

Fr. John A. ("Casey") BURNS 83 USA

*September 6, 1915 Kaylor, PA

+December 12, 1998 Natchitoches, LA

The first-born son in a family of eight boys and six girls, he did his elementary schooling and one year of high school at Chicora PA, before entering Duquesne University's Prep School, but transferred to Cornwells in 1930. Being a very good student, he graduated there with an average of A- in 1936. He made his first vows on August 25, 1937, at Ridgefield, CT. In the final year of his senior seminary studies at Ferndale, CT, he was ordained there on June 29, 1942. Meanwhile he had earned a B.A. and a B.D. Sent to Duquesne, he earned also a M.A. in 1943. His final evaluation at the end of his formation period described him as tall, stocky, neat, in good health, pleasant, easy-going but reliable and responsible.

His first assignment was to St. Joseph's House, in Philadelphia in 1943, but in 1945 he became a military chaplain to the troops occupying Japan.

Released in 1947, he spent a short time teaching English at Duquesne University before being appointed director of the Cornwells School and dean of studies. In July 1951, while coming back from a fishing trip with his father and a diocesan priest, an out of control car struck them. He had a broken kneecap, managed to get out of his car and found the other two lying on the road, his father looking dazed and gray but saying he was otherwise okay, and the diocesan priest with his head split open and copiously bleeding. Fortunately, a doctor passed by a few minutes later and gave first aid, before an ambulance took them to Mercy Hospital in Pittsburgh. There the doctors diagnosed that his father had a cracked vertebra and the secular priest's injury did not include a

broken skull. "Casey's" own kneecap would require three months to heal but he would regain almost full use of his leg.

He was then transferred to St. John's Parish in Tucson, AZ, as assistant to its pastor until in 1959 he became a staff member of St. Emma's Military Academy, Powhatan, VA. Four years later he was transferred to the West as a faculty member of Gerard High School at Phoenix, AZ.

In 1969 his energy took a new direction. From this time on he worked in pastoral ministry in Spiritan parishes, beginning with St. Joseph's Parish in Conway, AR, as assistant and bursar. Three years later he became pastor of Our Lady of Lourdes African-American Parish in Abbeville, LA. In the afternoon of January 1, 1971, the church burned down to the ground while he was absent visiting his confreres in Opelousas. It was then decided not to rebuild but let the parishioners integrate in the hitherto pure White parish in Abbeville as separate facilities were no longer needed. Some of the parishioners of Our Lady of Lourdes were understandably reluctant to see their church disappear.

Father was then transferred to St. Edward's Church in New Iberia, LA, as assistant, but a few months later he became its pastor. In 1973, he had the pleasure of accepting the first vows of his nephew Robert Burns as a member of the Congregation at St. Edward's. In January, 1976, he became associate pastor of Holy Ghost Church in Opelousas, LA, reportedly the largest African-American parish in the U.S.A. with close to 10,000 members. His stay there was rather short as in November, 1977, he became associate pastor of St. Paul's in Lafayette, LA, only to be transferred in July 1978 to Sacred Heart Parish in Morrilton, AR, as associate pastor. An emergency arose one

month later and led to his transfer to Holy Ghost Parish in Opelousas as associate pastor. By June 1980, however, he returned to Morrilton, this time as pastor. He rendered another eight years of faithful service there to the people.

Being in his mid-seventies, he asked to retire in 1988 and was assigned to Maison Brottier in Natchitoches, LA, still doing limited ministry as long as he was able. In 1992, he celebrated the golden anniversary of his priesthood in his hometown Chicora, PA. On this occasion he received a glowing letter from the provincial Fr. Michael T. White: "Wherever your obedience took you..., you served the people with deep faith, a living hope and profound charity. You could be counted upon... to get 'the job done' with integrity and honor... (although) your assignments were among the most difficult... your example of what it means to be a good and holy priest continues to be a great inspiration to us all: We thank you for saying yes to God."

Death came for him at the Maison Brottier from a heart condition. He had just been planning to spend his remaining days at Chicora with two of his surviving sisters in the family homestead. His brother and sister-in-law came to take him home, but arrived only after his death. Burial took place at the Spiritan plot in St. Augustine Cemetery, Isle Brevelle LA. He himself had made the coffin in which he was interred.

Only one thing remains to be mentioned. Throughout his life he was a great community man, the life of the monthly gathering of Spiritans who lived in the region where he worked. His profound religious life did not prevent him from greatly enjoying the comradery of being together in the "best club" he knew.

