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Editor's Note: This article has been updated to include information about Fr. Howard Gray's service to NCR.



Fr. Howard J. Gray is pictured in this 2012 file photo. He died May 7 at St. Joseph Mercy Oakland, a hospital in Pontiac, Mich., of injuries sustained in a car accident. He was 87 years old. (CNS/courtesy Jesuits Midwest Province)

Jesuit Fr. Howard J. Gray, a national and international known scholar on Ignatian spirituality, died May 7 from injuries received in an automobile accident in Michigan.

The 87-year-old priest taught, spoke and conducted retreats around the world, helping people encounter Jesus through the Eucharist and the spiritual exercises of

St. Ignatius of Loyola.

Officials of the Midwest Province of the Jesuits said Gray died at St. Joseph Mercy Oakland, a hospital in Pontiac, Michigan.

Gray was one of a group of Jesuits and laypeople who helped bring back one-on-one personally directed retreats in the 1960s. His writings on Ignatian spirituality made him a popular speaker and retreat leader eagerly sought by parishes and organizations around the world.

Gray was a member of the NCR board of directors from 1989 to 2003.

Pat Waide, a fellow board member, said that Gray was a thoughtful participant at meetings and was gifted at conflict resolution. He had a reputation as a peacemaker.

“Howard's interpersonal manner and tone of speaking forced calmness and reconciliation in board meetings,” recalled Waide. During one conflict, which resulted in a board chairperson’s resignation, “Howard stepped up at the Board meeting to calm everyone and seek a solution.”

At Georgetown, Gray worked to reconcile different ethnic and sexual orientation groups requesting club status at the university.

Fellow Jesuit and NCR board member Fr. Julio Giulietti, a research fellow of the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs at Georgetown, was a friend of Gray’s for 39 years. He described Gray as “a man many Jesuits sought out to seek counsel.” Gray saw himself as “a sinner called to be a companion of Jesus.”

Gray was a gifted counselor because “he was aware of his limited humanity, sinfulness and distance from God while at the same time feeling the closeness of the son of God.”

In a talk he gave at University of Detroit Mercy on the 12th anniversary of 9/11, Gray emphasized the importance of interreligious dialogue. Through interreligious dialogue, he said, participants can come to realize that God, expressed via many traditions, “is more deeply loving than we can imagine.”

He said that a church open to the world can best express this reality of God.

“We do not live our faith in a gated community where only the initiated can come in,” said Gray. “It’s a swinging gate or it’s not the church.”

The province described the priest as an avid reader who could seamlessly incorporate themes, references and quotes from novels, poems and spiritual books into his lectures and reflections.

In his seven decades as a Jesuit, Gray authored more than 60 articles and essays on Ignatian spirituality, ministry and the apostolic mission of Jesuit high schools and universities. He also received six honorary doctorate degrees.

In a 1993 address in Buffalo to the Conference of Major Superiors of Men, Gray explained that the "wisdom to know true solidarity from false solidarity" and the method of planning commitments "in the light of human solidarity" will help religious orders understand their futures.

Acknowledging that the issues facing religious communities are many, Gray called on attendees to consider what they were doing about aging membership that were asked to meet new demands. "What shall we do about a day jammed with immediate problems when we are supposed to be men of vision and agents of transformation?'' he asked.

While some believe religious life today is in "a kind of dark night of the soul,'' Gray said, "I believe that we are also pointed at a moment of new grace.''

He said there are two reasons for religious and their leaders to pursue a spirituality of solidarity.

"First, it engages us with the decision Jesus made and presented as a constitutive element in following his way. Second, a spirituality of solidarity gives us a way of interpreting and responding to the needs of our times,'' he said.

"Being in solidarity as Christ was in solidarity means being in solidarity with the people of today,'' said Gray.

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Born May 23, 1930, in Cleveland, Gray entered the Society of Jesus in Milford, Ohio, in 1948. He was ordained at the Jesuits' Colombiere Center in Detroit in 1961. He pronounced final vows as a Jesuit in 1965.

Much of his time as a priest was spent within the Jesuit community, teaching and serving as an academic administrator and working in the formation of priests. But at 66, he left that work to become the first director of the Center for Ignatian Spirituality at Boston College, serving from 1996 to 2001. He returned to the order's Detroit Province where he was rector of the Jesuit community and assistant to the president for university mission at John Carroll University in suburban Cleveland.

In 2007, he moved to Georgetown University, becoming assistant to the president for special projects, a position he held for a decade. In his final year at the university, he served as interim vice president for mission and ministry.

He earned bachelor's and master's degrees from Loyola University in Chicago. He also earned licentiates in philosophy and theology from West Baden College in Indiana. He studied for a doctorate in English at the University of Wisconsin in Madison between 1965 and 1968, where he also was a Knapp Fellow.

Gray also served as rector of Weston Jesuit School of Theology in Massachusetts from 1976 to 1982 and was dean of the theologate for a year before becoming the provincial of the order's Detroit Province, a post he held from 1983 to 1989. He also served for a period as vice president of the Conference of Major Superiors of Men in the 1980s.

A funeral was planned for May 12 at Gesu Parish in University Heights, Ohio, a Cleveland suburb. Burial was to follow in All Saints Cemetery in Northfield, Ohio.

[NCR correspondent Peter Feuerherd contributed to this article.]