

Monsignor marks 99 years with music, humor

By Lee Strong
Senior staff writer

PITTSFORD — Monsignor Francis B. Burns has a spirited sense of humor.

Appropriately, the fact that he celebrated his 99th birthday Nov. 19 seems a kind of practical joke on those people who had a hard time believing he'd even live long enough to be ordained in the first place.

He's outlived them all.

Indeed, Monsignor Burns observed, his insurance company even had to pay off on his policy.

"That's another incentive for living all those years," he quipped.

Monsignor Burns now lives at the Sisters of St. Joseph Convent Infirmary, 4095 East Ave., where he continues to get around needing only the help of a cane. He regularly entertains his fellow residents with his piano playing.

For more than 50 years, however, he was a resident of the former St. Bernard's Seminary, where he taught a variety of courses — including moral and pastoral theology, and social work — from 1928 until St. Bernard's closed in 1981. A member of the class of 1922, he is the oldest living graduate of St. Bernard's.

The priest numbers among his former students many of the priests who currently serve in the Rochester diocese. He also taught the late auxiliary Bishop John McCafferty; retired Bishop Joseph L. Hogan; and Bishop Dennis Hickey, who, he observed, "was a whiz."

Bishop Matthew H. Clark, another former St. Bernard's student, was sent to Rome to study before he could take one of Monsignor Burns' courses. "Bishop Clark escaped me," the priest remarked with a smile.

Monsignor Burns staged his own "escape" from ill health on his way to the priesthood.

Born in 1894, he grew up as a parishioner of the former St. Patrick's Cathedral, attending St. Patrick's School before moving on to St. Andrew's and St. Bernard's seminaries.

But while studying at St. Bernard's in 1918, he caught a flu virus that would claim the lives of millions of people worldwide.

The priest himself hovered on the edge of death. But his doctor tried a newly developed vaccine, and Monsignor Burns lived. He was so weakened and so frequently ill, however, that his ordination was eventually delayed from 1919 to 1922.

Even then, Monsignor Burns acknowledged, diocesan officials were unsure what to do with him.

"I was a health liability," he explained.

He was temporarily assigned to serve as the chaplain for the Sisters of St. Joseph



S. John Wilkin/Staff photographer

Monsignor Burns delighted residents of the Sisters of St. Joseph Convent Infirmary with his piano playing during a Nov. 19 birthday party celebrating his 99th birthday.



at their Hemlock Lake house, which the order used as a convalescent facility.

When he proved up to that task, Monsignor Burns was assigned in 1922 to St. Mary's Parish in Elmira, where he inherited the organ, adult and children choirs. His musical abilities helped him fill that role and, after he moved to St. Mary's Church in Auburn in 1925, he worked with the choir in his new parish.

During his six years in ministry, he was never sick — a surprise both to him and his diocesan superiors, he acknowledged. In fact, when he was first assigned to Elmira, he contacted an insurance agent about sickness insurance. Although he kept the policy in force until he was 65, he collected only \$25 over the years for time lost due to illness.

In October 1927, Bishop Thomas F. Hickey, who had been Monsignor Burns' pastor at St. Patrick's, summoned him to Rochester from Auburn to ask if he would be interested in going to Rome for advanced studies to prepare for teaching at St. Bernard's Seminary.

"Apparently he knew me so well, he had it in mind all along that I should teach, but he always wondered about my health," Monsignor Burns recalled.

In response to the bishop's query, however, Monsignor Burns said he did not want to return to the seminary because he had bad memories of how ill he was there. He added, nevertheless, that he would do what the bishop wanted him to do.

Bishop Hickey waited until the following summer, when, just a few weeks before the school year began in 1928, he told Monsignor Burns he would be teaching moral theology at St. Bernard's Seminary.

Over the years, Monsignor Burns also taught social work, pastoral theology and a variety of other courses. During World War II he sometimes taught six courses, in

addition to directing the seminary library. Yet he still remained in good health.

"The boys (in the seminary) used to complain that I never got sick," the priest observed. "They never got a holiday."

To help with his teaching, Monsignor Burns spent many summers studying at graduate institutions and even at the New York School of Social Work. Meanwhile, the St. Bernard's program continued to grow and develop, so that the seminary was among the first in the country to offer courses in social work and on the church's social encyclicals, he reported.

In addition, priests from other dioceses came to St. Bernard's to study. "We really were progressive," he remarked.

In addition to his teaching duties, Monsignor Burns was active in the Rochester community, serving on the boards of such social-service groups and agencies as the Mary Cariola Children's Center, the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children and the School of the Holy Angels. He also assisted and eventually became rector of the Star of the Sea Chapel in Greece — until it was supplanted by St. Mark's Parish.

Even after retiring in 1968, Monsignor Burns continued teaching courses at St. Bernard's until the seminary closed. When the building was sold to Eastman Kodak Company, he took up residence at the Holy Apostles rectory in Rochester before moving to the SSJ Convent Infirmary.

When asked about his longevity, Monsignor Burns simply attributed it to "the will of God."

"How else can you explain the fact that here I was a complete liability, and I'm still alive?" he asked.

"I can still get about, thankfully," he continued, gesturing to his neck, "Everything's fine from here up. God's been good to me."



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