

Priest keeps his chin up in battle with Alzheimer's

By Mark Zimmermann
Catholic News Service

POTOMAC, Md. — For the past five years, Father Joseph Byron has waged a quiet but very public battle with Alzheimer's disease.

He first noticed some difficulty speaking during the mid-1980s. A battery of tests in 1988 confirmed that he had Alzheimer's — a disease with no known cause and no known cure.

Father Byron recalls telling each of his three brothers about the diagnosis. "We'd have a crying session, (but) not too long," he said. "That was it, and we go on."

Alzheimer's is only the latest challenge faced by Father Byron, 67.

As an infantryman in World War II, he was wounded by a shrapnel burst. "I look back (and think), why was I not just terribly afraid? But it was just something to be done, and we did it," he told the *Catholic Standard*, newspaper of the Washington Archdiocese.

As the 1960s drew to a close, Father Byron was among a group of 39 local priests disciplined by Cardinal Patrick O'Boyle for publicly dissenting from Pope Paul VI's 1968 encyclical *Humanae Vitae* ("On Human Life").

He did not regain his priestly faculties until 1971, after a Vatican congregation took up an appeal on his behalf and that of 18 other dissenting priests.

"We lost a lot of people. I lost a lot of friends," Father Byron said, commenting on those who left the priesthood over the controversy.

He also recalled a traffic accident in a Washington suburb that left a little girl trapped in a vehicle. Father Byron walked to the site and held the hand of the child's mother while she awaited word on her daughter, who later died.

"There was nothing to say, (we could only) just wait," he said. He later told a friend that consoling the mother in those anxious moments was the hardest thing he ever had to do.

Now the struggle with Alzheimer's takes center stage. In a 1989 open letter in 1989, he disclosed his illness to the 5,000 members of Our Lady of Mercy Parish in Potomac, Md., where he was



pastor. Following experts' advice, he remained busy and active for as long as possible.

As the Mass became the centerpiece of his life, he would spend long hours each day preparing his homilies on note cards. When preaching and reading the Gospel became too hard, he had to rely on a deacon for help. Even

celebrating Mass became difficult. "Even to get the simplest Mass, I have to do an awful amount of time getting ready. Even the things (I'm) reading on a page, sometimes I look at a phrase, and it's like I never saw it" before, Father Byron said.

"The one thing I do not want to do is to get ..." Father Byron began, pausing to reach for the word expressing a condition he sought to avoid.

"This is another word I never can get, so I wrote it (down)," he said, getting up from his chair to retrieve a slip

of paper. On it were two carefully printed words: "DE-PRESSED." "DE-PRESSION."

"Depression," Father Byron said. "The one thing I don't want to do is that. If I feel it coming on, the first thing I do is pray, and the Lord has been good to me."

In such moments, he often leaves the rectory at Our Lady of Mercy, where he is now senior priest, to do errands. He can no longer drive, but can take the bus and subway on his own. Parishioners often give him rides or join him for dinner and a movie.

At one Saturday afternoon Mass in February, Father Byron seemed to take special joy in the sign of peace, slowly walking up and down the church's main aisle. He smiled happily as he shook hands with the people he has served for nearly 10 years.

One week later, the moment he feared the most happened. Celebrating Mass, he lost his place several times. Friends in attendance cried as they watched him struggle.

Immediately afterward, he met with Monsignor John Enzler, the pastor, to say he could no longer celebrate Mass by himself. He asked the younger priest to concelebrate with him the next day.

"I wanted to die," Father Byron said later, betraying a sadness he fights to keep in check.

Again, he turned to prayer: "I asked the Lord to let me not be ... I asked him that I not be ... that thing I can't say ... depressed about it."

But before that first concelebrated Mass was over, "I was completely, completely at peace," Father Byron said. "I was saying to myself I can still say Mass as long as I need to, for a while, it's just that I won't be in control."

He continues to concelebrate Masses, make Communion calls, attend meetings and help however he can. Daily he prays for many special intentions: his fellow priests, his family, his friends, his parishioners. And he says a simple prayer for himself.

While Father Byron can no longer give the homilies, Monsignor Enzler said the priest speaks through example.

"Here's a man who has given himself completely to the will of God. At every step of his illness, he has been willing to give it over to the Lord," Monsignor Enzler observed.

"That has been, for the priests, staff and parishioners, his greatest sermon."

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