

Rev. Finian McGinn dies at 84 after cancer battle

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The Rev. Fr. Finian John McGinn spent more than 25 years of his life in Fresno, using his language skills to teach Hmong and Spanish at Fresno Unified and Fresno State, marching for farmworker rights and reaching countless others with his multilingual Masses.

McGinn died July 25 in Vista, near San Diego, after a short battle with cancer. He was 84.

Ordained in 1960, McGinn first ministered in Stockton to farmworkers in the Bracero program. After earning his degree in Spanish from Notre Dame in 1967, he arrived in Fresno at Our Lady of Mt. Carmel, where he remained until 1994 before leaving for Oakland.

In 1969, he was approached about teaching Spanish at Edison High School. Later he was director of bilingual education at Tehipite Middle School and eventually a professor of linguistics and education and director of bilingual education at Fresno State.

When the Hmong population began to grow in the Valley in the early 1990s, McGinn learned the language and began teaching Hmong classes at Fresno State. He also gave Mass in three languages on Sundays.

MCGINN CALLED FRESNO HIS HOME

Although McGinn left for Oakland and later lived in Rome, Fresno "became home to him," said Armida Espinoza, a lifelong friend of McGinn's. "This is where he served the longest."

McGinn would make regular trips back to Fresno, always staying with Espinoza. "We had Finian's room," she said.

His trips back to Fresno would excite the community and calls would come in to make appointments to see him. Espinoza said there has been a saying in the community for years: "Fr. Finian has either baptized, married or buried you."

When McGinn's 50th anniversary of ordination came in 2010, it was a huge affair. Naturally, Espinoza said, he wanted to celebrate it in Fresno. The community came together and, all on donations, rented space at Arte



Armida Espinoza

The Rev. Fr. Finian John McGinn died Thursday in Vista, California at 84 years old, after a battle with cancer.

Américas, where 500 people arrived to see McGinn.

He wrote in a booklet for the ceremony, "I chose to come here and celebrate my 50th anniversary of ordination with you, the people of Fresno, because I have spent over half of my 50 years as a priest with you. How lucky I have been to have met you, worked with you and to have you as friends."

MCGINN'S OTHER ACCOMPLISHMENTS

During the Cesar Chavez-led farmworker rights movement, McGinn rallied around social issues that affected church members at Mt. Carmel and St. Jude church in Easton, where he was also a pastor.

He became friends with Dolores Huerta, taking political stands and marching. "It was almost impossible to be a conservative in those days," he told The Bee in 1994.

After leaving Fresno and spending some time at St. Barbara Province in Oakland, he was elected in 2003 as councilor general for the International Franciscan Order in Rome. After his assignment was finished, he returned to California, to the Franciscan School of Theology at Old Mission San Luis Rey.

EARLY LIFE

McGinn was born premature in Phoenix on Nov. 18, 1934 to parents Kathryn McGinn and Virgil McGinn.

He entered the seminary at 13, young by today's standards, Espinoza said.

His passion for language started early, and as a college freshman, he taught Special Latin to

upper-class students.

He started out as a Franciscan friar before being ordained in 1960.

In 1994, just before McGinn embarked from Fresno to Oakland for his position as a vicar provincial, he told The Bee that there had been times he wondered if he would someday regret giving up the possibility of marriage and family.

He said particularly after his father died, he wondered if he would grow old alone. But his fears were always short-lived, he said. "The careers I've been involved in are so fulfilling. I've been so lucky. It's kept me young."

EDUCATION

McGinn spoke five languages: English, Spanish, Hmong, Latin and Greek.

Just a few months before his death, McGinn let slip in a conversation that he was teaching a class in Greek. Espinoza said she had no idea he had learned the language.

"Fifty-one years (of knowing him) and how did I not even know. He was so modest, so humble," she said.

McGinn earned several degrees in philosophy and theology, a master's in Spanish from Fresno State in 1979 and a doctorate in education from the University of San Francisco in 1989.

He was named teacher of the year more than once: in 1984 from the city of Fresno, and in 1985 from Fresno County, the Association of Mexican American Educators and California Association of Bilingual Educators of Fresno.

He received a distinguished alumni award