

Auburnian named a Knight of the Black Madonna

By Lee Strong
Senior staff writer

AUBURN — In the musical, *Man of La Mancha*, one song describes Don Quixote as the "Knight of the Woeful Countenance."

"Woeful" is not an apt description for Dr. Joseph Karpinski, whose very voice sparkles with good humor.

But the St. Hyacinth parishioner is a "Knight" who clearly follows Don Quixote's example in his charitable concern for others.

In ceremonies last Nov. 19-20, at Jasna Gora Monastery in Poland, Karpinski was installed as a Knight of the Black Madonna — the patron saint of Poland. He is only the second American given the title, which was created in 1685.

The honor was bestowed on the Auburn resident because he has personally delivered hundreds of thousands of dollars of medical supplies and overseen the distribution of more than \$230 million in relief aid to Poland over the past 30 years.

And at an age when many people look forward to retirement, Karpinski is planning still more working trips to Poland — on top of the 38 or 39 excursions (even he is not sure) he has already made — as he continues an active oral surgery practice in Auburn and Geneva, delivers lectures around the world, and even finds time and energy to ski.

The Auburn native acknowledged that he was surprised by the honor. Indeed, he was informed of the award a scant two weeks before the ceremony.

"That's the way the Poles operate," Karpinski said. The doctor added that Polish President Lech Walesa, who was made a Knight of the Black Madonna in 1992, said to him, "Don't feel bad. They only told me three days before."

Although Karpinski's contacts with Poland did not begin until later in life, he has lived his Polish roots since childhood. His father — one of the founders

of St. Hyacinth Parish — ran a store in Auburn's Polish section. As a boy, Karpinski worked in the store and quickly learned Polish so he could serve customers. He later improved his Polish by listening to records.

Karpinski's first trip to Poland did not come until he was married. He met his late wife, Honey, while both were at Jersey City Medical Center — he for his residency, she to complete her nursing studies. They were married July 6, 1956.

When Karpinski first began his practice, Honey joined him as his nurse — an arrangement that lasted only three days. "She said, 'I'll stay married to you, but I won't work for you,'" he recalled with a chuckle.

The couple traveled to Poland in 1957. But the planned nine-day visit was cut short at only six days because of the situation they found there.

"We ended up at hotels where there was nothing to eat, just herring and potatoes," Karpinski recalled. "You'd go into restaurants and all they'd have was herring and hard-boiled eggs. It was a very depressing situation."

He also learned that the country's medical situation was as equally depressing. Thus in the ensuing years, when he made trips to Poland for conferences and to teach, he'd pack his suitcases not with clothes, but with medical supplies. He soon built up a network of contacts in the United States to get supplies, along with Polish officials who were willing to let him get the much needed supplies into Poland.

In 1979, officials of the Polish American Congress Charitable Foundation Medical Commission asked Karpinski



Provided photo
Dr. Joseph F. Karpinski (center) stands with his sons, John (left) and Paul, during his installation in Poland as a Knight of the Black Madonna.

to oversee the distribution of medical supplies being sent to Poland.

Those trips and supplies became especially important during the days of martial law in Poland in the early 1980s, he noted. Because factories ceased production of goods, medical facilities had to rely on foreign countries for even basic supplies. Karpinski, for example, estimated that during those days he brought in nearly one million syringes.

Over the years that he was developing his practice and undertaking his many trips to Poland, Karpinski and his wife had six children. All are grown up now, with four of them in dental careers, one a lawyer, and one beginning medical school this fall.

Meanwhile, he and Honey were active at St. Hyacinth Parish, and in the local community. Both were in demand as

speakers nationally and internationally. Indeed, Honey even spoke several times in China.

Honey died April 23, 1991, following a battle with cancer. In her honor, the family has built a memorial chapel at the Carmelite Fathers Retreat House in Korona, Fla. The chapel is scheduled to be dedicated in the next few months — as soon as the Polish provincial of the Carmelites can make the trip to Florida.

Karpinski himself is planning another trip to Poland in the next few weeks. He wants to distribute more supplies and check on material being sent, and continue to fulfill his duties as a Knight of the Black Madonna.

"It's an ongoing thing," Karpinski explained. "I guess I like to help people." Don Quixote would be proud.

THOUGHTS TO CONSIDER



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