Ray Hill

Memories of Lifetime Sustain Retiring Pastor

THE REV. Basil A. Ormsby on Thursday will celebrate his final Mass as pastor of old St. Teresa's Catholic Church, ending a 36-year career as patriarch of South Buffalo. To his flock, he was a priest in priest's clothing, uncompromising in matters of faith but with a deep understanding of human frailties.

A spare, often solitary figure, he was "the church" at Seneca and Hayden, and generations came to him to be baptized, married and, with increasing frequency of late, to be buried.

And suddenly, summer had turned to fall. But with five daily Masses to be celebrated — not counting those funerals — the time passed unnoticed until that day when the telephone call came from the chancery. Basil Ormsby had turned 75, the age of mandatory retirement for priests.

Rev. Basil A. Ormsby

Like Paul, he had run the race and fought the fight. And now, with the sense that everything was being done for the last time, the memories — the good ones and the unpleasant ones — flowed.

They were of the little boy sitting in the kitchen, worried that his newspaper editor father was spending too much time on the job, who asked his mother, "Do you think if I promised our Lord that I would become a priest that he would see to it that Dad would come home on time?"

And there were memories of other boys, too . . . of more than 100 of them who served as altar boys at St. Teresa's and were gently nudged by him into the priesthood, many of them with his financial help. They were the children of the original parishioners from County Clare who came here to scoop and mill grain and found fulfillment when their sons took Holy Orders.

REMEMBERED, TOO, was the meeting with Mother Teresa of Calcutta and feeling as though he had been in the presence of a real saint. And there was the day in the Vatican when he concelebrated Mass alone with Pope John Paul II. A reminder of that arrived last week when the pope, who traditionally uses the pronoun "we," sent Father Ormsby a gift and a note that read, in part, "I bestow my blessing on you."

There was the private luncheon in the White House with Ronald Reagan that had been arranged by a mutual friend. And there was a little "dust-up" with Harry Truman, too.

It came when one of Father Ormsby's former altar boys had been wrongly accused of stealing and was about to receive a dishonorable discharge from the United States Army. The priest went right to the Oval Office to complain in person. "OK, OK, OK," said the feisty president, "he's got an honorable discharge."

He wondered where the time had gone. Was it 36 years ago that a young priest reported at St. Teresa's to the much loved Monsignor Leo Toomey, "the bishop of South Buffalo"?

There were also times of agitation and aggravation. The loss of the Latin Mass was the former and it was . . . well, prayerfully and dutifully accepted.

Then there was the young couple who came to his rectory to discuss having their "trial marriage" blessed. To Basil Ormsby, the conservative traditionalist, that was a real aggravation, and with saintly control he was able to tell the couple he couldn't find the rite they were seeking in the missal.

FOR ABOVE all else, Basil Ormsby never saw the church as a democracy or as an institution that would change to conform to changing morality.

But his legacy to St. Teresa's is a debt-free parish and its own grammar school with its no-frills religious education. The son of John Stanly Ormsby, the late editor of the Niagara Gazette, Father Ormsby found the will and had the financial means to assist the parish in sustaining its school.

There are no retirement plans. It came up too quickly for that. "I will always be a priest," he says. "You cannot retire from Holy Orders."

With a deep faith, he says he will await a call from God. "That's something that happens, and when it happens," he says confidently, "you really know it. You can hear the call."

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