

Priest approaches milestone birthday

Mike Latona/Catholic Courier

BRIGHTON — A recent Monday afternoon found Father Joseph M. McDonnell deeply immersed in prayer, reading a worn booklet containing the Liturgy of the Hours. However, he graciously interrupted this ritual — which he repeats several times per day — to spend a few minutes being interviewed in his room at McAuley Residence.

"I won't tell the truth," he quipped. However, Father McDonnell did admit to the truth about a big personal milestone looming on the horizon. He is among a small handful of Rochester diocesan priests who have lived to the age of 99 — and, in just a couple of months, on Jan. 12, he would become the first to cross the 100-year mark.

Despite this special status, Father McDonnell remains matter-of-fact about his longevity.

"I don't think about it. You just take the days as they come along," he said.

Father McDonnell is currently the oldest living diocesan priest, having inherited that status upon the March 11, 2002, death of Father Benedict Ehmman at age 97. Father Ehmman was nine days older than Father McDonnell.

Father McDonnell will celebrate 75 years in the priesthood this coming June. More than half of that time was spent at St. Michael's Parish in Newark, Wayne County, where he served as pastor from 1957 until his retirement in 1975. He continued as pastor emeritus for 24 more years at

SeniorLife

St. Michael's before relocating in 1999 to McAuley Residence, located at the Sisters of Mercy Motherhouse.

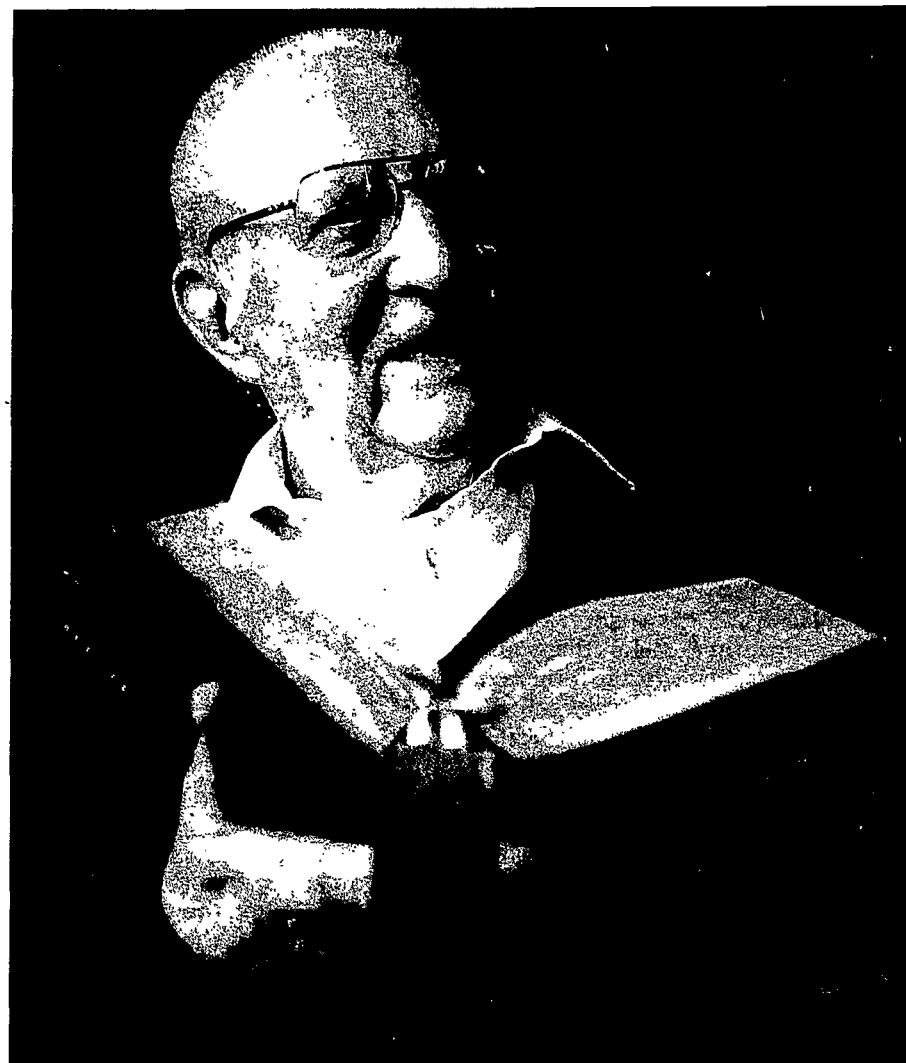
Father McDonnell is a native of St. Mary's Parish in Bath. He attended St. Andrew's and St. Bernard's seminaries, and was ordained in 1930 by Bishop John O'Hern at the former St. Patrick's Cathedral in Rochester.

He served as assistant pastor at Rochester's Holy Rosary Parish from 1930-38; as assistant pastor at St. Mary's Parish, Rochester, from 1938-41; and as chaplain at the State School at Industry, a reformatory for boys, from 1941-44.

His first pastorate was at St. Gabriel's, Hammondsport/St. Patrick's, Prattsburg, from 1944-50. He then was pastor for seven years at St. Ignatius Loyola in Hornell, until settling in for his 42-year stay at St. Michael's in Newark.

Father McDonnell declines to show favoritism toward any of his priestly assignments, saying, "I liked all the years of my priesthood. People are the same wherever they are... you're given a job, you go to it and handle it as you see it ought to be handled, that's all."

The Catholic Church is largely unchanged from his perspective, but he acknowledged that the Second Vatican Council brought forth some important revisions such as Mass being said in English instead of Latin. "Thank God for that," he said.



Mike Crupi/Catholic Courier

Father Joseph McDonnell, who will turn 100 on Jan. 12, flashes a smile for Mercy Sister Fran Wegman at Brighton's McAuley Residence, located at the Sisters of Mercy Motherhouse.

He also had positive words when it was mentioned that Rochester Bishop Matthew H. Clark has done a good job. "I agree with you there," he stated.

Deb Housel, a parish liaison in the diocesan Office of Pastoral Planning, said she and Father McDonnell became fast friends after she began as a staff member at St. Michael's Parish in 1989. She credited Father McDonnell for supporting her efforts as a woman moving into parish leadership roles.

"If I ever had to talk at church, he would tell people 'Sit down and listen to the kid,'" Housel said. "If they complained to him that the bishop would let a woman do something, he would say 'My job is to follow the bishop, and it's the pope's job to take care of the bishop'... that there should be no complaint in what the bishop has been given the authority to decide."

Housel also noted that Father McDonnell gave regularly to numerous charities — "probably a list of about 20 ministries" — and was linked so strongly to St. Michael's School that the school hall has been renamed for him. Indeed, Father McDonnell became visibly animated when he recalled the students at both St. Michael's and Holy Rosary schools.

"Certainly I like kids. Who wouldn't enjoy children?" he remarked with a big smile.

According to Housel, Father McDonnell said daily Mass at St. Michael's until 1998, and drove a car and played golf until a year or so before that. These days, Father McDonnell enjoys bantering with the folks who care for him at McAuley Residence. He continues getting regular visits from close friends, particularly Housel and Father Ed Steinkirchner, who was pastor of St. Michael's in Newark from 1980-95. The trio has often enjoyed dinner outings together: "The Brighton Inn knows him well," Housel remarked.

Despite being almost totally deaf, Father McDonnell continues to exhibit his zest for life via his boisterous singing.

"You can hear him loud and in tune, all the way down the hall," said Mercy Sister Mary Fran Wegman, director of community care services at McAuley Residence.

But on Jan. 12, the tables will be turned when Father McDonnell's well-wishers do the singing — in the form of a heartfelt "Happy Birthday" for their centenarian priest.

"He's a good friend: Not just a good priest, but a good friend," Housel said.

Someone's hungry



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