

Priest traveled the globe to spread the Word

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — As a boy attending Holy Family School, Charles Erb eagerly awaited the arrival each Friday of *The Little Missionary*, a children's magazine detailing life in the church's overseas missions.

Sparked by those periodical deliveries, the zeal for missionary life has led Father Charles G. Erb, now 83, to preach the Word of God from the snowy slopes of Alaska to the sun-drenched regions of West Africa. "There's always a few dopes who get enthusiastic," commented Father Erb.

Like a modern-day St. Paul, Father Erb has lived an adventurous life, traveling afar sometimes at his own whim and sometimes at the whim of others. After eight years at Holy Family School, his first major excursion was to Girard, Pa., where he attended high school and college with the Society of the Divine Word, a missionary order that he would eventually join.

Following college graduation, Father Erb studied theology and ethnology at St. Gabriel's Seminary outside of Vienna, Austria. "I was ordained in 1933 when Hitler came to power," Father Erb wisecracked. "I figured there wasn't room for two geniuses, so I left."

The young cleric applied his talents as a



Father Charles G. Erb (far left) is shown with members of the last parish to which he was assigned in Battor, Ghana. The priest spent eight months with this congregation, culminating 42 years of preaching the Gospel throughout the West African nation.



Pope John Paul II greets Father Erb in Rome, where the priest visited before returning to America this year.

teacher at various Divine Word seminaries in the midwestern United States and as prefect of discipline in the order's houses in Techny, Ill. and East Troy, Wis. He also edited *The Little Missionary*, the magazine that had inspired him in his youth, from 1935-1942.

At his seminary graduation, he had expressed a desire to do missionary work among the Chinese, the Filipinos, or America's southern blacks. None of his



Father Erb baptizes Joachim Hus Avayeme as the child's family looks on.

requests were fulfilled, but by the late 1930s, he told his superiors he wanted to go to Africa.

Unfortunately, the other "genius" Father Erb had left behind in Europe had plunged the world into war, and when the United States entered the conflict, Father Erb enlisted as an Army chaplain in 1942. When asked about his war experiences, the priest rolled his eyes and said: "Well, we won anyway."

The chaplain's contribution to the war effort included with a year and a half in the Aleutian Islands in Alaska. Due to a dearth of chaplains, the priest ministered to Protestants, Jews and Catholics.

In 1944, Father Erb went with the illustrious 42nd Division (Rainbow) Artillery to the European theater. The carnage he witnessed filled him with horror, but undoubtedly, the most terrible sight he saw were the piles of bodies strewn about the concentration camp at Dachau, Germany, liberated in May of that year.

Among the camp's survivors were 1,100 Catholic priests. "I met my own classmate," Father Erb recalled, noting that the man was the first priest he encountered at Dachau. A *Catholic Courier-Journal* article dated Nov. 29, 1945, quoted Father Erb's imprisoned classmate: "What happiness when we recognized our American confrere! We cried and laughed with joy and relief." The chaplain wound up taking two fellow SVDs back to the society's seminary in Bichofshofen, Austria.

After the war, Father Erb pursued graduate studies in anthropology at Harvard University in Boston. "I was bored stiff," he said, explaining his continuing dream of

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Masks that Father Erb brought from the United States during a visit with his family proved a hit with Ghanaian children. Lively humor marked the rapport the priest had with the natives.

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