

Fr. Gary Steven BURNS 54 USA
* November 4, 1939 Jackson Hole, WY

+ May 22, 1994 Millvale, PA

The only child of a Protestant couple, Gary had to travel a long and arduous road to reach the priesthood. His father died in a car accident when he was still in his infancy and his mother passed away of a brain tumor when he was nine. Then the grandmother who had taken in the waif died two years later. No wonder the sensitive boy thought that he was cursed. He then began to live with aunts and uncles, first in Seattle, Washington, and later in Utah. While in Seattle, he attended a Catholic school for the seventh and eighth grades and felt fascinated by the religious lifestyle.

Passed on to relatives in Utah, where he was surrounded by Mormons, he did his high school in Salt Lake City and became a Mormon. After graduating, he began to work for the Federal Government and served successively in Alaska, Denver and Washington, DC, in physical therapy. Throughout these years he also did part-time college level studies in three different colleges and universities.

In 1971 he converted to the Catholic Church in Arlington, VA. Eight months later, at the age of 32, he entered the Spiritan collegiate seminary at Bethel Park, PA and earned his bachelor's degree at Duquesne University. He made his novitiate at Dorseyville, Pittsburgh and was able to pronounce his first vows on September 23, 1976 at Chicago. He did his theology at Chicago Theological Union.

For his mission internship he went to Puerto Rico and then to the Kettle Moraine Correctional Institution, where he earned a diploma in physical therapy. In 1981 he was assigned to Old Saint Mary's, Detroit, to assist in parish work as a deacon while also doing jail ministry. This was to become his specialty.

On April 24, 1982 he was ordained a priest at Duquesne University and then returned to Old St. Mary's as an associate pastor. His main task, however, was to serve prison inmates at the McComb County jail as a member of the

archdiocesan Team for Justice in prisons. He proved to be, in the words of auxiliary Bp. Thomas J. Gumbleton of Detroit, "the right man in the right place." His work was greatly appreciated by prisoners and personnel alike: "a very caring and concerned person whose assistance is almost unbelievable," said the jail administration.

Gary became very interested in death row ministry and early in 1987 went to pay a visit to Angola State Penitentiary in Louisiana. The auxiliary bishop of Detroit who oversaw the work of prison chaplains had paved the way for his visit by writing "I do not know anyone who is doing it better"—the it being "prudence and Christian charity in prison ministry." In October of the same year, he was appointed chaplain at Angola.

It was an immense 18,000 acre complex of seven prisons for some 5,000 inmates, fifty of them on death row. Once again the warden expressed his great appreciation for his zeal and devotion to the inmates and the personnel families living on the prison grounds.

The prevailing atmosphere of emphasis on punishment and doing very little to rehabilitate the prisoners worked on his nerves, but he valiantly tried to offset that climate. He got two laymen to conduct the first Catholic retreat ever given in Angola. It went so well that these two considered it the "most satisfying" of all the retreats they had conducted and they volunteered to continue this prison ministry.

Gary did not limit his ministry to the 1500 Catholic prisoners, but also gained the esteem of others, notably the Shi'a Muslim inmates and their Iman, himself a prisoner.

Although he performed his ministry in an "exceptionally satisfactory way," it was wearing him down. His health had never been robust and a chemical imbalance in his blood required a long treatment. When it was over, he received

a leave of absence, during which inter alia he did rehabilitation work, studied pastoral counseling at Loyola College and did ministry at St. Joseph House, Philadelphia. New health problems requiring frequent visits to specialists plagued him and he went to reside at the Bethel Park, PA, community, doing incidental ministry while undergoing treatment.

In June 1993 he took up ministry at St. Anthony's, Millvale, PA, while resuming also his pastoral studies at Duquesne University. When this parish merged with St. Ann's in May 1994 to form the new Holy Spirit parish, the bishop officially appointed him its associate pastor. The new parish opened on May 22 and he was scheduled to celebrate the 9:00 A.M. opening Mass. One hour earlier, a procession began to wend its way to Mass from St. Ann's to St. Anthony's. But Gary was not its celebrant. Feeling unwell, he had returned to his room and died there of a heart attack. His only living relative, a Catholic cousin and her family attended the funeral. The spacious church was almost filled to capacity. Interment took place at the Spiritan section of the parish cemetery in Shaler Township.

An unassuming and gentle man, he loved interpersonal contacts and excelled at dealing with the less fortunate. Although his great emotional sensitivity could sometimes tend to depress him, it also made it easier for him to identify with the oppressed and help them with total dedication.