

'JET' Tolan takes a bow

The colorful Monsignor J.E. "JET" Tolan, perhaps Iowa's best-known Catholic priest and a champion party-giver, officially takes retirement next Sunday at an afternoon reception his congregation is having at St. Joseph's Church in the northwest Iowa town of Wall Lake.



J.E. "JET"
TOLAN

It'll be a little quieter than the way I planned on going out," Tolan, 74, said from Holy Spirit Retirement Home in Sioux City, where he is living while battling health problems. "I was going to have one final, big production like I've put on so many times. But I'm not up to it."

His big productions were his annual "JET 100" parties — he had 35 of them — which grew from a humble game feed in a church basement in Sac City. Later ones became sometimes wild extravaganzas, initially for 100 and later for 250 or more of the state's top business, political, sports and media figures at ballrooms in Fort Dodge or Lake View or at the estate of Byron Godbersen, the wealthy Ida Grove industrialist.

"JET is a true friend," said Godbersen, a major benefactor of the parties. "He's this Lutheran's priest." Corporate donations paid for the parties, which included cocktails, elaborate dinners, wines, take-home gifts and entertainment. Money left over went to charities.

Tolan always became part of the entertainment, usually singing "I Did It My Way" (turning it into "I Did It the JET Way") while his brother, Justin, a Pocahontas dentist, plunked rough accompaniment on a ukulele.

"JET's a great guy, a great Iowan, with a great sense of humor," Gov.

Branstad is a veteran of the parties, as was his predecessor in office, Robert Ray. Tolan once staged Ray's "coronation" and had the governor ride a white horse into a ballroom, reporters trailing behind for manure pickup.

There always were such hijinks, some planned and some not. Once, at a wintertime JET 100, a tipsy state legislator tried to jump over the fence into Tolan's church's Nativity scene and broke his leg.

"I decided to start calming things down in later years," said Tolan. "A good friend of mine, Bill Farner from Carroll, grabbed me one night and said, 'You're better than that program you had,' and he was right. They got tamer, but we always had that camaraderie."

The last one was five years ago. Tolan sneaked away from the cocktail crowd and made a grand entrance to dinner in a coffin, popping up in a white suit and top hat when the lid was lifted.

At another one, at the Starlite Motel in Fort Dodge, the drapes on the ballroom were drawn open so his guests could see him "walk on water." He actually ran across a plank positioned just under the surface of the swimming pool.

Tolan, at 179 pounds now a shadow of his former self, left Wall Lake in February for the Mayo Clinic.

"I don't want anybody singing any sad songs for me, but I've had a tough time," he said. "I found out I had a heart attack nine months ago and didn't even know it. Then I got a disease, an infection of my muscles, that's affected my whole immune system. But make it clear it's not AIDS."

"I've been on strong medicine, and I've had depression. Everything hit at once."

He may be best known publicly for the old party antics, but the Fonda native also is respected as a great friend of youth and an effective priest. He's had extremely loyal congregations in his 48-year ministry in Sioux City,

Terry Branstad said. "Not a great singing voice, though."

In Sac City, he started and coached Little League baseball, and the field is named after him. For years, he was the chaplain of Iowa State University Cyclone teams. Briar Cliff College in Sioux City two weeks ago awarded him an honorary doctorate.

"With the adults in my parishes, I really changed one thing over the years," Tolan said. "Early on, I controlled everything. Later I learned to delegate. The people have done 90 percent of the work, and I think the freedom to do that got them more involved in their faith."

Tolan looks back over his career and says, "It's been good. If I've done anything offensive, I'm truly sorry. It has been fun. God has been so good to me."

— Chuck Offenburger

Sac City, Humboldt, Lake City and Wall Lake.