

Fr. Joseph A. BRENNAN 71 USA TZA

\* Aug. 10, 1919, Philadelphia + June 26, 1991, Bethel Park, PA

An only child, orphaned at an early age, he passed through several foster homes, never feeling that he did "belong." In spite of this he grew up without resentment but with a great desire to make friends. And after he joined the Congregation in 1936 as a college student in Cornwells, the religious community became his home and gave him his identity.

Professed at Ridgefield, CT, August 15, 1941, he did his senior studies at Ferndale, where he was also ordained June 4, 1946. A summer of prefecting in 1945 at St. Joseph's Home for homeless boys had shown his zeal and uplifting qualities; they were highly appreciated by the director of the house and even more by the boys themselves. He would have loved to make ministry to such boys, whose condition was so similar to his own, his lifework, but it was not to be.

Appointed to Africa in 1947, he sailed for the Kilimanjaro district in Tanzania, where he was to labor for sixteen years. At first he was assigned to Arusha, but in 1950 Bp. Joseph Byrne made him his secretary, chancellor and mission procurator for the diocese of Moshi. He travelled widely around the area as troubleshooter, wherever the bishop sent him, while also working as a pastor. He held this position for a dozen years.

As mission procurator, he showed a real talent raising funds for the construction of churches in the diocese, including the new cathedral of Moshi, and a novitiate building. A letter dating from early 1963 showed that in the two preceding years he managed to collect donations totaling \$127,000.

His stay in Africa came to an abrupt end when in 1963 the local physician advised his immediate return to the USA after he had diagnosed that Father was suffering from an incurable bone disease. Fortunately, a specialist in Philadelphia concluded that it was only a case of arthritis of the neck, aggravated by a fall he had suffered in 1960; the disease could be kept under control in the USA.

Thus began the second state of his lifework, with an appointment to St. Ann's parish, Millvale, PA, as an assistant. Five years later he became pastor of the African-American parish of St. James in Dayton, OH. While many Catholic schools began to close for lack of funds, he managed to keep that of St. James open on an integrated basis, even though the cost of doing so rose to \$100,000 a year. The diocese contributed half the amount, but Father had to find the other half. As the small and poor parish could not contribute much, he became known, and admired for the way he managed it.

Ideally, he realized, an African-American parish should have an African-American pastor. So, when in 1972 it became possible to let Fr. Egbert Figaro take over, he gracefully stepped aside and went to Sacred Heart Parish in Emsworth, PA, as its pastor. In his farewell letter Abp Paul F. Leibold of Cincinnati, wrote: "You had a unique charism--accepted by your parishioners, able to understand them, fight for their work, their needs, but not by way of conflict, so you won the love and respect of those outside your community and the love and cooperation of your fellow-pastors."

Father's record in the Pittsburgh suburban parish of Emsworth was equally impressive. At that time this middle class parish was divided in the turmoil of conservatives versus progressives. The new pastor began by visiting each of the 800 families, and did so thereafter each year. His charism won the day, and the strife subsided. He remodeled the school, built a new rectory and was able to pay off all the parish debts.

When in 1977 he began to experience serious heart trouble, in addition to his diabetes, he had to resign his pastorate. Bishop Vincent M. Leonard of Pittsburgh then wrote to him:

"I have never met any Religious priest who had more concern for the good of the diocese than yourself. In fact the spiritual life of Sacred Heart parish is a testimony to this. I have met many of your

parishioners ... and all spoke of how wonderfully you had brought the parish back from the unfortunate circumstances which seemed to have afflicted it over a number of years prior to your appointment as pastor."

Father was then assigned to the Congregation's retirement home in Sarasota, FL, as its superior. There he could also do part-time ministry at nearby St. Martha's Church and in the local hospital. But he did not find such part-time work sufficient to keep him busy and begged his superiors to assign him again to a parish.

In 1979 his wish was granted and he became pastor of St. Christopher's Tiverton, RI . Two years later a coronary by-pass operation and a mild stroke forced him to return to Sarasota. Though in and out of hospitals repeatedly, he did part-time ministry again. In 1985 we find him briefly at Bethel Park's retirement facility. From there he moved to St. Stanislaus Parish, Pittsburgh which offered easier access to patients in nursing homes for his ministry. When, two years later, his health improved somewhat and he begged for a more active position, he was assigned as pastor to St. Joseph's, Bay City, MI. The improvement, however, did not last and in 1988 pneumonia caused his fourth and final retirement.

After spending some time at the Congregation's retirement facilities in Sarasota and Cornwells, he returned to Bethel Park in 1990. It was there that he died quietly of heart failure in his sleep. Interment took place in the Cornwells Spiritan cemetery.

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