

CLERGY APPRECIATION MONTH

Did You Know?

Father Ron LeJeune

Born and raised in Fremont, Ohio, Father Ron LeJeune dreamed not of the priesthood as a boy but following in the footsteps of a hero who assisted those in dire need. "One of my favorite TV shows was 'Perry Mason,'" says Fr. Ron. "I always wanted to be a defense lawyer, so I could help people."

At age 21, Fr. Ron determined he could help more people as a priest. While attending the Pontifical College Josephinum in Columbus, the bishop noted Fr. Ron's proficiency in Spanish classes and asked him to study in Mexico during his summer break.

From 1967 to 1971, every summer Fr. Ron traveled to Mexico to earn his master's degree in Spanish and Latin American literature. He lived with a group of Maryknoll priests and served as a deacon for them.

Focusing on Mexico's Cristero War, Fr. Ron had the opportunity to meet several novelists and people who lived through the war in the 1920s. "The faith of Mexico is quite a bit stronger because of that war," Fr. Ron says.

After being ordained to the priesthood in 1971, Fr. Ron was assigned to Leipsic St. Mary's. He was then assigned to Holy Spirit Seminary in Toledo where among all his tasks, Fr. Ron taught Spanish. Every summer he took his seminarians to Mexico to immerse them in the culture. "Being a priest means being with the people," says Fr. Ron.

After Holy Spirit Seminary closed in 1982, Fr. Ron felt himself called to serve as a missionary in Mexico. Fr. Ron asked Bishop Hoffman if he could work with the Maryknoll priests in Mexico, and Bishop Hoffman agreed to a three-year assignment.

Looking back at the missionary experience, Fr. Ron is grateful he was a missionary to the Mexican people when he was a younger priest. His church in Mexico had 100,000 parishioners, and his weekends overflowed with church ministry.

Saturday Mass was at 11 a.m. each week and Fr. Ron averaged 20 baptisms a week and three quinceañeras each Saturday afternoon. Weddings happened every Saturday night, and unlike our tradition of one couple per officiant, Fr. Ron presided over group weddings that could have couples in the double digits – he once married 75 couples at the same Mass.

On Sundays Fr. Ron said five Masses in the morning and another two Masses in the afternoon. After the last Sunday Mass, Fr. Ron left for a two-day break.

When he returned on Wednesday, Fr. Ron said a Mass of Resurrection for the people who had died the previous week. Because the Mexican people do not embalm the bodies of the dead, everyone must be buried within 24 hours of their death so there is not time for funerals.

The Mass of Resurrection took the place of funerals, and each week there would be 60 to 80 intentions for those recently deceased.

Shortly before Fr. Ron was due to return to the United States in 1985 he was awakened the morning of September 19 with his bed rocking from an 8.0 earthquake. Getting out of bed, he

went and stood in the doorway of his home. He watched the church across the way as he held on tight. It moved to the left and to the right before collapsing into a heap of rubble.

It was two weeks before he was able to speak with Bishop Hoffman, and he told the bishop he could not return as planned and leave the people of the church. Bishop Hoffman agreed to an extension, and Fr. Ron finally returned to the United States in 1986.

"It was a wonderful time in my life," Fr. Ron says of his time living in Mexico. "The experience taught me so much about people."

Back in the Diocese of Toledo, Fr. Ron worked at parishes in Genoa, Fremont and Bucyrus. During his time in Bucyrus he presided over a Spanish Mass, first monthly then bi-monthly, in nearby Mansfield.

In 2011, Fr. Ron retired and moved to Mexico. His retirement dreams were detoured after he was diagnosed with cancer of the jaw.

When the doctor gave Fr. Ron his diagnosis of Stage IV cancer he was told there were two choices. Do nothing and be dead within three weeks or have surgery. Fr. Ron chose the surgery, not knowing the extent his life would change.

His jaw was removed and replaced with bone from his leg and a skin graft from his chest. His recovery included extensive therapy, so he could learn to walk, talk and swallow again.

He still has a feeding tube and is only able to eat liquids, but Fr. Ron is thankful for not only surviving the cancer, but for all the help along the way. "I wake up in the morning and say, 'Thank God, it's another day,'" says Fr. Ron. "It's amazing what the doctors did, and all the prayers that were sent to the heavens. Thank God for Fr. Hartigan, Monsignor and the people here. This parish has been so kind to me."

His time in Mexico after his cancer battle has been blessed. He presides over a living room Mass every Sunday for the neighbors who live in the 10 condos that surround his.

Fr. Ron will return to Mexico in December, but for the last time as a resident. His condo is going up for sale. When Fr. Ron returns to the U.S. in April he will be settled in his new apartment outside of Columbus near his sister.

He started to set up housekeeping this month and will be in Columbus for about a month before his last Mexican winter. Letting go of his second home is hard, but Fr. Ron is excited to be near family.

His life as a priest has brought Fr. Ron great joy. "It helped to grow up during Vatican II," Fr. Ron says. "It was wonderful chaos and we were open to so many things."

He can highly recommend a priest's life to any young man interested in a challenge. "Be grateful for what God has given to you," says Fr. Ron. "Think of what you can offer others. It's a great life."

To the people of Historic Church of Saint Patrick, Fr. Ron wants everyone to know he holds us in his heart. The connection he has with all of us is a special treasure for him, and he promises to return for regular visits!