

Fr. Garvey reached boyhood goals of teacher, coach, sailor



Written by Ann-Margaret Lambo, Special to the Exponent

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MANTUA – When Father Michael Garvey was a young man growing up on the shores of Lake Erie he wanted to be three things – a teacher, a coach and a sailor.

He got to do all three.

As they say in the armed services, “mission accomplished.”

Father Garvey will soon be sailing on the smooth waters of retirement in Pensacola, Fla., after 44 years in the priesthood.

Many of those years were spent teaching and coaching at Catholic high schools in the Youngstown Diocese. Others were spent coaching and teaching on the flight decks and barracks as a chaplain in the U.S. Navy.

A son of the late Thomas and Anne Wheatley Garvey, Father Garvey attended Ashtabula Mother of Sorrows School and St. John High School, as well as St. Gregory (minor) Seminary in Cincinnati.

He was ordained by Bishop James Malone on May 29, 1971, after completing seminary studies at Mount St. Mary's of the West in Cincinnati.

His first assignment was that of associate pastor at Canton St. Joan of Arc. During the winter months, Father Garvey filled in for an older, sickly priest who taught two days a week at Canton Central Catholic. The younger priest caught the eyes of the administration.

“They noticed [and said]: ‘He kind of likes this and does well,’” Father Garvey explained. “And before I knew it I was headed to Ursuline High School in Youngstown, where I taught for nine years and coached wrestling, helped coach track and was moderator for the band booster club and the band. I had a lot of fun doing that.”

In 1981, Father Garvey was named administrative assistant for pastoral ministry at St. John High School, Ashtabula, where he coached cross-country.

During one season, St. John had the best cross-country team in Ashtabula County, finishing third in the league. He was also pro-tem administrator of Ashtabula Mother of Sorrows Parish.

“As time went by, I got a little older and the kids got a little younger it seemed and I was ready for a change,” Father Garvey noted.

“I found out some information about Navy officer programs but before I went too far I had to talk to [diocesan officials]. Would they allow me to leave the diocese to be on loan to the Navy and the military archdiocese?”

Father Garvey, whose father had been a Merchant Marine captain who sailed the Great Lakes, found that he had the blessing of Bishop Malone to pursue his newfound dream to be a Navy chaplain.

“Bishop James W. Malone was very, very, gracious ... and initially he allowed me to go for three years.” Later, the bishop said, ‘I see that this fits you and you can go for your 20-year career, but please [when that's over] come back to the diocese,’ Father Garvey related.

In 1987, the priest attended chaplain school, then spent seven weeks in Newport, R.I., where he learned how to wear a uniform, how to salute and how to get along with clergy from other religious traditions.

His initial orders were to go with the Marines to Okinawa but the priest there decided he wanted to stay.

“There was a priest in New Orleans who was going to retire,” Father Garvey explained. “And they said, ‘How would you like to go to New Orleans?’ They didn't have to twist my arm.”

Father Garvey spent two-and-a-half years there. After a brief time at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, he finally was aboard a ship – the U.S.S. Forrestal in the Mediterranean.

The Forrestal was the first aircraft carrier in the Mediterranean Sea after the Gulf War. The carrier's mission was to keep Saddam Hussein from going north against the Kurds.

There were three chaplains aboard who were responsible for an all-male crew. While at sea, the chaplains held evening prayer every night at 9:55 p.m.

When the men come onboard, there is a “welcome aboard brief,” which includes a presentation from the chaplain. Much of a chaplain's work deals with separation issues between those onboard and their girlfriends, spouses or family members who are landside, the priest said.

Besides, New Orleans, Cuba and the Mediterranean, Father Garvey's Naval career took him to Okinawa, the Navy shipyard in Philadelphia and the Great Lakes Naval Training Center in Great Lakes, Ill.

After retiring from the Navy in 2007, Father Garvey was named associate pastor at Girard St. Rose Parish. Less than a year later, he was appointed pastor of Mantua St. Joseph Parish in July 2008.

Father Garvey has also served as chaplain for the Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts and Camp Fire and for the Canton Curia of the Legion of Mary.

Right now, Father Garvey, who is an avid gardener, is looking forward to living in a “mostly civilian community” on the west side of Pensacola. He had once served at the Naval Training Center in Pensacola.

Bishop George V. Murry, S.J., wrote him a letter of suitability so that once he arrives in the Sunshine State he might be able to help out in the Diocese of Pensacola-Tallahassee and at the Naval Archdiocese. Father Garvey has been involved in prison ministry here and also hopes to continue that in his retirement.

“I find it very rewarding and very humbling,” he said. “You see people who have had troubles, [and who] in the eyes of the world, are not worth very much, but in the eyes of God it's the exact opposite. Who did Jesus hang out with? Who did he look after?”

Besides his service to the Church, Father Garvey said he plans on spending time on the beach, working out, gardening, traveling and spending time with his brother and his family, who live in Michigan.

Not surprisingly, his brother is a Merchant Marine on the Great Lakes, whom Father Garvey expects to be a captain in the next couple of years.

St. Joseph Parish will hold its retirement and farewell celebration for Father Garvey on Aug. 30. Mass will be celebrated outdoors on the parish grounds

at 10:30 a.m., followed by a pot-luck picnic for parishioners and friends.