

SENIOR LIFESTYLES

U.S.'s first permanent deacon still active at 87

By Paul A. Barra
Catholic News Service

CHARLESTON, S.C. — His strong hands and one severed finger are the only clues that 87-year-old Joe Kemper is a carpenter.

But the gold and velvet dalmatic he wears as he goes about his duties on the altar at St. Mary's Church in Charleston is a sign of his other responsibilities.

Kemper is a permanent deacon, the first of three men ordained in the first class of permanent deacons in the United States. He will celebrate the 25th anniversary of his ordination in August.

He now serves in the oldest Catholic parish in the Carolinas, founded in 1789, but his journey began in western Canada.

One of 11 children, Deacon Kemper was a U.S. citizen whose father tried unsuccessfully to homestead on the route to Alaska. His family lived a peripatetic life, moving back to the lower 48 states and around the country.

Deacon Kemper worked the first half of his adult life as a cabinet maker, an aircraft factory worker during World War II and a mechanic. He and his wife Eleanor raised four children and saw a good bit of the country themselves.

But life changed when Eleanor died of colon cancer in 1958 after suffering for years. The children were grown by then, and Deacon Kemper was carpenter and handyman at a New Jersey parish.

There he met the late Msgr. Charles L. Elslander, who got Deacon Kemper interested in the lay apostolate and in the mission churches of the South.

He eventually moved to South Carolina and became an invaluable aide to



At age 87, Deacon Joe Kemper continues in active ministry at St. Mary's Church in Charleston, S.C.

Charleston Bishop Ernest L. Unterkoefler, who died in 1993.

"I was proud to work with him," Deacon Kemper told *The New Catholic Miscellany*, newspaper of the Charleston Diocese. "He did so much for the poor and underprivileged."

Franciscan Sister Maigread Conway, pastoral administrator of Our Lady of Mercy Parish, met Deacon Kemper around 1965 and was impressed by his intellect and goodness of heart. "It was an edification to me to see a lay person give his life over so extensively to the diocese, especially at that time," she recalled.

The future deacon worked around the statewide diocese, repairing and rebuilding rectories and churches, schools and hospitals.

"He was so marvelous with wood, he put the high school back in shape," said Msgr. Robert J. Kelly, rector of Charleston's Bishop England High School, of Deacon Kemper's work.

"And he is spiritually gifted too," he said. "He has given his life to the church. Joe Kemper is a gift."

Bishop Unterkoefler, who was instrumental in establishing the permanent diaconate in the United States, was named its first director when the diaconate was restored by Pope Paul VI in 1967. Even though his carpenter friend did not have enough formal education to qualify for the diaconate, the bishop told Deacon Kemper that the pope wanted him to be ordained.

Deacon Kemper was sent to St. John's University in Minnesota for two years. He was ordained with Alan Bohner and Wilber Darsch on Aug. 10, 1971, the feast of St. Lawrence, deacon and martyr.

Bishop Unterkoefler proceeded alphabetically through the minor orders and vows of obedience, according to the deacon, but when he got to the laying on of hands, he ordained him first of the three.

For 22 of his 25 years as a permanent deacon, he has worked closely with Msgr. John A. Simonin, pastor of St. Mary's. "He is really devoted to the diaconate and I have always been happy to allow him to do everything a deacon is permitted to do," the pastor said.

"If I didn't have Joe, I don't know what I'd have done," he added.

Betty Hendricks, secretary at St. Mary's, said he still serves at daily Mass and twice on Sunday, in addition to leading the Saturday night rosary and Lenten stations of the cross. He also does carpentry work and repairs for the parish.

Deacon Kemper, who has eight grandchildren and five great-grandchildren, credits the Holy Spirit with his years of service.

"Someone had to be guiding my hands," he said. "I had no control over any part of my life. I was just the hammer or the saw; he did all the work."

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