News



Fr. Norman Fischer a veteran Lexington, Kentucky, priest and the president of the National Black Catholic Clergy Caucus, died July 14 at age 50. (BCM/Centre College)

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Fr. Norman Fischer Jr., a veteran Lexington, Kentucky, priest and the president of the National Black Catholic Clergy Caucus, died in Delaware July 14. He was 50 years old and had been on sabbatical.

The news was first announced by Lexington Bishop John Stowe, who noted that Fischer was at the Catholic Heart Work Camp in Wilmington at the time of his death.

Fischer celebrated 24 years as a priest this month and spent his final weeks in New Orleans at the Institute for Black Catholic Studies, where he was a student in the continuing education program.

No cause of death was announced, but Fischer's family was known to have a history of heart problems.

"We gather today with a profound sense of loss … with more questions than we have answers," Stowe said during a standing-room-only memorial Mass July 15 at St. Peter Claver Catholic Church in Lexington, the historically Black parish where Fischer had served since 2006.

"[There's] a lot of heaviness in our hearts," Stowe said. "A lot of concern about so many people that have been touched by Fr. Norman's life, by his unique way of touching people and reaching people and healing people and involving people and bringing grace to their hearts."

Raised in rural Perryville, Kentucky, Fischer answered the call to the priesthood after attending Centre College in Danville, where he majored in psychology and art. He received a Master of Divinity from Mundelein Seminary in Illinois and was ordained in 2000 as the first Black or Filipino priest in the Diocese of Lexington. It was during his seminary years that he first became involved with the IBCS, where he took graduate courses in Black Catholic studies.

After news of his passing reached the community in New Orleans, a series of memorial services were held on the campus of Xavier University of Louisiana, where his former classmates gathered to remember his wide-reaching legacy.

"Norman taught us a lot about holding hospitality," said IBCS development coordinator Resurrectionist Fr. Manuel Williams during a prayer service at St. Katharine Drexel Chapel July 17.

"Not just welcoming people into our homes or our places of worship or our schools … but welcoming folks into your physical presence. Into that wealth of attention, and that gift of things so precious: time, that he took with everyone he met."

In addition to his service at St. Peter Claver, where he recently headed up a $3.5 million campaign to construct a new church edifice, Fischer served for more than 18 years as chaplain at Lexington Catholic High School. There, he was known for his gregarious personality and founded the school's first Black affinity group.

His ecumenical impact in the Lexington region was also widely felt, including efforts for racial healing in partnership with local ministers, churches and schools. Fischer was also active in the charismatic movement, which brought together Christians of different stripes — including recently during the Asbury revival in 2023, where Fischer was noted as one of the Catholic participants.

Outside his pastoral ministry, Fischer was also a talented singer and visual artist. He exhibited several recent paintings earlier this year at the Hockensmith Fine Art Editions Gallery, where his work remains available.

"His faith and love of others was like wildfire," said gallery owner John Stephen Hockensmith. "He was my friend and mentor. We shared inspiration. My love for him will burn forever."

For his work and impact in the community, Fischer was named this summer as one of several recipients of the 2024 Grassroots Black Leadership Award from the Blue Grass Community Foundation.

Local and statewide civic leaders are among hundreds expressing shock at Fischer's death this week, including Kentucky Gov. Andy Beshear and Lexington mayor Linda Gorton.

"Father Norman Fischer had a smile that would light up the room, and an ongoing passion to serve people," Gorton said in a statement. "We had many opportunities to talk, and [I] loved his great sense of humor and ability to connect with others. His passion for people and service will be missed."

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On the national scene since his formation for the priesthood, Fischer was a former member of the National Black Catholic Seminarians Association, a constituent organization of the NBCCC. He was elected president of the latter organization in September 2023, and was likely the first Afro-Asian American to serve in the role.

"Fr. Fischer's commitment to our mission and his tireless work for justice and equality have been a beacon of inspiration for us all," said NBCCC vice president Fr. Kareem Smith in a statement July 15.

"His leadership, compassion, and wisdom guided our organization during this difficult time in our nation's history, and his absence will be deeply felt by everyone whose lives he touched."

Among Fischer's survivors are his parents, and he was remembered with a livestreamed memorial Mass at Lexington Catholic High July 18.

The Diocese of Lexington has also announced that visitation services will take place at St. Peter Claver noon to 6 p.m. July 27 and 3:30 to 8 p.m. July 28.

A funeral Mass will be celebrated by Bishop Stowe at 11 a.m. July 29 at the Cathedral of Christ the King, followed by interment at Calvary Cemetery. Memorial gifts in Fischer's memory can be made to the St. Peter Claver Church Building Fund.