



Home

Msgr. O'Neill celebrated as 'shepherd to his people'

February 6, 2026

by Christina Leslie

Msgr. Edward M. O'Neill, whose philosophy was "If you always have the best in mind for the people, that is what matters the most," was celebrated at his Mass of Christian Burial Jan. 10 in St. John Vianney Parish, Colonia, the faith community which flourished under his leadership for 23 years of his 55-year priestly service. The retired priest died Jan. 6 at the age of 83.



A native of Downpatrick, Ireland, Msgr. O'Neill was born in 1942 to the late Mary (Walls) and John O'Neill. He was educated by the Sisters of Mercy and the De Salle Brothers, later entering the Dominican Order as a Brother. Following his studies in St. David's College, North Wales; the Divine Word Seminary, Roscommon, Ireland, and St. Patrick's Seminary, Maynooth, Father O'Neill was ordained to the priesthood for the Divine Word Missionaries Dec. 18, 1971, at Sligo Cathedral by Bishop Dominic Conway.

Father O'Neill served as a missionary in Papua New Guinea before being assigned in Bordentown. In 1975, he was assigned to St. John Vianney Parish, Colonia; he was incardinated into the Diocese of Trenton in 1981 and assigned to St. Andrew Parish, Avenel, as well as Chaplain to Rahway State Prison and Avenel Diagnostic Treatment Center.

In 1985 he became pastor at St. John the Evangelist Parish, Lambertville, before returning to St. John Vianney as pastor in 1995. He was named a Chaplain to His Holiness in 2004, retiring from active

Msgr. O'Neill celebrated as 'shepherd to his people' - Catholic Spirit - Metuchen, NJ
ministry in 2018. Under the direction of the Irish-born priest, the parishes in which he served enjoyed the benefits of a newly constructed preschool building and re-furbished sanctuary (St. John Vianney); a major restoration to mark the centennial of the church (St. John the Evangelist); and the appointment of a chaplain at the state prison in Rahway.

In his homily, Father James W. Hagerman, pastor of St. Bernadette Parish, Parlin, recalled his friend and fellow priest's declaration that only two things were certain: taxes and eternal life. "Msgr. O'Neill said, 'Our faith journey in Christ begins as we are carried into the church to our Baptism, and our faith journey ends as we are carried in for our funeral,'" Father Hagerman said. "The prophet Isaiah speaks powerfully, and God made you and I a tremendous promise: on this mountain I will destroy death forever."

Pausing at times to regain his emotions, Father Hagerman continued, "Monsignor said to me, 'Let my celebration be one of rejoicing, for I lived such a wonderful life.' I have to admit that last night [during the priest's Mass of Commemoration] some of us did not do that so well. God challenges us to assist one another as we journey to him."

The two had met when Msgr. O'Neill and then-Deacon Hagerman were assigned at St. Andrew Parish, Avenel; the deacon's father approached the Monsignor to ask he watch over his son. During the course of their friendship, travel and conversations, the two shared both pleasant and difficult times.

"He always prayed for his parishioners, had a deep devotion to pray the breviary and to pray to Our Lady, which he got from his father," Father Hagerman said. Sharing the Monsignor's philosophy of service, he quoted, "Do what is best for the people. It is not about you, it is about the people you shepherd."

With a nod to the place of Msgr. O'Neill's birth, the liturgy's music included a heart-felt rendition of the Irish hymn "Lady of Knock" and a farewell which bid the deceased "May the road rise up to meet you. May the wind be always with you. May the sunshine warm you always 'till we meet again."

Msgr. O'Neill is survived by his brother Sean O'Neill, his sister Mary O'Hara and many loving nieces and nephews. He will be interred in his native country on a future date.

Before the final farewell, Father Jonathan Toborowsky, diocesan administrator, noted Msgr. O'Neill had begun his ministry as a missionary in Africa before travelling to the United States. "He understood the worldwide dimension of our faith to our brothers and sisters," Father Toborowsky noted, "no

Msgr. O'Neill celebrated as 'shepherd to his people' - Catholic Spirit - Metuchen, NJ
matter they were of different colors and different peoples. Who could imagine, from his childhood in
Ireland, he could fall in love with Colonia, New Jersey.



© 2026 - The Catholic Spirit
P.O. Box 191 • Metuchen, NJ 08840
(732) 529-7934
news@catholicspirit.com

Login | powered by eCatholic®