

Bidding farewell to Father Bondi



1 of 2

Pallbearers walk the casket of Rev. Paul Bondi from St. Mary's Roman Catholic Church Monday afternoon. (RICK GARGIULO/The Saratogian)



By SARATOGIAN | news@saratogian.com

PUBLISHED: March 3, 2009 at 5:19 AM EST | UPDATED: July 22, 2021 at 6:28 AM EDT



Listen to this article now

Powered by Trinity Audio



1.0k

00:00

06:05

BALLSTON SPA — Had the Rev. Paul J. Bondi's prayers been answered 40 years ago, he might never have served as pastor of St. Mary's Roman Catholic Church in Ballston Spa. "When I got the word in 1969 that I was being transferred from Sacred Heart Church in Stamford to St. Mary's, I wasn't happy at all," Bondi once confessed. "In fact, I twice petitioned the Bishop asking him to reconsider my appointment. I was soon to learn the Lord sometimes works in mysterious ways. My Ballston Spa appointment was very much a blessing in disguise." Just how great a blessing was never more evident than when the revered spiritual leader, who passed away Friday at age 88, was bid a fond farewell by his flock at a church reception on Sunday, followed by a "Celebration of Life" at which Bishop Howard J. Hubbard officiated Monday. The 11:30 a.m. church service began with a choir directed by Ann Van Derwerker singing "On Eagle's Wings" as a funeral procession — which included the Bishop, current Pastor Rev. Thomas J. Kelly and the Rev. George St. John, who delivered the Homily — made its way to the altar. Pallbearers were New York State Supreme Court Judge Steve Ferradino, Surrogate Court Judge Harry Seibert, Dr. William Kelley, Al DeFilippo, Bill LaRoche and Wendell Neugebauer. Among those seated in the front pews of the historic church — which was packed to capacity a half hour before the service began — were members of the late priest's family and a host of Diocesan priests who brought tears to the eyes of many mourners with their rendition of "Thou Art A Priest Forever." Those on hand to pay their respects were also visibly moved by the solos of Jerry Crouth and Tara Ellsworth. The service took on a lighter note when Father St. John injected humor into his reminiscences about his longtime pastoral colleague and friend. His words praised Bondi for the seeds of faith he planted and nurtured in the gardens at St. Mary's Church and St. Mary's School. There was no doubt as St. John's homily drew to a close that Stamford's loss four decades ago had been Ballston Spa's gain. This was reinforced as Bishop Hubbard presented a eulogy that included an overview of Bondi's legacy of Christian service that touched legions of lives far and wide. Born to Italian immigrant parents Anna (nee Gatto) and Joseph Bondi, young Paul shared a devout Catholic home in Albia — now known as Troy's Griswold Avenue — with younger siblings Vincent and Rita. Although their community was predominantly Irish-American, the Bondi children were raised to speak Italian as well as English and to believe that faith could move mountains. Much of Bondi's free time as an adolescent was spent tossing balls through hoops at Catholic Central High School in Troy. After graduating from CCHS in 1939, he became a semi-pro player on the Siena College freshman basketball team. Faced with choosing between a sports career and the priesthood, the young man quickly chose the latter. The decision to become a priest led Bondi to St. Joseph's Seminary in Dunwoodie in Yonkers. His ordination took place on April 17, 1948 at the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in Albany. Bishop Edmund F. Gibbons officiated at the ceremony. He was the first priest ordained from his home parish of Sacred Heart in Troy and later served as a chaplain in the U.S. Air Force. Over the next 18 years, Bondi — who once reportedly gave a beggar the coat off of his own back — served as an assistant pastor at eight churches throughout the Albany Diocese. After being named pastor of St. Mary's in September 1969, Bondi quickly earned a reputation for brevity — or, as Bishop Hubbard quipped, "liturgical shorthand." Bondi had worded it differently, explaining once: "If you can't make your point in eight minutes, you don't have a point to make." Tirelessly devoted to the advancement of Catholic education, Bondi's legacy also included working closely with Sister Annette Allard to ensure scholarship funds for St. Mary's Elementary School and being supportive of Saratoga Central Catholic High School in Saratoga Springs. Among those who will be forever grateful for this part of Father Bondi's ministry is choir member Crouth. "It was because of Father Bondi's generosity that my wife Vivian and I were able to afford to send all seven of our children (Brian, Lisa, Andrew, Jeffrey, Anthony, Kevin and Stephen) to St. Mary's and then on to Spa Catholic. It was an honor to sing at the service celebrating his life," said Crouth, who is also a member of the Racing City Chorus and the host of "Jerry's Sentimental Journey" on MOON Radio. "The last time I serenaded Father Bondi was at his retirement picnic at the Saratoga County Fairgrounds in 1996 when 4,000 people turned out to show their appreciation for all he had done for our parish and our village," mused Crouth. "At that time I was afraid I'd get a lump in my throat if I made eye contact with Father while singing one of his favorite songs called 'Happy The Man.' Today I just had an overwhelming sense of peace." Another longtime parishioner on hand to pay her respects yesterday was Agnes Pompa who grew to admire and respect Bondi's sincerity and hospitality over the decades. "He genuinely loved his church and his parishioners. He was always there for us," Pompa said. Others recalled Father Bondi's love of The Sport of Kings — a draw that brought him to the Saratoga Race Course each August long after his retirement. For these and other reasons, Bondi will be remembered as a joyful and a powerful soul. His own words, recorded at the time of his retirement, said it best: "God made us a family. We need one another. We love one another. We forgive one another. We work together. We play together. Together we serve our God. Together we hope for Heaven." Memorial contributions in memory of Father Bondi may be made to St. Mary's School, 167 Milton Ave., Ballston Spa, NY 12020.

