

WORLD & NATION

Priest claims cardinal readying 'to go home'

By Tracy Early
Catholic News Service

NEW YORK — Cardinal John J. O'Connor of New York is prayerfully preparing "to go home," Father Benedict J. Groeschel of the Franciscan Friars of the Renewal told a congregation at St. Patrick's Cathedral April 21.

Delivering Good Friday meditations, Father Groeschel commented briefly on the absence of the cardinal, who has delivered the meditations in previous years, and said he was "desperately" ill.

Father Groeschel, director of the New York archdiocesan Office of Spiritual Development, asked for prayers for the cardinal and for his doctors.

Joseph Zwilling, the cardinal's spokesman, reported that Auxiliary Bishop Robert A. Brucato, substituting for Cardinal O'Connor at the Easter Sunday Mass, "said he brought the cardinal's greetings to the congregation, and would bring the congregation's greetings back to him."

But there was no written statement sent as Cardinal O'Connor had sometimes said to be read when he could not be present for a Mass, Zwilling said.

Cardinal O'Connor, who had surgery for removal of a brain tumor Aug. 31 and underwent about five weeks of radiation, regained some strength at the beginning of the year and visited Pope John Paul II and other officials at the Vatican Feb. 9-11.

But he then became markedly weaker, and Zwilling told Catholic News Service in a telephone interview April 24 that Cardinal O'Connor was no longer involved in the work of the archdiocese.

Zwilling said he had not seen the cardinal in recent weeks, but kept informed about his condition primarily by talking with Msgr. Gregory Mustaciuolo, his secretary, and Eileen White, a lawyer who is the cardinal's special counsel.

They reported April 22 that Cardinal O'Connor was not bedfast, and using a cane was able to walk to a sitting room and to his chapel, Zwilling said.

He said the cardinal remained "extremely weak," had "diminished" hearing because of treatments, and was unable to read because of eye problems.

Visitors read to Cardinal O'Connor, and he can and does watch television and converse on the telephone, Zwilling said, adding that visitors were mostly members of the cardinal's family, especially his sister, Mary Therese O'Connor Ward.

Zwilling said the time Cardinal O'Connor

Elian

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a reconciliation between Elian's father and the Miami Gonzalez family.

Msgr. Vallina said that Cuba's dictator Fidel Castro has placed "agents" in constant surveillance of the father, Juan Gonzalez. "Castro is manipulating the father. Castro is our enemy," he said.

"Reconciliation means that the father of Elian gets together for several days with the rest of the family so that the father is free from fear of the Castro government," said Msgr. Vallina.

"It is impossible for Elian to go back to Cuba," the monsignor said. "He would not live with his father. He would be a puppet of a government that doesn't believe in the family."

"His mother left a testament. She died so that the mother could be free. Elian was saved by dolphins, by fishermen, by the hand of God," the priest said. "We now ask that God act so that things turn out for the best and that God's will, not Castro's, be done."

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Contributing to this story were Lou Panarale and Agostino Bona in Washington.

nor could stay on his feet varied, but he was able to celebrate Mass in his chapel most days and prayed the rosary.

The secretary also serves as driver, and has taken the cardinal on some outings, Zwilling said.

Cardinal O'Connor's last appearance at a cathedral Mass was March 5, when he presided but did not celebrate or preach, and his last meeting with staff was March 7. His column in the archdiocesan weekly, *Catholic New York*, last appeared March 16.

Cardinal O'Connor's doctors have never given the public any reports about the tumor they removed, results of follow-up tests or any information about his weakening condition.

When a reporter asked Cardinal O'Connor in October if he had cancer, he said he was not using the word because his doctors had not used it.

Zwilling, asked in the CNS interview if Cardinal O'Connor had cancer, said he could not comment or talk about the cardinal's instructions to him about handling news of his illness.

Pope keeps 'spiritual force'

PARIS (CNS) — Pope John Paul II's neurological disease is making him more and more a "prisoner in his body," but the pope's mind and spiritual gifts remain intact, French Cardinal Jean-Marie Lustiger said.

Cardinal Lustiger, archbishop of Paris, made the comments in an interview with the French weekly newspaper *Le Journal du Dimanche*. It was published as the pope — at times looking drawn and tired — led a heavy schedule of Easter activities at the Vatican.

"It is known that his illness is leading to a progressive paralysis of the body, but his spiritual faculties remain intact," Cardinal Lustiger was quoted as saying.

"This man, who used to be an athlete, is becoming more and more a prisoner in his body. But he maintains a spiritual force, an intellectual capacity and a memory which are extraordinary for someone who will be 80 next month," the cardinal said.

The pope suffers from a neurological disorder widely believed to be Parkinson's disease, which causes progressive deterioration of the nervous system and



Reuters/CNS

Pope John Paul II leads the Way of the Cross around Rome's ancient Colosseum on Good Friday, April 21.

decreasing mobility. The pontiff has walked with difficulty following hip surgery in 1994.

Cardinal Lustiger said the pope was handling his physical limitations well, and that he continued to carry out his papal mission "faithfully and courageously, like a good servant."

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