November 11, 2026
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Rhode Island Catholic

FAITH, FAMILY & LIFE SINCE 1875

Father Robert Perron, pastor, longtime advocate

for the poor, dies at 67



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With Bishop Thomas J. Tobin by his side, Father Robert Perron blesses baby Benjamin Pettis during his installation as pastor of St. Joseph Parish in West Warwick in August 2014. “He has great experience of leading parishes,” said Bishop Tobin at the installation Mass, noting Father Perron’s involvement in many initiatives that help people in need.

RHODE ISLAND CATHOLIC FILE PHOTO





Posted Thursday, August 6, 2020 8:30 am

By RICK SNIZEK, Executive Editor

PROVIDENCE — Father Robert Paul Perron, the director of the diocesan Society for the Propagation of the Faith and pastor of St. Michael Parish, who was known for his compassionate service to the less fortunate over the course of his ministry, died on Saturday, Aug. 1, in South Providence. He was 67.

Father Perron was installed in 2016 as pastor of St. Michael Parish, where he embraced its diverse Hispanic, Haitian and Hmong congregation. He was also very involved in the adjacent Bishop McVinney School.

In a statement posted online, the school mourned his sudden passing, expressing gratitude for the time the pastor spent interacting with staff and students.

“The Bishop McVinney School community mourns the loss of a devoted priest and a dear friend to our faculty and students,” the school posted.

In addition to the weekly classroom visits where he would play his guitar, sing to the students and share stories from his life’s experiences, the priest they called “Father Bob” also led the school in First Friday Mass each month.

“He had a special way of communicating with the youngest and the oldest, and he played a very important part in teaching our children what it means to be a Christ-follower and a peacemaker. Father Bob used his many God-given talents to engage with his community here in South Providence. Bishop McVinney School grieves together with those who consider him family, those who were nurtured by

his spiritual guidance, and those who witnessed his passion and his commitment to his faith-filled mission. We are grateful for his time with us, and pray together as a school community for his eternal rest."

Father Perron was born on June 28, 1953, in Central Falls, a son of the late Alfred and Florence (Lefebvre) Perron. He attended St. Matthew School, Central Falls, and then Our Lady of Providence High School Seminary, Providence.

In preparation for the priesthood, he studied at Our Lady of Providence Seminary in Warwick, and then was selected to participate in the prestigious Basselin Scholar program at the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., where he completed both his bachelor's and master's degrees in philosophy. After theological studies at St. Bernard Seminary in Rochester, New York, where he earned two additional master's degrees in theology, he was ordained a priest on June 6, 1981, at Our Lady of Good Counsel Parish, West Warwick, by Bishop Louis E. Gelineau.

Father Perron first served as assistant pastor at St. Lucy Parish, Middletown, from 1981-86, during which time he co-founded — along with Sister Susan Jenkinson — Lucy's Hearth, a 24-hour place of respite for women and children rendered homeless due to crisis and economic hardship. The social service organization, which was incorporated independently of the parish, operated out of an unused convent on St. Lucy property, which it leased for $1 a year, with the assistance of parish volunteers for the first few years.

After more than 35 years, the organization continues to serve vulnerable families on a larger scale with shelter and programming to help foster independence to prevent future homelessness.

Father Eugene McKenna, who was appointed pastor at St. Lucy Parish in 1983, and served for 25 years until retiring in 2008, told Rhode Island Catholic that from his first assignment at St. Lucy Father Perron showed compassion for people in need.

“He could motivate people and start things and organize things,” he said, remembering the charisma, energy and desire to improve the lives of the less fortunate his former assistant exhibited both then and throughout his ministry.

He recalled how Father Perron worked with Sister Jenkinson to lead the St. Lucy Parish Social Action to co-found Lucy’s Hearth in the unused parish convent. The Hearth, a 24-hour emergency and transitional shelter, was served entirely by St. Lucy staff and parish volunteers in the beginning before the organization grew beyond the parish into the larger social service organization it is today.

“Lucy’s Hearth has always been a source of pride for generous benefactors in Newport County who have supported its expansion for 36 years,” Father McKenna said. “Father Bob’s love and compassion were contagious and remain a model to this day.”

Jenkinson, who worked with Father Perron for the first three years of Lucy's Hearth, recalled how anxious and driven he was to get the project off the ground.

"There was no place at the time for women with children, no place for families who were homeless to go," she said.

St. Lucy's Convent happened to be empty at the time and it afforded the perfect space to provide a nurturing environment for families who were displaced.

"He was a tireless advocate for those that didn't have a voice and he was happy to do it," Jenkinson said of Father Perron. "His whole life was dedicated to serving people who were poor, who were disadvantaged, minority communities. He was just a good man."

After leaving St. Lucy Parish in 1986, Father Perron was assigned to serve as assistant pastor for two years at Our Lady of Mercy Parish, East Greenwich. From 1988-1992, he served as a Team Ministry member at St. Michael Parish, Providence. In July 1992, he was appointed pastor of Notre Dame Parish, Central Falls, serving until 1997.

Father Perron served as administrator at Holy Spirit Parish, Central Falls from 1997-2001, before being appointed to serve as pastor for the next six years at All Saints Parish, Woonsocket. From 2007-2009, he served as administrator at both St. Joseph Parish and Sacred Heart parishes, both in Pawtucket. From 2009-2014, he was appointed as pastor of Holy Family Parish, Pawtucket, and then as pastor of St.

Joseph Parish, West Warwick from 2014-2016. In 2016, Father Perron was appointed as pastor of St. Michael Parish, Providence, where he was serving at the time of his death.

In addition to his parish duties, Father Perron was Dean/Vicar Forane for Deanery VII (1990-92); Deanery XII (2003-07); and Deanery I (2013-14).

Through the years Father Perron also worked tirelessly with the Pawtucket Soup Kitchen and with the diocesan Cathedral Square Ministries, assisted by a large group of dedicated individuals representing the Breadlines Ministry and other aid organizations.

From 2014 until the time of his death, he served as the diocesan director of the Society for the Propagation of the Faith.

“The Society is our connection to the poor throughout the world,” Father Perron told Rhode Island Catholic in an interview for a story announcing his appointment to the position, expressing appreciation for his new appointment and the opportunities it would bring to help those in need on a global scale.

The Society for the Propagation of the Faith is one of four Pontifical Mission Societies around the globe. It provides ongoing support for the pastoral and evangelizing programs of the Catholic Church in Africa, Asia, the Pacific Islands and remote regions of Central America.

In his role as director, Father Perron sought to bring awareness of diverse global cultures to the classrooms of Catholic school students across the diocese, both through informative packets he would develop and design himself, including the colorful artwork adorning them, as well as through educational outreach in the pages of the diocesan newspaper.

Father Perron was no stranger to offering his assistance to hard hit regions of the world, and also to those in need on the city's streets.

For the past decade he also served as director of Providence Haiti Outreach, which was founded more than 25 years ago by Father Francis Giudice, with the support of the late Pat Pezzelli, a founding board member.

Father Perron traveled with the board to the island nation of Haiti, helping to facilitate the network of schools the organization continues to support along the South Coast in the towns of Jacmel and Marigold.

During one visit, he told Rhode Island Catholic in an earlier interview that he and his group were held up by a gunman who demanded he turn over the camera he was using to photograph their missionary work. After some tense moments, Father Perron offered to pay a sum of money to get back the photo card from the camera rather than agree to suggestions by members of his group's security team that they would draw their own weapons and retrieve the camera by force.

Father Perron, a talented artist, was also widely known for producing colorful paintings depicting Haitian culture that he sold to raise money in support of Providence Haiti Outreach.

“He was a mentor for all of us. He spiritually uplifted us, myself included. He always knew what to say to make us feel inspired,” said Susan Whipple, daughter of co-founder Pat Pezzelli and a longtime board member who recently succeeded Father Perron as director.

“He was a champion for the poor,” she added, noting how under Father Perron’s direction the organization’s St. Dominique School (The Pat Pezzelli Memorial School) grew from a 200 student elementary school to a 700 student Pre-K through high school campus.

“His journeys to Haiti inspired him to new levels each time — new buildings, a computer lab, cafeteria, outdoor spaces and whatever was requested he made it happen.”

Whipple said Providence Haiti Outreach will dedicate their annual Golf Tournament fundraiser, to be held at Kirkbrae Country Club on Sept. 22, in Father Perron’s memory.

Several people who knew Father Perron posted messages online indicating their sadness at his passing.

“Such a tragic loss for the Diocese of Providence, St. Michael Parish and Bishop McVinney School. May he Rest in Peace. Fr. Bob has left a wonderful legacy of service,” wrote John O’Leary.

Paula Hurteau said that Father Perron was her former pastor at All Saints Parish and was the host pastor for Our Lady of Victories School when she served there as principal.

“When I became Administrator of the Greater Woonsocket Catholic Regional Schools he was always there for advice! I still remember him on 9/11 when he came to Good Shepherd to lead the school in prayer with his guitar! He will be missed by all who knew him! Rest In Peace Fr. Bob!” Hurteau wrote.

Nancy Tomassi Gallo wrote, “So sad and heartbreaking. You will forever be in our hearts. Rest in peace Fr. Bob, you will be missed.”

Calling Hours will be on Thursday, August 6, from 4 – 7 p.m. at the O’Neill Funeral Home, 3102 Mendon Road, Cumberland. A Concelebrated Mass of Christian Burial will be offered on Friday, August 7, at 9:30 a.m. at Holy Spirit Parish, 1030 Dexter Street, Central Falls, with a private burial to follow.

Assistant Editor Laura Kilgus contributed to this story from our Online Desk.

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