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Minnesota priest, mission pastor in Guatemala parish dies

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Msgr. Gregory T. Schaffer (Courtesy New Ulm diocese)

Msgr. Gregory T. Schaffer, a priest of the New Ulm, Minn., diocese and pastor of the diocese's mission parish of San Lucas Toliman in Guatemala, died May 24 in St. Paul, Minn., from lymphoma/cancer. He was 78.

Schaffer was known nationwide for his work at San Lucas Toliman, where he was pastor for 48 years.

"He's instilled in me the true meaning of mission," said Kathy Huebert, who worked with Schaffer for more than 30 years as the U.S. coordinator/administrative assistant for the mission. "He was a wonderful man to work with."

Schaffer was born on Jan. 29, 1934, in St. Paul. After ordained a priest in 1960 in New Ulm, he was an associate pastor and taught religion at a high school. He enjoyed teaching and parish work so much that he thought it was his life's work.

But around that time, New Ulm Bishop Alphonse J. Schladweiler was looking for volunteers for the diocese's sister parish in Guatemala, and in 1963, Schladweiler appointed Schaffer as diocesan missionary to San Lucas.

Schaffer did not know much Spanish or much about mission work, but the people at San Lucas were patient teachers, he told *NCR* in a 2011 interview.

In 1984, Pope John Paul II conferred upon him the honorary title of "Monsignor."

Everything the mission does is based on the expressed felt need of the people. The mission now has establishments such as a medical clinic, dental clinic, elementary school of about 600 students, women's center, library, sustainable housing, and an apprenticeship program. The mission also helps people buy land to produce food as well as coffee, a cash crop. The Juan Ana Coffee that is sold by the mission is named after Schaffer's parents, John and Ann.

He could talk about anything (except himself -- he was humble, Huebert said), from theology to farming to family, Huebert said.

People from the U.S. were and still are exposed to the work at San Lucas by visiting it. Right from the beginning, the mission started hosting visits from people in the U.S., Schaffer said, so that they could "come to know a people in a culture other than their own as well as people struggling with the process of poverty."

Visiting the mission 15 years ago was how Fr. Brian Oestreich of the New Ulm diocese met Schaffer.

He had "true humility" that all priests are invited to have, Oestreich said, and he had a "phenomenal" intellect. Schaffer could be deep in conversation about Catholic teaching while passing buckets of concrete for a mission project.

Mix Catholic social teaching with *Humanae Vitae* and that was Schaffer, said Oestreich, pastor of St. Michael the Archangel in Madison, Minn., and St. John the Apostle in Appleton, Minn.

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"Fr. Greg is irreplaceable," he said.

Schaffer received many awards. Among them was the Order of the Quetzal, the highest honor bestowed by the Guatemalan government, given for his long-lasting service and commitment to the people of San Lucas. He accepted the award in the name of the people of San Lucas.

"I really kind of feel like I owe 'em," he said in an NCR interview last year, "because they really have made this a wonderful, wonderful life and service that I've been struggling with. They've put up with all of my mistakes and put up with all of my errors and all of the humanity that we all live, you know. I've tried to learn from them and be of any kind of service I could."

After visitations and funeral Masses in Minnesota, Schaffer's body will be flown to San Lucas Toliman for a final Mass and burial in the San Lucas Toliman cemetery.

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