

Rev. James Coffey, priest for 60 years

By Katherine M. Curley
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

The Rev. James H. Coffey, a priest in the Archdiocese of Boston for 60 years who was widely known to his parishioners for his outgoing personality, died Wednesday of colon cancer at his home in Cambridge. He was 86.

Born in Jamaica Plain, Father Coffey attended Blessed Sacrament School before moving to West Roxbury with his family and attending Roxbury Latin School. He graduated from Boston College High School as valedictorian in 1936 and from the College of the Holy Cross in 1940.

Despite his father's urging that he become a lawyer, Father Coffey followed in his older brother's footsteps and entered St. John's Seminary. While there, he was diagnosed with chronic phlebitis and spent a year in the hospital undergoing a series of operations to correct problems with his circulation. Subsequent complications plagued him throughout his life.

After his ordination in 1945, Father Coffey was assigned to Sacred Heart parish in Lynn. Taking a vow of poverty, he dressed in donated clothes and spent much of his time attending to the poor.

Throughout his 60 years in the priesthood, Father Coffey served as chaplain at the state prison at Walpole, where he said the first Mass after the facility opened in 1955. He was also assigned to St. Joseph's in Amesbury, St. Theresa's in Billerica, where he helped raise funds to build the present parish church, Sacred Heart in Medford, St. Aidan's in Brookline, and St. Mary's in Wrentham, where he was a curate and then pastor for 17 years, as well as chaplain for the Wrentham State School. He retired in 1987.

Father Coffey was also a dedicated uncle to his eight nieces and nephews. Family members recalled his weekly visits to his sister and her children in Weymouth, where he would tell stories of his experiences in the priesthood before taking the children for ice cream.

Father Coffey played in weekly tennis matches at Longwood Tennis Club, or wherever he could find an opponent, until he was 82, family and friends recalled.

After his retirement, Father Coffey served as parochial vicar at Our Lady of the Rosary in Stoughton for three years. He returned to St. Aidan's, where he served as senior priest in residence and as a substitute priest around the diocese, filling in for priests who were ill or on vacation. After moving into the assisted living facility at Youville House in Cambridge, he continued his work as a substitute priest and visited his younger sister, Eleanor, who in her last years had Alzheimer's disease.

In addition to his nieces and nephews, Father Coffey leaves 11 grandnieces and grandnephews.

A funeral Mass will be said at 10 a.m. tomorrow in St. Mary's Church in Wrentham. Burial will be in St. Joseph's Cemetery in West Roxbury.