sometimes backfired.

Father Stebler and Dorsey were among a group of priests who raised money to renovate a dilapidated building for low-income housing.

"We were babes in the woods. It was disastrous. We were completely bamboozled by some people that we got as tenants, and then Housing Court went after this group of priests, who had become slumlords," Dorsey recalled.

The priests wanted their day in court, certain that they would be vindicated. But the night before the hearing their tenants skipped town. The priests still came to court, demanding to be heard.

"In the middle of all this, Father Stebler sauntered into the room. He didn't say anything to anybody. He just stood in a half-slouch, looking out the window. The judge asked him who he was and he said, 'I'm here on behalf of peace and justice.' And we all broke up," Dorsey said.

Father Stebler had a way with words that sometimes offended those who expected bland piety from a Catholic priest. But those who were estranged from the church were drawn to his down-to-earth manner. He was very open about the fact that he was a recovering alcoholic, Dorsey said.

"He was always very believable to people who were on the edges," he said.

"He didn't start off with a principle and deduce things from it. He started with reality and worked his way up to the faith dimension of whatever you were talking about, whether it was the Steelers or local politics."

In 1988, Father Stebler became pastor of St. Victor in Bairdford. He remained there until January 1996, when he took a six-month health leave. When he returned he was still weak, so he was assigned to St. Teresa as a parochial vicar. Not long afterward, he was diagnosed with cancer.

"Patience was never his long suit. But in these last months at St. Teresa, he became very content and very serene with his illness," Dorsey said.

Father Stebler is survived by his mother, Marie Connors Stebler of Shadyside.

His funeral was yesterday at St. Teresa. He was buried in Calvary Cemetery. McCabe Brothers Funeral Home in Bloomfield handled the arrangements.