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Archdiocesan Priest, Rev. John P. Smyth, Dies

Smyth was Executive Director of Maryville Academy in Des Plaines, Ill.



Chicago, IL (April 22, 2019) – Rev. John P. Smyth, retired priest of the Archdiocese of Chicago, passed away on April 16, 2019. He was 84 years old.

Smyth was born on June 5, 1934, in Chicago, and attended St. Genevieve Catholic School, DePaul Academy and Quigley Preparatory Seminary, all in Chicago. He graduated from the University of Notre Dame in Indiana in 1957. Smyth was offered a playing position for the National Basketball Association but instead pursued a vocation to the priesthood and received his bachelor's degree in Theology at the University of St. Mary of the Lake/Mundelein Seminary in Mundelein, Ill., in 1962.

Smyth was ordained to the priesthood on April 28, 1962, by Albert Cardinal Meyer, archbishop of Chicago, and celebrated his first solemn Mass at St. Genevieve Catholic Church in Chicago on April 29 of the same year.

Screenshot of Archdiocese of Chicago's obituary for Fr. John Smyth, at https://bit.ly/2ZSB8hZ



by Michael Leach

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Art Contreras who grew up at Maryville Academy, once one of the largest child care facilities in the U.S., is as tough a 70-year-old man as you're likely to meet. He cried as we spoke on the phone. "I lost my father," he told me. "I lost my father."

Fr. John Smyth, 84, had died the night before on April 16 at Loyola University Medical Center in Maywood, Illinois, after aneurysm surgery and pneumonia. John would never return to Maryville, his only home as a priest for 57 years, where he gave his life to thousands of kids and their families every day without exception. These "Maryville kids" — now in their 70s, 60s, 50s, 40s and 30s — were not only grieving for their father but hurting over headlines that focused not on his unparalleled life but on an accusation made three months previous that they all knew could never be true.

"Rev. John Smyth, former head of Maryville Academy accused of abuse, has died," announced WGN. The newspaper stories turned on allegations made by two " convicted felons" who had been teenagers at Maryville's Scott Nolan Center, a lockdown facility two miles from the grounds where Fr. Smyth, then in his late 60s, lived. Smyth, who walked with a cane after two hip replacements, had never, not once, been accused of anything like this in all his years as a priest in a world of children.

Regina Butler Dziewior was 12 when Fr. Smyth came to Maryville in 1962. "He was a father to me ever since," she says. "He would never harm a child. No one who knew him believes these allegations, and I will go to my death defending his reputation. Sadly, his legacy, regardless of when he is exonerated, will always end with that part of the story. He is the kind of man, like Cardinal Bernardin or Pope John Paul II, who would have forgiven his accusers. If life was fair that would have been 'the rest of the story.' "

Related: Chicago priest removed from ministry during review of abuse allegations

John is dead now and, like many priests whom dioceses now put on their lists of "accused sex offenders" even after their deaths, he isn't here to defend himself. Thanks to decades of negligence by the hierarchy and its fear-filled attempt to now make up for its sins, someone could concoct a story that Fulton Sheen touched them inappropriately, and that would be part of his story, too.

So let's get on with the real story.

Fr. John Smyth was to Maryville what Fr. Edward Flanagan was to Boys Town (squared), to children in our time what St. John Bosco in the 19th century was to his, and to disadvantaged families from Chicago what Mother Teresa was to those written off by society in Kolkata. This is not an exaggeration but an understatement. John poured out his life for children, especially those with three strikes against them, and many thousands of them, now successful adults, will tell you that Michael Jordan's monument at the United Center is an ornament compared to the statue of Smyth and the flying child near the entrance of Maryville.

John, like that statue, was larger than life. I was a priest at Maryville with him in the late '60s. We lived and worked together 24/7 with four other priests, two dozen Sisters of Providence, and 600 boys and girls from kindergarten through high school. My forever memory of John is the day we welcomed an 8-year-old boy to his new home. The boy was trembling. John took the boy's hand into his. It was like a goldfish cradled in a first baseman's mitt. The boy looked up to John and exclaimed, "God's hands!"

John was 6-foot-5, an all-American basketball star at Notre Dame and a third-round draft pick of the St. Louis Hawks. He chose to become a priest instead. The only sports accomplishment I ever heard him brag about was the NCAA record he set that still stands today: most personal fouls. "I couldn't run, couldn't jump and couldn't shoot," he joked, "but God gave me two good elbows and I used them." If he had a flaw it was a fervor to win that made Michael Jordan's look like a low-grade fever. But the truth is, and what even his detractors would tell you: all John ever wanted to win as a priest was a good life for his kids.

In my time Maryville was an old Catholic movie with Bing Crosby and Ingrid Bergman and "Our Gang" with attitude. We were like an extended Swiss Family Robinson, cut off from the world, with the opportunity and ability to create a better one on the spot where we lived. Even though he wouldn't become executive director until 1970 John was the priest-leader and I tried to follow his example. I remember the great snowstorm of 1967 when scores of cars were buried on River Road and John led a platoon of high school kids to shovel them out, and me a posse of eighth-graders. We housed and fed the passengers for three days.

When Chicago was burning from race riots John drove one of our school busses with kegs of milk and food to the dangerous West Side where stores were in ashes or had their doors barred shut, and he helped feed families who could not get out of the neighborhood. He started "Midnight Basketball" in Altgeld Gardens, a housing project run by gangs in a prairie on the farthest frontier of the archdiocese, driving three hours each way every Friday night, and turned it into a community unifier. Whenever he got a phone call in the middle of the night from a kid in trouble, John got out of bed and drove his beat-up Ford to the rescue. Over the years he would marry the alumni, baptize their kids, marry theirs, go to their parties and gatherings, say Mass at their funerals, and never say no. None of these things ever made the newspapers.

In the 1970s Maryville became a financial drain on the archdiocese, and the buildings, just like the crumbling school in "The Bells of St. Mary," were beyond repair. Cardinal Cody was ready to sell the 100-acre property to real-estate developers for a fortune or raze it and turn it into a profitable cemetery. What John needed to accomplish in order to keep Maryville and its children from losing their home was impossible.

So he exceeded expectations.

With help from his friends from Notre Dame, John put Maryville in the black without a dime from the archdiocese. He mowed the fields himself so the kids could play ball. He initiated an annual Chuckwagon Day to raise funds, and it soon became the largest one-day fundraiser in the state of Illinois. He replaced the old three-story dorms with modern residential cottages where the children participated in managing their own homes. They went to local schools, took part in chores, menu planning, grocery shopping, and budgeting under the supervision of a live-in married couple, and supported by a team of social workers and counselors. Maryville was the model for child care facilities everywhere.

The number of Maryville volunteers soared into the hundreds. Cubs and Bears and Blackhawks left their lairs to come and play with the kids, rock stars like Pete Townshend gave multiple concerts to raise money for new programs, and philanthropists, politicians and celebrities flocked to Maryville to "stoop down and lift up a child."

The spirit of "the City of Youth" in Des Plaines, Illinois, soon spread to Chicago like a New Testament breeze. Over the next two decades Smyth expanded its mission to

more than 18 inner-city sites, caring each year for more than 16,000 neglected, abused and abandoned youth. These centers treated cocaine-addicted newborns, toddlers with complex medical needs, teenagers with mental illness and substance-abuse problems, teenage girls at odds with the law, victims of prostitution, child pornography and sexual abuse, children damaged from family violence, and included a state-of-the-art psychiatric hospital for children up to the age of 21. Fr. Smyth never had to refer to "Catholic social teaching"; he embodied it.



A torch is lit Dec. 11, 2008, the eve of the feast day of Our Lady of Guadalupe at the Shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe on the grounds of Maryville Academy in Des Plaines, Illinois. (Catholic New World/Karen Callaway)

John was devoted to the Blessed Mother and in 1988 at the request of Hispanic Catholics initiated the building of a shrine to Our Lady at Guadalupe on the Maryville grounds. It was just one of those things that John would say "yes" to and then do, but who could have known that the first weekend of Our Lady's feast days on Dec. 11 and 12, more than 300,000 worshippers would line up for miles, mostly on foot, coming from as far back as the South Side of Chicago, wrapped in winter coats, carrying babies and banners and roses to lay at the foot of Mary's statue. For Fr. Smyth in 1988, it was just another good day. According for Fr. Esequiel Sanchez, rector of the shine since 2016, who celebrated John's funeral Mass in its new Chapel of St. Joseph, thousands come to its five Masses every Sunday, and last December 270,000 pilgrims again brought their roses and petitions to the shrine on her feast. What started as a request to Fr. Smyth became the largest shrine to Our Lady of Guadalupe outside Mexico City, and draws more than 1 million pilgrims each year.

By the late 1990s the world of child care turned upside down. Fr. Smyth felt a responsibility to take on severe cases, rejected, hardcore kids who were different from the kids who came to Maryville in the past. The Illinois Department of Children and Family Services, the courts, the state — nobody wanted them. Maryville was the only safety net left. John's belief that there is no such thing as a kid who could not be saved left him no option. A suicide at one of the homes and two alleged sexual assaults between students led to a newspaper investigation. Maryville became the scandal *de jour* and John its lightning rod. Illinois Gov. Rod Blagojevich, never a friend to Smyth or Maryville, jumped on the political bandwagon and withdrew state funding to Maryville even though it was picking up the state's pieces, and the governor declared that foster care was the best way to care for wards of the state. For the good of Maryknoll's mission Fr. Smyth resigned. Blagojevich become a ward of the State when he was later impeached for corruption and sentenced to federal prison for 14 years.

John was almost 70 and could have retired. Instead he accepted an offer to become president of Notre Dame College Prep in Niles, Illinois. His vision was to produce a new generation of Catholic ethical leaders. Always relying on the Blessed Mother,

one of the first things he did was build a shrine to Our Lady of Lourdes at the entrance way of the school, similar to the one at the University of Notre Dame — only three feet taller and three feet wider.

John also established the Standing Tall Charitable Foundation to provide scholarships to underprivileged children. A local newspaper once reported that you might catch him on a Chicagoland golf course a couple dozen times a year, but not golfing. "I hate golf. I don't golf. I stand there like an idiot and shake everybody's hands." Why did he do it? "To raise $1.4 million to send 200 kids to college."

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John was the recipient of innumerable awards during his lifetime, including a special award for promoting child safety presented to him by former President Ronald Reagan, and a Laureate in the Lincoln Academy of Illinois for his work in the field of social services, the highest honor an Illinois governor can bestow upon a citizen of the state. The award he valued most was the University of Notre Dame's prestigious Laetare Medal; established in 1883 the Laetare Medal has been worn only "by men and women whose genius has ennobled the arts and sciences, illustrated the ideals of the Church, and enriched the heritage of humanity." Other recipients include President John F. Kennedy, Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, Sr. Thea Bowman, Supreme Court Justice William J. Brennan, and Catholic Worker founder Dorothy Day.

But no honor is greater than the gratitude of thousands of children who will always know him as Father. Because of them, I believe, the archdiocese suspended its investigation so this spiritual giant beloved by alumni and admired by the priests of Chicago, could have a public funeral on the Maryville grounds. On April 26 more than a thousand people crowded the Chapel of St. Joseph. Fr. Sanchez's sermon was eloquent in charting John's spiritual quest. "Mission accomplished!" he concluded, and the congregation rose as high as "the flying child" and cheered.

As I write this a few days later, the archdiocese has not given formal closure to the accusation I believe they too believe is spurious, and four sources tell me they will not until the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services finishes its investigation. That could take a day or months. The Des Plaines police department ended its probe weeks ago "based on the lack of any credible evidence or testimony from the accusers."

Fr. Smyth's legacy is not the buildings he put up or the millions he raised, but the family he built and the values he gave his kids by example, and that so many of them have embraced: compassion, kindness, generosity, gratitude, dedication, devotion to Mary, and a desire to follow Jesus and his teachings. I'm sure they hear him now as he whispers to them the words that Jesus confided to his disciples before his death: "I will not abandon you as orphans. I will come back to you."

[Michael Leach is publisher emeritus of Orbis Books and editor of NCR's Soul Seeing columns.]